

Professor Harding's invitation: examining a PhD

You are a well respected but easy going lecturer in government and social studies at the University of Barchester. As you arrive for a meeting of Faculty in December you meet a friend of yours of many years, Professor Harding, Head of the Department of Cultural and Media Studies. He mentions to you casually that Darren Archer is about to hand in his thesis just before the four year deadline.

You express interest. (Darren is only slightly known to you, largely through a paper he gave on 'Who controls the Media?' some 18 months previously at your departmental graduate workshop. You had not thought well of the material he had presented which seemed to you superficial and without any evidence of a theoretical framework. So you and one of your students had over coffee pointed him towards some of the basic literature).

To your surprise, Professor Harding then invites you to act as the internal examiner for Darren's thesis. He says that you would be more appropriate than any member of his own staff whose knowledge of political science is, he says, 'rusty'.

You feel somewhat flattered at the suggestion and in any case you hope for his support in your department's submission of a new MA course which is likely to be opposed by the sociology and economics departments in the meeting. So you agree. Further discussion is prevented by the start of the meeting which Professor Harding leaves before the end.

- 1. What are the functions of internal examiners of PhDs?**
- 2. Why do people agree to act as internal examiners?**
- 3. What would you have done in these circumstances?**

Reading your father's Daily Telegraph at Christmas you notice an item headed 'Media Control by New Left?' which reports on a paper given to the National Association for Media Independence Annual Conference in Margate by Harding and Archer of the University of Barchester.

At the beginning of the term you receive a bound copy of Darren's 500 page thesis. After a couple of weeks you skim through it and find to your surprise that, although the references you gave him have been extensively quoted, Darren has made no attempt to integrate them with his fieldwork data which mainly seems to consist of extensive transcripts of interviews with minor employees of a BBC local radio station, freelance journalists and retired ITV continuity announcers.

- 1. What other information, if any, would be helpful at this stage?**
- 2. What would you have done in this situation?**

In the event you are busy with teaching and filling in forms for your department's contribution to a Teaching Quality Assessment Exercise and decide that in view of the time that has elapsed, you must continue to fulfil your undertaking to Professor Harding.

In the first week of February you receive a phone call during a second year tutorial from a Professor Harris at the Letchworth School of Management Studies who appears to have been appointed External Examiner and who wants to fix a mutually convenient date for Darren's viva. He suggests a date which he knows will suit Darren. It is a Wednesday, convenient to you, and you agree to holding the viva at 11 a.m., since Professor Harris has to be back in Letchworth for an evening engagement.

- 1. What is the role of the External Examiner? Does it differ in any way from that of the Internal Examiner?**
- 2. Have you any comments?**

You take the next weekend to read the thesis in detail, starting by marking every fault, omission, unsound argument etc, but after two chapters you just read with increasing doubts. You become certain that, had the thesis been submitted in your own department, no degree could have been awarded, and a MPhil only after a drastic rewrite and resubmission. Darren has used no recent literature nor produced a systematic analysis of the interview material and the newspaper cuttings photocopied alongside the text.

You therefore phone Professor Harris before the viva date to suggest he comes to Barchester at 9.30 a.m. for coffee to allow for a thorough discussion before the actual viva. He seems surprised, saying 'There's no problem, is there?' but agrees to come as early as possible - probably about 10.30.

- 1. What should examiners discuss before a viva?**
- 2. How much should the examiners tell the candidate beforehand?**
- 3. Have you any other comments on the situation?**

In the event Professor Harris is held up in the traffic and has difficulty finding a parking space on the Barchester campus. He arrives at 10.50. You use the time however to express your doubts about the quality of the thesis and clumsily suggest that you see no likelihood of being satisfied by Darren's performance in the viva.

Professor Harris seems taken aback. He had attended the December Conference and been so impressed that he had personally offered to publish a popularised account of the research in a paperback series he is editing: 'The Hidden Persuaders'. However, you are not convinced that he has read the thesis thoroughly, since he remarks that it 'only needs some tidying up and correcting typos'. But he does agree that the viva should be stiff and that the decision should depend on Darren's performance.

- 1. How independent should an examiner be of earlier contact with the candidate and the material?**
- 2. What is the function of a viva?**
- 3. What rules should govern it?**

You go ahead with the viva. You put tough but you think fair questions, but from the start Darren flounders, saying that he has not used a political science perspective and that the fieldwork data was only obtained with great difficulty. To your embarrassment, he bursts into tears.

Professor Harris is however very supportive, and after praising Darren's efforts only asks the most banal questions, and, where Darren hesitates, fills in the gaps himself.

1. List the features of a good viva.

2. What would be unacceptable?

3. Any other comments?

After Darren leaves, you feel shattered and wonder whether you ought to feel guilty . Have you given him a fair chance? Professor Harris suggests that it would be helpful to have Professor Harding in to join in as Darren's supervisor. You phone him and he agrees to come straight across to your room.

Professor Harris explains to him in what you feel is not an altogether unbiased manner the nature of your disagreements and the unfortunate viva performance. Professor Harding explains that the topic finally chosen by Darren had not been the one that had originally been registered, but that he had lost interest towards the end of the first year so that when he had suggested the new topic the Department had been pleased to see his regained enthusiasm and accepted the change particularly in the light of his ambition to follow an academic career.

He also explains that, although Darren had not wanted it mentioned, he should inform you in confidence that Darren had had very difficult personal circumstances during his time at Barchester which had involved time-consuming, stressful and expensive legal proceedings. He had however been a model student, and despite living over 20 miles away, been an excellent attender at the first year training courses and an assiduous student representative on the Departmental Committee.

- 1. What factors can be taken into account in making a decision?**
- 2. Finally, what are the options in this case? What would you do?**
- 3. Have members of the group had relevant experiences as internal or external examiners. If so, summarise these and the lessons learned.**

Group Task

Write a short list of issues on which Barchester's examiners and postgraduates need guidance.