

Amanda's dilemmas examining a PhD thesis

Episode I

I have been a lecturer at the University of Barchester for nine years now, but my only experience of the examination of a PhD thesis was my own – the viva for which was almost ten years ago.

On the plane on my way home from a conference my colleague and friend Kate from the Department of Health Studies asked me if I would be the internal examiner for a PhD that she had supervised. She told me about the topic. Although my research expertise is in health and illness, this research was not in my specific field.

I felt flattered that she had asked me, but my main concern was that the period running up to the viva was also the period during which I expected to be in the final stages of writing a book for which there was a tight deadline. I explained this. Kate replied that she was very keen that I took on the job and perhaps the viva could be delayed slightly to allow me to get the book completed.

Q1 What factors should be taken into account in identifying potential examiners for a doctorate?

Q2 How should Amanda respond to Kate's invitation?

Episode 2

In the event I felt I had little choice but to say 'yes', particularly as Kate pointed out that at this stage in my career it was about time that I took on this responsibility. Apart from anything else, it would be good experience and stand me in good stead when asked to be an External Examiner.

Not long after arriving back in Barchester I happened to mention to my Head of Department that I had agreed to be the internal examiner for a PhD - imagining that he would be pleased at the recognition it conferred both on my status as an academic, and also on the Department.

I was therefore surprised by his negative reaction. Although he would not of course stand in my way of accepting, his advice was 'don't touch it with a barge pole'. He went on to tell me, based on his own experience and his observations of others' experiences how many things could go wrong. Firstly he said that as I had never examined a PhD before I might be rejected by the Postgraduate Studies Committee as unsuitable, and this rather than furthering my career would undermine my credibility. Secondly, it would be a huge amount of work for no reward – at least financial. He also pointed out that being close friends with the supervisor was potentially problematic. Supposing I felt that the thesis should fail, would I feel able to say so and would this risk our friendship? Such a response would by definition be critical of her supervision. He also raised other issues about the possibility of me disagreeing with the External – whom I knew to be a very senior academic. Kate had mentioned that they had collaborated on a large research project and co-authored several publications.

Q1 How independent should examiners be of the supervisor, student and other examiner/s? what relationships would make a candidate unacceptable?

Q2 What should Amanda do now?

Episode 3

Having been thoroughly unnerved by my HoD's reaction, I thought the best course of action was to preempt the Postgraduate Studies Committee finding me 'unsuitable'. I called the Secretary of the Committee to suggest myself that I might be unsuitable as I had had no previous experience of PhD examining. I hoped thereby to be able to tell my friend Kate that, although I would have loved to do it, it was out of my hands and that she unfortunately needed to find another examiner.

On the contrary the Secretary responded that my inexperience would simply mean that a chairperson would have to be appointed to oversee the viva, and, if this was arranged, there was no reason why I should not be the internal examiner. My heart sank.

Q1 What preparation should be provided for PhD examiners?

Q2 What should Amanda do now?

Episode 4

I rang Kate to tell her about the need for a Chair. I just hoped that she might say that it would be easier to find another internal. But a few hours later she phoned me back saying that she had managed to find a senior colleague who had agreed to chair the viva. There was apparently no way out - and I still had to tell my HoD.

After my classes on the following day Kate surprised me by asking me whether I had realised that it was up to me to arrange the viva and co-ordinate between the different parties.

I found the logistics worrying, especially as I knew that not only was the student from overseas but that she had also specially requested that Kate be at the viva. This seemed to pose more problems than the usual two examiners and one home student. Although Kate gave me their email addresses, it seemed strange that when the student, External Examiner and Chair were already in frequent communication with her, that it would be me that had to arrange the meeting. In the event finding a suitable and mutually convenient time for the five of us was every bit as time consuming as I had anticipated.

Q1 How should vivas be organised in your institution? and by whom?

Q2 What should Amanda do next?

Episode 5

A couple of weeks later I received an enormous parcel in the internal mail – it was the thesis – along with the form of appointment and details of regulations and duties. So, having read the regulations I signed and returned the form and then set the thesis aside unread until I had finished writing the book - and the current mountain of marking. I had committed myself to being internal examiner without even looking at the thesis. It then sat on the corner of my desk engendering feelings of anxiety every time I caught sight of it.

