

Amanda's progress

I

It is a year since I approached the Dean about applying for a Chair and in the interim I have been trying to add strength to my case. This has been partly achieved by taking on both the supervision and examination of PhDs.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

The first new supervision I agreed to was of Gordon, a mature student of robust opinions whose topic was only tangentially related to my own area of expertise. Despite my lack of expert knowledge of the topic area, both the HoD and the Post Graduate Studies co-coordinator felt that my experience in methods and ethics and the wider health field would justify my appointment as supervisor. I was told that Gordon was a very bright and able student and would need little in the way of supervision – just guidance. In addition, my co-supervisor, Craig, from a different department and disciplinary background had a sound knowledge of the substantive area. On this basis I agreed to take on the role of first supervisor but with particular responsibility for methods and ethics.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

Gordon began with flourish and promise, supplying lengthy and frequent disquisitions of an extremely theoretical nature. I had no concerns about his intellectual ability but I was not so certain about his grasp of the challenges he would face in getting consent to interview senior managers. My main anxiety was his assumption that through the good offices of a relative he would have easy access to his intended research participants. I urged him to begin to negotiate access at an early stage as I could foresee the possibility of delay and difficulty – his intended study being something of a political hot potato. However his complacency ruled and for more than six months he said ‘don’t worry – I’ve got it all sorted it won’t be a problem’.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

Needless to say it was a problem; his relative let him down, told him he couldn't help and this left Gordon with no choice but to start from scratch with an ethics application through the NHS – a time consuming and challenging process with unpredictable outcomes. I then spent several months urging Gordon to begin the application process – to no effect.

At Gordon's annual review his progress on the theory was thought to be good but the panel said that he should make more effort to secure consent for his fieldwork (something I had been saying for a year).

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

A couple of weeks after the review Gordon sent me a draft of his NHS Ethics application form. It was poorly completed and I was almost sure it would be rejected outright by any approvals committee. After consultation with my co- supervisor Craig, who agreed with my judgement of the form, I wrote a lengthy e mail detailing what Gordon needed to do to amend the form and get it up to standard. In addition I sent the hard copy of the form back through the post with extensive comments.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

I subsequently heard nothing from Gordon despite repeated e mails to him and he failed to attend his next supervision. Having previously been a reliable student who I saw frequently Gordon had in effect 'disappeared'.

Three months after his annual review (the last time I had seen him) Gordon e mailed me and said he needed to see me urgently. I suspected he was going to tell me that he had decided to withdraw or suspend his studies, so I was stunned when he told me that rather than amend his ethics application he had contacted a prospective third supervisor, Peter, from a different discipline than either mine or my co-supervisor's and had asked him to join the team. Gordon's revised research plan was that instead of collecting data through interviews he would take a historical perspective and his thesis would be now be based on archival and secondary sources, thus rendering the ethics application redundant. I suspect he had been put off gaining access to the field by my criticisms of his attempt to complete the form and what he now realised were the demands of the process.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

The 'third' supervisor, Peter, said he would take Gordon on but not as a third member of the team. Peter did not mind if it was me or Craig who was jettisoned but he refused to supervise with more than one other person.

Gordon asked to see me so he could tell me that (though my supervision had been 'brilliant') I was off the team. So I had effectively lost a PhD student not only from my own list but from the Department's as both Craig and Peter are in other departments.

This was not a promising turn of events as I had been hoping that Gordon was a student who I would see through to completion...

However, just before I was about to tell the Post Graduate Studies co-ordinator what had occurred, my HoD contacted me to ask if I would act as the internal examiner for a thesis he had been supervising. It was not in my area of expertise.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

... but I agreed.

I have now read the thesis and have concerns about it on a number of different levels. It is not the robust piece of work that Geoffrey, my HoD had hinted at, and I suspect that it requires major revisions that will necessitate re-submission...the viva is in six weeks...

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

I submitted my report on the thesis indicating the areas that I believed to be problematic. I met the external for the first time an hour before the viva; it was a relief to discover that he shared my concerns. We agreed that it was surprising that the Geoffrey, a supervisor with an international reputation in the field, had allowed the submission of a thesis that required such a substantial amount of work to be done. Nevertheless we felt that if the student acquitted herself well that there was chance she could be given the opportunity to amend it without resubmission and another viva.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

The student, Kate, did not wish Geoffrey to be at the viva, but he showed her in and introduced us before withdrawing. Kate had also requested that rather than have a Chair present, the viva should be audio recorded.

