POWER IMBALANCE

Student Perspective

I’m completing a dissertation project this year and a group of us meet regularly with our supervisor. I think there’s this power differential. You know, it’s an “us” and “them.” And as a student I’ve always felt it. As students, we had a concern about the way the meetings were going, we were all feeling the same stress but none of us had the capacity to stand up and say. “This is not working”. I just think that there is a power differential that you feel you cannot. I know students feel quite powerless.

Even when it’s to do with my own dissertation I find it difficult to question anything I’m told. The times that I have plucked up the courage to say something my supervisor has got defensive at me. So then I retreat back again and then I’m fearing well, if I take it any further then what do I do about my future prospects? Recently my supervisor told me I had done something wrong, and I was sure I hadn’t but I was like “Oh well who would know better than my supervisor”. I just went with what I was told to do. It’s the power imbalance. I’m worried that I’m not going to get the supervision I need to finish my dissertation if I challenge my supervisor. The other thing that limits me a little bit is my supervisor is hopefully going to supervise me again next year. So I really felt like I couldn’t alienate myself in any way and then have the potential for that to backfire on me in the future.
POWER IMBALANCE

New Supervisor Perspective

I’ve been here 12 months and when I first arrived, it was communicated to me that “It’s a good idea to pick up honour students because they’re your research assistants and you can line up projects” and the impression you got was that you did set up projects for them.

I’m very worried about the model of research assistant, supervisor hierarchy thing. Some supervisors have quite hierarchical relationships, where the supervisor is effectively directing or micromanaging the student to perform particular tasks and I find it really off-putting when you know that there are things that need to be done, but that sets up a scenario where the student is effectively a research assistant for like potentially a broader project and I have real issues with that. I don’t see any research skill development or any skill development in the students. I think maybe the systems within the university, particularly in terms of demand for publication and high workloads, are almost encouraging that sort of arrangement.

As a supervisor I’m in a position of authority, because that’s just what the role is, but I don’t want it to be so hierarchical that my students end up feeling that they’re reporting to their boss. I don’t think that works and the times where my supervision hasn’t worked, I think the students have thought that they’re reporting to their boss.
POWER IMBALANCE

Coordinator Perspective

Students are often afraid to broach issues with their supervisor. They worry about their marks being affected, or their supervisor not continuing to work with them if they’re considered to be too needy or too troublesome and stuff like that. One of the things that I’ve noticed is that at that really early, fledgling level, you know, when they’re really green to doing research, they’re just not equipped with the skills or the confidence to be able to say to their supervisor, “Look, this is my project. I’m in charge of this, not you”.

I think a lot of that comes down to that having to transition, I suppose, between being a student at undergraduate level to being a research student at Honours level. There is a lot of transitionary stuff that students have to learn. I find I need to spend a lot of time focusing on building the confidence within students to actually take charge of the relationship with their supervisors. Because I think until you actually get to that stage of being confident and being – you know, feeling empowered – you’re never really gonna have the ownership of the project that’s required.