Three or four weeks later, just after Christmas, I sprained my ankle and was confined to the house for a week. This I felt was a golden opportunity to read the thesis. It took me ten days of careful reading and making notes. Although it was in my general area of 'health', the student had used a theoretical perspective quite different from those with which I am familiar. Thus many of her references were new to me.

Nevertheless I ploughed through trying to make intelligent criticisms for the report. It seemed to me, unfamiliar as I was with the theoretical approach (Foucault rather than Habermas) that it *probably* did fulfill the criteria for a PhD though I did have grave reservations about the very limited scope of the fieldwork, the structure, and the coherence of the overall argument. Individual chapters were well constructed and argued, but I was not convinced that they were sufficiently well integrated to make a coherent whole.

Q1 How can an examiner determine whether a thesis is of PhD standard?

Q2 What should Amanda do next?

Episode 6

Kate and I had often discussed the work of her research students. She had had others who had caused her concern, but, as far as I could recall, this candidate was apparently not one of them. She had even said at one stage, when talking about one of her problematic students, that she wouldn't suggest that I acted as examiner for him. It seemed to me that the implication was that the student I was to examine was in her view 'unproblematic'.

I have great respect and admiration for Kate's academic and teaching skills. Thus I put my reservations about the thesis down to my own inexperience as an examiner. As the last – indeed the only - PhD thesis I had read was my own, I presumed that I had 'forgotten' that such work represents a very early stage in an academic career and concluded that I had been expecting work of too high a standard.

Nevertheless I sent in my examiner's report which raised the issues about which I had concerns, but I did not feel that I should indicate my reservations about the thesis' suitability for the award of PhD. In addition, I thought, as the viva is also part of the examining process, perhaps the student would offer a convincing defence of her work.

Q1 What should be included in the examiners' pre viva reports?

Q2 What should Amanda do now?

Episode 7

Kate and I had from the start explicitly agreed not to talk about the thesis. This was difficult sometimes when we met, as practical arrangements had to be made and it was tempting to share my reservations about the thesis at these times. I felt as though I was misleading her into thinking that all was well, when clearly it might not be. I sometimes felt a little dishonest, possibly implying that all was well when in reality I was harbouring major reservations.

In the weeks running up to the viva, Kate and I continued to meet socially. On one occasion when discussing the room to be used for the viva, she mentioned out of the blue that as examiner I must put our friendship aside, and that, if I had criticisms of the thesis, I must not feel constrained about voicing them in the viva.

Q1 How should Amanda respond to Kate?

Q2 Is there anything else she should do at this stage?

Episode 8

In my response I decided to tell her that I had already submitted my report and that I did feel there were some aspects of the thesis that needed defending, but I felt it inappropriate to go into more detail. I then 'forgot' about the thesis and applied myself to the daily obligations of teaching, marking and writing.

I was just thinking of resurrecting it in preparation for the viva when, a week before the due date, I had an e mail from the External asking me to arrange his accommodation and book a hotel room for him. This caught me by surprise. Was this also included in my list of duties? I had the feeling that it was over and above what an internal might be expected to arrange. The Secretary of the PostGraduate Studies Office confirmed that this was not part of my obligation and that the External would have been sent a list of approved accommodation with the other papers. So I e-mailed a diplomatic message to the External to this effect, and offered the services of the student's department should he require further assistance.

But five days before the viva I had an e mail from him saying that he had concerns about the thesis and asking me to ring him. My heart sank yet again.

Q1 What contact should there be between examiners before the viva?

Q2 What should Amanda do?

Episode 9

I decided to call him.

From a lengthy discussion he appeared not to have written his report, but he raised as problems all the reservations I had had about the thesis, and some more, and said that he did not feel that in its present state the student could be awarded a PhD for the thesis. I felt vindicated but concerned.

As we were speaking I remembered that some years ago Kate had told me of a previous viva at which the student (and she) had been taken by surprise by the examiners' criticisms and she had felt that this had been a very unsatisfactory experience for all parties. I was therefore worried that she would feel attacked at the viva if we withheld our concerns until then.

So I asked him whether she should be warned beforehand. When he heard that Kate would be at the viva, he suggested that I phone her to alert her to the problems. That increasingly familiar sinking of the heart reappeared. I could just hear my HoD saying 'I told you so'...

Q1 What should a supervisor and student know of the examiners' views or decisions before the viva is held?

Q2 What should Amanda do in response to the External Examiner's suggestion?

