

Cate's Story: a matter of integrity?

Episode I

Last year, my – recently promoted - University decided it had some research money to spend on offering postgraduate student bursaries. We were all asked to draft suggestions for possible fields of study. These were then advertised.

There were not many applications, but one potential student, Jess, had applied for my field. The research centre at the University proposed to interview her, along with four others, none of whom were applying as students in the performing arts.

I was asked if I would be happy to be Director of Studies if the interview went well and if the student was offered a bursary.

I had some reservations: firstly, I now knew that I was due to go off on maternity leave, only two months after the student would begin her studies. Secondly, although I had some expertise in the performances the student would be looking at, her study would need to encompass a range of theory that was not familiar to me. Thirdly, I have little experience of PhD supervision.

QI How should Cate respond?

Episode 2

It was suggested that there might be two other supervisors: one of these would be a Professor in Performance, though not in the same field. The other would be a lecturer who had a good grounding in relevant theory, though not in performance (he works in Cultural Studies). The first would take over while I was on leave and would ensure that I understood the formalities of the PhD process as we went along; the second would fill in my gaps in my theoretical knowledge by suggesting relevant reading etc.

There still remained the question of a stand-in for my own expertise in contemporary performance, and it was further suggested that another colleague, an inexperienced researcher, but able lecturer, would be an 'advisor'.

Q1 Discuss the risks in arrangements proposed

Q2 What should Cate do now?

Episode 3

I remembered your workshops at Missenden Abbey and was uneasy about this unwieldy supervisory team. However, there was pressure to accept, as we have very few PhD students and I knew it would be good for my own career to become first supervisor to a postgraduate student. I therefore agreed, though somewhat against my own better judgement.

Jess's proposed topic was interesting. Her writing was rather naïve and she showed rather limited knowledge of contemporary work, but we felt this could be addressed. She seemed articulate and bright and keen to embark on the PhD. She was offered the bursary on the condition that she moved to Wessex. She accepted.

Q1 Discuss issues raised by team supervision

Q2 What should Cate do now?

Episode 3

When we began work, I very soon became concerned. We do not currently award research degrees and so our students must be accepted by Barchester University, which validates them for us. To do this, Jess had to complete a 'Form 1', which must outline her proposal and would need to be approved by an external and internal assessor, before being sent to Barchester. In theory, this should have been a relatively straightforward task, since it was only a few pages long and she had already written a proposal for us - and could adapt this. It needed more work, however, in order to fill in the gaps we had identified prior to accepting her.

Jess was always very chatty, but always had reasons why it had been hard to do any work: the move was exhausting; the research methodology seminars were demanding; she had been thinking hard, but not yet put anything down.... etc.

Despite agreeing to write a draft of the form every time we met, I did not receive even a first draft from Jess for two months - a week before I was to go on leave. There were many problems with this. I sent her a lot of feedback, but then had to leave it to my substitute.

Q1 Discuss Jess' strategy so far

Q2 What arrangements should be made for supervision when the Director of Studies goes on leave?

Episode 4

After this, I was more concerned, of course, with my new baby who was born on May 20th. So, it was not until October that I became aware that Jess still hadn't completed this form I. I'm not sure exactly what had happened, but I think she submitted a draft that was way over length and then had to cut it. When it was finally put forward, the External Assessor rejected it (for some of the same reasons I had identified), and it had to be redone. At last, it was accepted by both assessors.

[What I did not know, and what became relevant later, was that there were some mix-ups in sorting out both the form I and the assessors. It also became evident that my stand-in had too many research students and it was agreed (without consulting me) that the Director of the Research Centre, a Professor of Christian Theology, would take over from him shortly.]

To my surprise, I then received an e-mail asking me to sign the student's Form I.

Q1 Discuss the situation that has now arisen

Q2 Should Cate sign the form? If not, what should she do?

