

Pathways for Dealing with Problems in Supervision

Supervision, just like independent research, is a complex process. Sometimes we can feel overwhelmed, out of our depth, beset by problems or just plain frustrated by the supervisor or student we are working with. These kinds of situations are not unusual in working life.

When they arise, there *are* pathways available.

Before turning to any of the options below, consult the University's policy, *Resolution of Research Problems: Postgraduate Research Students*. The policy recommends that student and supervisor try to resolve difficulties through informal processes in the first instance. This document does not over-ride the policy in any way but, along with the *Self-Help Options for Dealing with Problems in Supervision* document, it provides more detailed suggestions for how to handle informal dispute resolution processes.

Self-Help Pathway

The first pathway is to try self-help processes: see *Self-Help Options for Dealing with Problems in Supervision*. When self-help strategies do not seem possible, or they have not worked, there are further options that involve other people helping.

Pathways that Involve Advice from Others

Which pathway you choose will depend on the particular situation and the impact of the problem on you. There are no right or wrong answers and all of the options have some benefits:

Start with self-reflection: Give yourself some quiet time and space to think about what is happening and to write it down (see *Self-Help Options for Dealing with Problems in Supervision*, for some suggestions as to how to structure your thinking process.)

Talk the situation over with one or more of the following people (in no particular order). Make sure you ask anyone you talk with to keep the discussion confidential and not to take any action on your behalf without your consent.

- a friend or someone in your family or community whose advice you trust
- your Departmental Graduate Adviser, HoD, or Faculty Associate Dean (Postgraduate), all of whom are named in the policy as potential sources of help
- a University Counsellor if you are a student or the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) if you are a staff member
- a University Chaplain
- Graduate Centre
- Student Learning Centre or Academic Practice Group
- a WAVE Network (AUSA) representative if you are a student, or a TEU representative if you are a staff member
- the University of Auckland Mediator

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If, as a result of advice, you decide to deal directly with the person who is part of the problem, then prepare for that discussion as if you were going to a meeting or tackling an assignment. (See *Self-Help Options for Dealing with Problems in Supervision*, Acting on your decision.) You should probably let someone know what you're planning so that if a further problem arises, or if the situation escalates, or if you just want to debrief afterwards, then you've got support. You could take your supporter with you, although that is likely to make the situation appear more formal and may raise the anxiety of the other person.

The University's Mediation Service Option

If direct contact between you and the other person/s does not resolve the situation to your satisfaction, then you can seek the direct assistance (rather than just advice) of the University Mediation Service (mediation@auckland.ac.nz, ext 87478/88905). An Information Pack about the mediation process will be sent to you on request and the Mediator can give you information about and help you to access assistance from any of the University staff listed above.

A mediator's role is to assist people to have difficult conversations with each other. Mediators are neutral and focus on providing a safe and constructive process or framework for people to concentrate on:

- *the issues* that are causing difficulty or disputes;
- how the issues are *impacting on the relationships*;
- exploring the problem/s *from the perspectives of all of those involved*;
- *seeking solutions* or ways forward;
- assisting those involved to *evaluate possible solutions and choose the best*;
- *recording any agreements*.

Mediators don't advocate for any particular person in the dispute and, although mediation is less formal than other processes, the mediator is likely to insist that certain ground rules are followed, e.g. not interrupting or blaming. Mediation is a fairly robust process and so being prepared for the discussion is always helpful.

If the mediator considers that the discussion may be enhanced by including another person, s/he will indicate this. Ultimately, and because mediation is a voluntary process, those involved have to agree on who should be present at the mediation and what kind of rules and records should be kept. Confidentiality needs to be defined in terms of who will have access to what information. The University Mediator is bound by confidentiality and cannot disclose what occurred at mediation unless all parties consent or unless the provisions of section 6 of the Privacy Act apply.

Yet More Pathways

If a mediated process is not successful, then you still retain your right to access any other pathways that are available in terms of finding a resolution to the problem. The Mediator can give you information about these but need not give you advice about which to choose.

The move to a formal process is one of those pathways and this is fully described in the University's policy, *Resolution of Research Problems: Postgraduate Research Students*.