Episode 10

I feared that the implications of me telling Kate about our concerns could be interpreted as a personal criticism of her judgement and supervision. Nevertheless I rang her – all probably highly irregular – and told her about my discussion with the External and our reservations about the thesis.

Her immediate reaction was to remind me that the viva was part of the examination process and that the outcome should not be preempted – the student might after all be able to defend the thesis against our criticisms. But during the conversation it became clear that she was surprisingly *unsurprised*. She told me that the student was quite headstrong and difficult to steer away from her pre-commitments and that Kate herself had not in fact seen the final version of the thesis as submitted, and assumed that her comments on the student's final draft would have been incorporated.

She warned me that the student might be quite aggressive if criticised in the viva. I assume that, although the issue was never raised between us, she did not warn the student that the viva might be difficult.

And at this point Kate offered to send me a copy of the comments on the final draft she had sent to the student and suggested that I also send them to the External....

Q1 What account should the examiners take of the supervisor's views in coming to their decision?

Q2 So what should Amanda do now?

Episode 11

.... which I did. (Reading her six pages of typed, single spaced comments I suspected that even if they all been heeded we would both still have had reservations about the thesis, though perhaps not as many.)

I spent the weekend dreading Monday morning. The arrangements were that the External, who had stayed in Barchester overnight, would meet me in Kate's room at 9.30. The viva was scheduled for 11, to be followed by lunch with Kate, the Chair and the second supervisor. The External was late. So Kate and I had half an hour to explore how the viva was to be handled. Once the External Examiner had arrived we spent the hour deciding how to address the discussion and discovered that not only did our views of the thesis correspond, we had also made similar notes and observations while reading the thesis.

In the event the viva was not the ordeal I had feared. Despite not having a copy of her thesis with her the student acquitted herself well. But in my view there was little chance that, however well she had done, resubmission would not be the outcome. The viva lasted for nearly two hours and was an exhausting process for all concerned. At the end the student and Kate left the room while the Chair remained and the External and I discussed the outcome.

Q1 What makes a good viva?

Q2 Are there any rules to be followed?

Episode 12

We agreed to recommend that, in the light of her performance, she be given a year to rewrite and resubmit for a PhD.

When we had come to this agreement, we called Kate and the student back in. The External told the student what had been decided and what would be required to achieve a PhD. Although looking upset, she was clearly relieved that we believed that she could achieve a PhD rather than only an MPhil.

Incidentally, although we did not in the end wish to fail the thesis, the form provided by the university did not appear to allow us this option. There were two columns, each of which had three options. The first column offered the options of a) awarding the PhD forthwith, b) subject to grammatical and typographical corrections or c) subject to some textual revisions. The second column offered the options of a) resubmission within 12 months for the degree of PhD b) to award an MPhil forthwith or c) to resubmit for an MPhil. What examiners would do if they believed the thesis to be unsalvageable was unclear.

I called Kate the next evening. She told me she thought that the viva had been fair and well handled. I felt relieved.

The saving grace for me of this harrowing process was that the External, the supervisor and I all shared the same opinion of the thesis. To some extent the process and the fact that the External and I reached similar views independently has given me confidence in examining at this level. I now have the resubmission to look forward to, but can *at least* make one addition to my CV.

Q1 Has the student any grounds for appeal under your regulations?

Q2 What assistance might a PhD candidate expect from supervisors and examiners during the period allowed for rewriting?

Postscript

Exactly a year to the day after the student had been given 12 months to rewrite, the amended thesis arrived in my pigeonhole at the university.

Fortunately during the Easter vacation, so at least I had time to read it. This reading proved even more time consuming than the previous year's as I had not only to read the resubmitted thesis, but constantly refer to the original to 'spot the difference' and to the examiners' requirements which had long since been forgotten by me. However, after a week's effort I was satisfied that the student had complied with the required amendments and I completed the form for the Postgraduate Studies office to that effect recommending that the Ph.D. be awarded forthwith.

A month later I had an email from the External Examiner saying that he had just read the thesis and had written his comments (which were attached) and if they concurred with mine he would submit them. If they did not we would have to discuss the matter. Luckily the comments were almost identical, and he also recommended the student be awarded her Ph.D.

Q1 Discuss the External Examiner's communication.

Q2 If time allows, evaluate Amanda's performance as an examiner and compare it with the team's experiences elsewhere.

Team Task

On the acetate provided list the issues that students, supervisors and examiners should be aware of in your institution