



PhD student loses his way

Target audience: Higher Degree by Research Supervisors, Heads of School, academic integrity decision makers, postgraduate research students.

Key issue being addressed: The potential for misunderstandings about academic integrity for mature-aged postgraduate students.

Purpose of the case: To assist supervisors to consider the needs of students returning to postgraduate research study, and to consider their own responsibilities in mentoring and supporting those students.

Materials and preparation needed to answer case:

- Remind participants to find and access appropriate policy and academic integrity resources at own institution prior to coming to session.
- Copy of university academic integrity policy, and procedures. Check if there is one specifically for HDR students.
- Copy of the university's guidelines for postgraduate student conduct and/or policy relating to the supervisory relationship.
- Separate PowerPoint for facilitator based on 1 or 2 hour session.

The case

Abstract

A mature-aged PhD student is not provided with adequate support during the early stages of his candidature and submits a research proposal which contains plagiarism. Rather than face an academic integrity investigation, he withdraws from his program of study.

Michael¹ is a 32 year-old Australian student who has recently returned to higher education to complete a PhD after a break of ten years. His First Class Honours degree in English Literature ensured his acceptance into the prestigious doctoral program, including a full scholarship. During the last decade Michael has worked in public relations and marketing, most recently as the Marketing Manager for a large publishing company. Although well paid and fairly satisfied with his career to date, Michael wants to fulfill his original ambition of becoming an academic.

Michael has missed the University's orientation sessions for postgraduate students, but as a mature-aged student with an excellent academic background, he is confident that he will have no difficulties with his study. Michael is slightly surprised that he has no set classes, his Supervisor does not set a regular meeting schedule, and she rarely responds to emails. Michael learns that his only requirement is that he must complete a Research Proposal for presentation within six months of starting at the university. Other than that, he is pretty

¹ All characters in the case are pseudonyms

much on his own. There are only two other PhD students in the English Department and they rarely work on campus.

Michael's days are unstructured and he feels like he is on holidays. He reads broadly and finds that his original idea for a topic has been extensively researched. He changes topic a number of times but finds it increasingly difficult to settle on a project. The months go quickly, and three weeks before the six month deadline, Michael's supervisor sends a short email reminding him that the Research Proposal is due. Although he hasn't written anything yet, Michael feels confident that he will be able to pull something together in time; after all, it's only a 30 page document and he used to knock reports up in a couple of days when he was a Marketing Manager. Unfortunately a number of personal circumstances get in the way, and with just a few days until the deadline, Michael puts in an 'all-nighter' just like he used to do as an undergraduate student. He cobbles together parts of his original Honours thesis, interspersed with bits and pieces from unattributed online articles and internet sources. Although not completely satisfied with the final product, Michael submits the Proposal with the view that his Supervisor will probably provide feedback and make suggestions for revisions anyway. He signs a cover sheet stating "I declare the work in this document to be my own, except where acknowledgement of sources is made", and authorising the university to check the assignment for plagiarism using text-comparison software.

The day before Michael is due to present his proposal, he receives a standard email from the academic integrity decision maker (AIDM), stating that his work has been forwarded for investigation and that he will not be permitted to present the proposal as scheduled. When Michael contacts his supervisor, she refuses to speak to him, stating that university policy dictates that all correspondence relating to potential academic misconduct must be directed to the AIDM.

Michael is very anxious as he has no comparable experience in his professional life or in his earlier studies. Rather than face an academic integrity inquiry he withdraws from his candidature and resumes his former employment.

Questions for discussion

1. How much of this issue is Michael's responsibility?
2. How much responsibility should Michael's supervisor take for this situation?
3. What responsibility does the university have to ensure the integrity of research, from postgraduate students' preliminary investigations through to professors' published papers?
4. How might this situation have been avoided?
5. What type of support does your university offer higher degree by research students?
 - a. Is this support offered in all study periods?
 - b. Who is responsible for ensuring that the student avails themselves of this support?
6. Are mature-aged students offered any additional resources/support?

7. Was this breach of academic integrity the result of laziness, poor study habits, lack of understanding or inadequate support? Or all of these factors? Brainstorm ways to engage HDR students in learning about academic integrity requirements.
8. Brainstorm ways to engage HDR supervisors in understanding academic integrity requirements and how to communicate these to their students.

Support for this project/activity has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views in this project do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.



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