

Adrian's 'academic insufficiency'?

Hi John

Thank you. It was a privilege to be a participant in your session....

This is my experience of supervision. I have to confess that as an educationalist I feel a failure. The reason is that I have not (thus far - I live in hope) been able to facilitate an understanding of theoretical concepts and ideas in the doctoral student I have been working with.

Soon after coming to one of your sessions in 2009, I started working with a Barchester University healthcare academic, (I'll call him James), a teacher and researcher at Barchester. We pioneered e-assessment and researched the teacher and student experience of online summative exams. These projects went well.

James mentioned a colleague (I'll call him Adrian, also in healthcare) who was helping with the evaluation of postgraduate courses for healthcare professionals and interested in starting a doctorate. James asked me to be second supervisor, as they needed an educationalist on the supervision team. The prospective doctoral student (Adrian) wanted to research the impact of his area of postgraduate healthcare education on patient care.

During initial meetings (before a research proposal was formulated), we explored the complexity of this type of research and the many factors (apart from postgraduate university learning), which might have an impact on patient care. These initial meetings with Adrian were difficult. He was sure he could measure impact.

I asked him how he saw 'impact' in this context and how he could measure this impact. He persisted in his determination to measure the impact of postgraduate university learning on patient care. I suggested that it might be feasible to explore course participants' perceptions of the impact of postgraduate study on their care of patients. A large research team and 'before' and 'after' evaluations of comparable procedures might produce some reliable data on that procedure, but it would still be difficult to establish the impact of courses on patient care in more general terms.

James (who had a PhD in this area of healthcare) quickly understood these complexities. However we found it challenging to persuade Adrian that, as a sole researcher, he would have to base his study on course participants' perceptions.

Before continuing, discuss the issues here and how a supervisor might address them

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I found Adrian's reasoning ability rather weak. He did not seem to grasp the basics of the preliminary literature on educational research methods that I suggested he should read. This was all to prepare him for his research proposal.

I therefore met James and explained that Adrian might find it challenging to take on a PhD. However Adrian was very keen to persevere. He would be self-funded and study part-time. He was about to stop practising professionally. Eventually, James and I managed to support him so that he could write an acceptable research proposal.

Before continuing discuss the supervisors' decision

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I have spent many hours using my best efforts (questions, discussion, suggestions of literature, using and analysing examples of PhD theses, examining alternative approaches to the research) but I have still been unable to help Adrian to work with anything that is not concrete. We have used 'plan, do, review' - short writing tasks and revision.

The first supervisor, James, Adrian's colleague, does not provide constructive feedback on Adrian's work. I provide comments on writing, suggesting further thinking and specific reading where texts lack clarity, and have spent time helping Adrian to extract meaning from difficult texts through dialogue (an uphill struggle). James focuses on the correct formatting of references, writing style, etc.

Discuss the supervisors' strategy. Have you suggestions at this stage?

4

Unfortunately Adrian failed his upgrade, which we had delayed as long as possible. It was a very painful process. Here is a summary of the report:

Second attempt at upgrade recommended

Progress

Approach not research but evaluation
No understanding of gaps in literature

Viable hypothesis/ research question

- Focus unclear
- Inability to formulate research question that could be answered using the data to be gathered.

Plan for the work

- No plan for development of thesis
- Focus on data collection, not analysis
- Timeline with appropriate tasks needed

Research ethics

- No indication of appreciation of delicate ethical dimensions

After the viva a professor of professional education (the external who examined Adrian) said privately that he would never 'get it'. The faculty graduate tutor explained to Adrian that he hadn't demonstrated that he could manage the 'philosophy' in the Doctor of Philosophy.

Adrian took six months out on grounds of ill health. So in effect he is meant to resubmit his upgrade report (with the time out) around year after the first attempt.

Discuss the function of the upgrade and the outcome for Adrian. Have you any suggestions for the supervisors?

5

The situation now is that Adrian, on our recommendation, used some of the time out to study a module on professional education at master's level. We hoped that if he were unable to get through this, he would appreciate that there were better ways of spending his time than pursuing a doctorate. If he did get through the course, he would perhaps have developed the ability to engage with theory.

I'm just waiting to see how the Master's level studies went. I dread Adrian's return.

Any comments on this arrangement?

6

There is a phrase in the Barchester regulations, which I fear, applies here - 'academic insufficiency' - but it's a phrase I don't like to believe in and would hate to use. How do you tell a mature person who wants to get a doctorate that his problem is 'academic insufficiency'? but I hope he has himself now decided he'd rather focus on something less challenging.

I hope my account is useful to you. Any advice would be much appreciated!

All best wishes

Rosa

Team tasks

1. How would you respond to this supervisor's request?
2. What lessons are there here for
 - a. Research degree candidates,
 - b. Supervisors, and
 - c. Institutions?