Associate Professor Inger Mewburn
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Office of the Dean of Higher Degree by Research
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By email: Inger.Mewburn@anu.edu.au

13 June 2017

Dear Associate Professor Mewburn,

Re: Proposal to design a new supervisor database at ANU

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposal to design a new supervisor database at ANU. The below response has been compiled by NECTAR Custodians on the basis of feedback provided by Early Career Teachers, Academics and Researchers (ECAs) across the university.

All respondents agreed that the aim of guaranteeing high-quality supervision is a worthy one. However, they questioned the value of introducing further quality control mechanisms, given that mechanisms such as the annual Performance and Development Review (PDR) already exist. In general the lowest level of compliance was felt to be appropriate; higher compliance models were expected to impose additional expense and inconvenience, and make it difficult to respond efficiently to challenges raised by the constantly changing university and outside environment, with no likely benefit to either supervisors or HDR students. There was some support for a higher compliance level for initial registration (compulsory briefing about policy and procedures, plus completion of a 'good supervisor' course); however, respondents cautioned that the database must allow relevant courses already completed to be recognised for compliance purposes. Where there was support for mandatory training prior to registration, this was conditional upon the training course being brief.

The most stringent requirements suggested were widely considered to demonstrate a lack of faith in ECAs. Respondents emphasised that ECAs are in fact eager to demonstrate their abilities, and would be disadvantaged by proposals to prevent them from being a primary supervisor until they had completed at least one student as a panel member. Such requirements could effectively result in important research projects being put on hold for four years after an ECA's arrival at ANU; they would also be unfair, as ECRs often spend a lot of time supporting prospective HDR applicants. Respondents acknowledged that in some cases ECAs' contracts might be shorter than the duration of a PhD project; in such cases a contingency plan should be put in place at the start of the project, but it was felt that this should be organised at the local level.

The proposal to mandate annual training as a condition of registration was likewise felt to imply deficiencies in ECAs' skills. Respondents expressed an overall preference for the status quo, i.e. that departmental Associate Directors would be empowered to make informed decisions about training and eligibility requirements based on relevant local circumstances.

Respondents felt that a ranking system along the lines proposed (gold/silver/bronze) would be likely to discourage students from working with ECAs, who are unlikely to have built up enough experience for a higher classification than bronze, despite the lack of correlation between supervisors' levels of experience and PhD outcomes. It was also flagged that creating hurdles to registering as a supervisor would likely discourage the involvement of external supervisors. This would be especially detrimental to the medical research program, where clinicians who may not have the required ANU credentials nevertheless can and do contribute significantly to supervision.

To recapitulate, our key concerns are as follows:

- the proposed database would **duplicate existing quality control mechanisms**;
- the medium/high compliance models would impose **additional expense and inconvenience**, with no likely benefit to either supervisors or HDR students;
- the medium/high compliance models do not allow **relevant local circumstances** to be taken into account;
- stringent requirements suggested under the medium/high compliance models would specifically **disadvantage ECAs**.

We trust that you and your colleagues will bear these concerns in mind when designing the proposed database.

Yours faithfully,

NECTAR