Kate was visibly nervous, trembling and looking as though she was on the verge of tears. The viva was tough for us all. The external and I addressed our concerns and hoped that Kate would respond appropriately. However, she appeared to be reluctant to accept that these concerns were legitimate and, rather than offering a defence of the thesis, she embarked upon a questioning of our judgement – not the wisest approach to a viva. Kate was unwittingly jeopardising her chance of avoiding either a failure or another viva and appeared to be on the verge of tears throughout. We plied her with water and cups of tea and after three hours I suggested a break. We reconvened after the break and another hour later we called the viva to a halt.

The external and I then discussed the options for another half an hour and decided that before we could agree an outcome we needed to speak to Geoffrey. I knocked on his office door where I found him sitting with Kate – both of them in a state of some anxiety. I am sure it did nothing for Kate's confidence when I asked Geoffrey to come into the examination room alone.

After further lengthy discussion between me the external and Geoffrey, we agreed that with careful supervision rather than require resubmission, if substantial revisions were made, in six months the thesis could be checked by me as internal examiner without the need for the external to see it again and without another viva. Geoffrey agreed to undertake this additional supervision and to ensure that the revisions – about which we were very specific – would be satisfactorily addressed and incorporated.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

11

Kate was then called back in and told of the outcome – it once again seemed that she was about to argue and challenge our judgement, but Geoffrey immediately interrupted and gently advised her that under the circumstances this was a good outcome for her and that she should accept our decision and do what we required.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

During the following few days the external and I liaised by e mail and wrote a detailed report of the viva and specified the requirements for revision and submitted this to the Post Graduate Studies office.

Six months later the amended thesis arrived in my pigeon hole. I located the viva report and began to look for the revised material, a task not made any easier because the student had not accompanied the revisions with a statement of how she had amended the thesis nor had she specified which sections contained new material.

I began to search for evidence that she had incorporated the required changes. I estimated that approximately 75% of the amendments had been made, but that some crucial changes were still outstanding. The patchiness of the revisions can be exemplified by the fact that Kate had incorporated the theoretical literature required by the external, but one 15 page section that had been without any references now had only three which I considered to be inadequate. I knew that I could not allow the thesis to be awarded a PhD as it currently stood.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

I was uncertain what to do; this was after all my HoD's student. In addition, I did not want to raise the matter 'officially' as I was afraid that the thesis would fail if I acknowledged that the required changes had not been made in their entirety. On the advice of a senior colleague, to whom I spoke in confidence about my concerns, I e mailed Kate and asked her to ring me so that we could sort this out 'off the record'. My intention was to ask her to incorporate the additional revisions and send me an amended copy. I gave her my home number (it was a Friday evening and I did not want her to worry over the week end). I then awaited her phone call which I anticipated would be made with great rapidity – however she did not call me. As I had to go away the following week, I e mailed her again explaining I would not be contactable for several days and still received no response.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

When I got back from my trip and had still received no response from Kate, I decided that I would have to speak to Geoffrey as a matter of urgency before the Post Graduate Studies office chased me up for my report. But Geoffrey did not respond to my e mails or voice messages. Eventually – after another week - I managed to catch him in his office and explained the situation. He told me in confidence that Kate had been having a number of health related problems and was enduring some additional personal difficulties. He gave me Kate's mobile number but said he would ring her first to 'prepare' her. He also told me that while he had overseen the revisions and approved the resubmission, he had only signed off the changes she had made and not checked them off against the clearly specified list drawn up by me and the external. Thus, though what she had amended was done to a good standard, there were omissions that he had not 'looked for' or noticed.

I rang Kate the next day and spoke to her in what I hoped was a reassuring way and was absolutely specific about what still needed to be done. Fortunately she neither challenged me nor burst into tears but seemed clear about what she needed to do and was willing to do it within the two weeks that I gave her. I collect the amended thesis tomorrow...

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

The amended thesis was submitted on time. However, despite adhering to my requirements which entailed additional references, I discovered that these had not been incorporated into an updated bibliography. I therefore had to telephone Kate again and ask her to amend the bibliography, highlight the additions and send it to me as an attachment. Upon receipt of this I decided that she had fulfilled the conditions for the award of PhD and completed the necessary paperwork. Her supervisor thanked me for the sensitivity with which I had handled the situation. And Gordon? I assume he is continuing in another department where he is (fortunately) the responsibility of another pair of supervisors...)

Team task

On the acetate provided list the lessons are there here for

1. PhD examiners
 2. Supervisors
 3. PhD candidates
 4. Institutions
-