Episode 5

I had thought, naively, perhaps, that it would be signed by my stand-in and the rest of the team, but not by me, since I was on leave. I replied that I had not actually seen the form. So I could not sign approval until I did. It was sent to me, together with a page requiring my signature to a statement that I approved the proposal and believed the student to be capable of completing a PhD.

I was appalled by the Form I, which was weaker, in many respects, than the first attempt. There was no sense that the student knew the field, either in terms of performances or relevant literature. She wanted to do a practical project as part of her work. Yet the form this project was to take was totally unclear. None of the concerns I had raised previously had been addressed. I suspected that little work had been done and that the second supervisor (with knowledge of the theory) and the advisor (with knowledge of the performances) had not been consulted. The advisor confirmed this, when I asked her.

Q1 How should Cate respond?

Q2 Should she now sign the form?

Episode 6

I rang the stand-in Director of Studies and asked him for reassurance that the student was working well. He wasn't able to give me any and suggested she had 'rather hidden behind the problems with the Form 1'. He had asked for some written work to be submitted by January.

I had a dilemma - should I sign my approval of the form?

Q 1 What should Cate do?

Q2 Is she now in a position to sign the form?

Episode 7

It was at this point that I contacted you for advice. After this, I told the University that I could not sign the form as it stood, and that, although I was open to being convinced otherwise, I saw no evidence of serious work at the moment.

This apparently put the University in a difficult situation. The form had already been approved by two assessors and the Research Degree Committee at the University. It had been assumed that it was submitted with the approval of the supervisory team. If it was now done again, this would raise questions about our procedures, since clearly, I should have been sent the form before anyone else was asked to assess it.

Secondly, there had been the problems mentioned above, concerning my replacement. If Jess should want to complain, it might begin to look a bit of a mess. None of this could come at a worse time, either, because the University had applied for its own research degree awarding powers and will be assessed for this in February. It was implied that I might sign the form 'as a formality', while the team would push Jess to work more effectively and review her situation in January.

Q1 Discuss the University's suggestion

Q2 How should Cate respond?

Episode 8

I refused for the time being, but said that if Jess could demonstrate that she was working effectively, then I would consider doing so. I suggested that I could look at her literature and performance review (already being prepared), together with a 10-page summary of work to date and any existing records of supervision.

A few days later, I was contacted by the University Registrar. She suggested that I withdraw from the supervisory team.

Q1 Discuss the Registrar's suggestion

Q2 How should Cate reply?

Episode 9

I agreed to the registrar's suggestion. The Director of the Research Centre - who, as mentioned above, is a Professor of Christian Theology - will now be the Director of Studies in my place.

My colleague who was the advisor was approached and asked to be second supervisor, but refused, because she shared my views and felt she had neither the time nor the experience for the task. (She doesn't yet have her own PhD).

Another second supervisor was sought and found - someone with some expertise in the relevant field, but with a track record of unreliability and poor supervision of undergraduates. (A complaint against him was upheld this year). The second supervisor with the knowledge of theory remains on the team. My original replacement is no longer on the team, because he has too many students.

The situation is now this: Jess has a first supervisor with no knowledge of her field at all; a second supervisor who has some, but is likely to be unreliable; a third supervisor and an advisor who might both be helpful, but whom she has not attempted to contact to date.

I was later told that Jess had been able to produce some - unfinished - written work and had been doing well in the research methodology course. So, perhaps she had been working harder than I had thought. This may be so - I hope it is - but in this case, she still needs a great deal of guidance in putting her energies into the relevant research areas.

It isn't really my problem any more. I considered putting my thoughts for the University in writing and I did indeed express them on the phone. I laughed, which didn't go down too well. But what's the point? I can see the logic. The problem of Jess is put off till after the decision about Research Degree Awarding Powers.

Q1 What do you feel about the University's procedures as they are demonstrated in this case? How could they be improved?

Q2 Review Cate's experience and strategy

Q3 Should Jess approach you for advice at this stage, how would you respond?

Team task

On the acetate provided list the main lessons here for

- **Supervisors**
 - **Postgraduate research students**
 - **Institutions**
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