



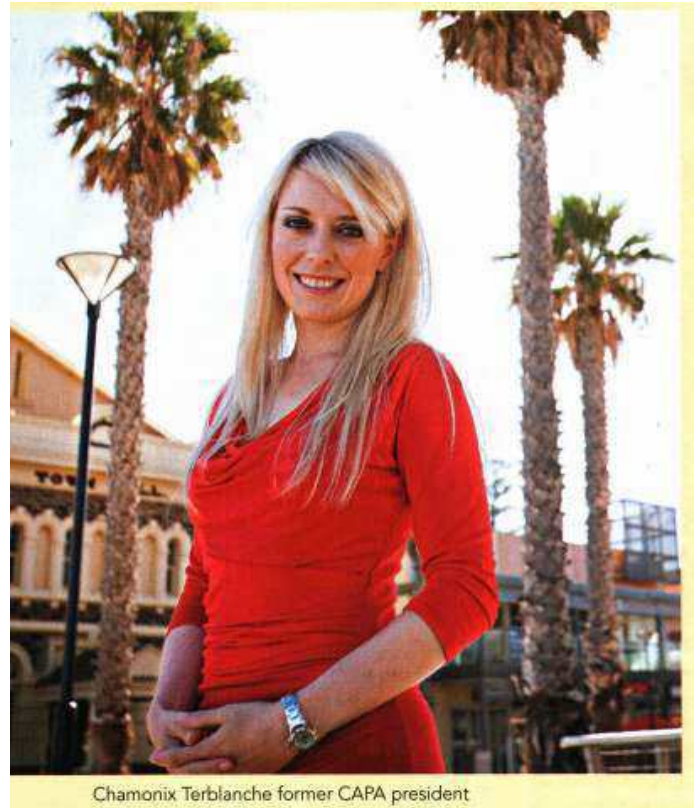
## A GUIDING LIGHT A HELPING HAND

Higher degree supervisors play a crucial role in the success of postgraduate students, writes  
**BRENDAN O'KEEFE**

**W**HETHER they be friend, mentor, shrink, taskmaster or all of the above, the higher degree supervisor is the most important person in a postgraduate research student's life for years.

And to succeed, the relationship has to be a good one.

James Cook University's Peter Leggat, a leader in the field of tropical medicine,



Chamonix Terblanche former CAPA president



says the biggest change in recent years has been the supervisor's ability to keep in touch with students around the clock no matter where one or the other is in the world.

Leggat, who recently co-authored a paper on the evolving role of higher degree supervisors, says "email and Skype have really become a significant part of our lives".

A recent report from the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations found too many

students were unhappy with their supervisors but that the supervisory relationship was "the single most important factor in the research education experience", says Chamonix Terblanche, former president of CAPA.

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Leggat says the best supervisors are alive to early warning signs that a student is struggling. ▷





“Mileposts need to be put in place so that issues can be picked up early,” he says.

The supervisor’s pastoral role comes to the fore when the candidate is examined by a panel on his or her thesis.

“Examiners provide comments on the thesis and recommend it be passed or changes made. That can be dramatic. If there are changes to be made it can be a stressful time for students,” he says.

“An experienced supervisor would look at those comments and advise on how to respond.”

Award-winning postgraduate research supervisor Jeffrey Walker of Monash University says there are no official supervising rules but the best starting point is to develop a rapport.

“You don’t set out to be their best friend but you want to be able

to communicate on a personal and friendly level rather than having a standoff student-supervisor relationship,” he says.

Walker, a professor in Monash’s engineering faculty, is currently principal supervisor for eight students and secondary for four others.

“Once a week we have lunch together to bring down any barriers and once a year I have everyone to my house for dinner to show I’m a real human being.”

The Monash supervisor of the year for 2011 advises an open-door policy so students can come and discuss problems.

He encourages his students to publish right from the outset and to go to at least one national conference and one international conference a year.

“That gets them involved and

**FAST FACT****1,221,088****Total higher  
education  
enrolments  
in 2011**



linked up with international experts. They should set aside time so they can meet and discuss research to establish a relationship,” he says.

Most of the research students in Walker’s department study in a shared office “so they can bounce off each other and they don’t feel an individual but rather part of a team, he says.

“They have their independent research but there’s quite a lot of synergy between topics. It forces them to collaborate.”

Unfortunately, not every student who starts a postgraduate research degree is cut out for it or, indeed, finishes it. That is one of the hardest parts of supervising, Walker says.

“There’s only so much you can do. The student has to be self-motivated. It comes to a point

where you have to say either do the PhD or don’t. They either have to put their nose to the grindstone or pack their bags.

“It is difficult. I’ve not forced anyone to leave but I have had that conversation with some.”

Terblanche says that among the best supervisory talents is knowing how to structure a thesis to make it publishable.

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One student in his late 20s says: “If it wasn’t for my supervisor I wouldn’t have had as many publications. My first was only a textbook review but it still got into a refereed journal. She is also helping me structure my thesis so that just about every chapter ▷





can end up being published as a journal article. She knows which journals are likely to accept my papers.”

A lack of respect can  
damage a student's morale

But on the flip side, a lack of respect can damage a student's morale, as told by a student in her late 30s: “I realised my

supervisor does not have any will to help me to complete. I have experienced even a panic attack because of shock from my supervisor. I am just a humble student, but I have a right to be respected.”

Other negatives were feelings of isolation, lack of funding

and even the lack of a desk to call home. One student said she needed a space of her own before she could feel valued. “It would be really helpful to have sole-use access to a work space (not a ‘hot desk’) in order to feel like I am valued by the university and that I have a space on campus to call my own.

“I could also use this space and treat my research and

candidature as a regular ‘job’ by working standard routine hours (eg: 9 to 5) and personalise the space in order to feel more comfortable, rather than being constantly displaced by using a hotdesk that is not secure and I can't claim as my own,” said one student.