SUPERVISOR WORKLOADS

Student Perspective

I have a supervisor who is very busy. She’s extremely busy, which is probably one of the biggest issues. And it’s not just her. Look, you’ve got some people taking on six students to supervise plus running a unit plus having to publish a thousand publications a year or whatever. I think that there’s been added pressure with supervisors having to publish more, we feel it, it’s all about publish, publish, publish. There’s this ambition to become the best research university and all that kind of stuff and I think a lot of things are lost in this ambition, including us as students.

My supervisor’s got too much on the go, and is exhausted. You see it, she’s exhausted. She keeps saying, “I’m tired, I’m tired”. I hear you, I see it, you can actually see how exhausted she is. Being demanding of her time when she has other commitments has been a bit difficult. I think I’m very conscious of that and so I try not to contact her unless I feel like it’s really needed. I think you are sort of conscious because all the students, we all know who’s got what supervisor and how busy everyone is. So there’s also a level that you’re conscious of your colleagues and the other students who are more desperate for that person’s time than you are right now.

Our supervision arrangements have been very vague the whole way through and we sort of met on a needs basis, which was often quite difficult for me to determine whether it was a need, and I knew my supervisor was very busy so I was always sort of a little bit conscious that I was taking up precious time of my supervisor. If I email my supervisor, it might take her quite a few days to get back to me. I guess I’ve learned to expect that there might be some delay because of the busyness.
SUPERVISOR WORKLOADS

New Supervisor Perspective

We are working in a much more bureaucratic style of university management where everything is time-budgeted to a razor’s edge. How does this actually influence when it comes to supervision: do we basically say, “I’m sorry, you used up your X hours with me. I can’t talk to you about your project anymore,” because I reckon I probably have spent my full allocation of hours on some of the students I supervise already? I’m just like, “Oh, shit! Do I cut them off?” But you ethically can’t. We are being constrained by a particular time management system these days, do we just turn a blind eye to that and overwork ourselves, which as you know, has a series of detrimental effects or do we play it exactly based on hours allocated in our workloads?

It has a spill-over effect into your other responsibilities. So it’s actually made me quite reluctant or very choosy when it comes to future supervision. There are few of us to supervise a growing number of students and I don’t – there’s absolutely no way, next year, I’m gonna be able to supervise as many students as I have this year. Supervision’s important but when you get to the point of being burnt out, it’s time to reassess.
SUPERVISOR WORKLOADS

Coordinator Perspective

The workloads of staff are pretty high. A lot of supervisors, they feel as though they’re under the pump with their own research. They have to produce. They have to publish. They have to put it out there. Their jobs depend on it, and they’re so stressed out about that, that I think a lot of them do work from home ‘cause at least they’re not being interrupted by students. That’s all very well, but part of their job is also to supervise the students. It’s not true for all of them, but I know that certainly for some of them, they really feel the pressure of the need to do research, and they stay away, so they can do their research, and then the students can’t access them, and that’s just not good. That’s what it hinges on, the amount of time that people have available to do supervision, given that so much of their time is taken up with teaching and marking and getting their own research done, and I think there’s a lot of ego involved as well now. There are a lot of people who are research-focused and they’re resentful actually of students kind of taking up their precious research time. And I know that that’s what a lot of students miss out on, I think, is they just don’t have the time with their supervisor that is required.

When staff-student ratios are high and there is a shortage of supervisors, it is often me as the coordinator who ‘picks up’ the additional students. One year I had 10 students where I was both the primary supervisor and the dissertation coordinator, so I was a one-stop shop. That’s just not sustainable.