

Naoki's question

1
August 2015

Dear John

It has been a while since I attended your workshop back in June. But I remember my lessons and have been trying to implement them on a student who is not progressing well.

She is from a country in the far east and doing a PhD, which is funded by her government, with the university since November 2013. I am her secondary supervisor.

She is married with 2 school-aged children; one of them has special needs. Her husband is a businessman who travels a lot. Originally, she was about to upgrade by December last year, but she was experiencing marital problems around that time. Her husband eventually left her.

Then she discovered that she was pregnant. Due to emotional strain she could not progress further and her upgrade exam was postponed until February 2015. Still she could not progress forward because of added complications to her pregnancy. She was admitted to the hospital for bleeding and the entire process was put on hold until the delivery of her baby in April. She delivered a healthy baby in April and took a month off to recover from her ordeal with complicated pregnancy.

She then set up a date for her upgrade exam for late September. The supervisory panel met once a month to monitor her progress since past May; she had to redo analysis because of her errors in classification of eligible participants. We waited for her to send some writing to the panel, but she appeared to be struggling with writing up.

One day she came to my office and complained that she could not sleep and could not concentrate on her writing. After hearing such complaint, we referred her to the University student counselling service in June, which they initiated seeing her straight away.

Despite all, she did not make much progress with her writing up. Then, her primary supervisor took a 6-week holiday (from mid-July), leaving me in charge of supervising this student. We scheduled to meet weekly to monitor the progress. Each meeting, I set a task, which was agreed by her to be completed.

But I did not see any progress with her writing at all. She kept saying she had

headaches or some other complains and did not follow the plan. She filled in only one small section of her report since I took it over.

When we met last time (last week), she explained that her parents who have been helping her around since the birth of her baby have gone back to home. Without proper childcare, she says she is very stuck and cannot spare any time to write.

I thought it was a huge obstacle and suggested her to call a child minder whom she knew already. She did not say anything this week whether she made successful arrangement on her childcare or not.

She keeps saying that she 'hopes to work' as best as she could. I told her to send her latest document around to the panel anyway on this Friday and to explain her situation for the upcoming panel meeting on 3 September.

I have been trying to be practical and realistic with her. I set a small achievable goal (a sub-section per week) and have followed her up, but she has not delivered the work.

What else do you think I could have done?

I fear that she is not ready for her upgrade exam. I am not sure whether it is feasible to postpone her exam once again. I am not even sure whether she will be ever up to the challenge.

Since her separation/divorce from her husband, her primary and graduate tutors have been taking a 'soft' approach for not upsetting her emotionally. While I agree with this approach in some aspects, I feel they are not entirely honest with her about consequences of postponing her upgrade exam repeatedly (she has already passed a maximum time of 18 months since enrolment). And this may cause the panel a problem; I am pretty sure that failing to progress a student will damage the reputation of the panel members.

At this moment, I am lacking my brain how I can motivate this student to progress. If you have any suggestions, I am very grateful with your advice. I apologize for a very lengthy e-mail and look forward to hearing from you.

With many thanks,
Naoki

Q. before reading any more try and agree how would you respond to this question

2

Dear Naoki,

Good to hear from you again but very sorry to hear about the severe problems you and your student are encountering. I am very impressed at your commitment to helping this student.

From what you say, despite all the help her supervisors have been providing, she is still not producing adequate work of higher degree standard. If this is the case, it is probable that the outcome of the upgrade process will be that she is not upgraded, but, if it has some potential, possibly either given clear criteria and deadlines and a second attempt in a few months time, or advised to present her work in due course for an MPhil.

The upgrade is designed to perform an early diagnosis. Not being upgraded should not be seen as a failure on her or your part, but just that at least partly in the extreme circumstances that she has faced she has not been able to produce work that will meet the expectations of a PhD. It is important to grasp the nettle now and not let the situation remain unresolved any longer. It will be a worse reflection on the panel and UNIVERSITY if they allow a student with little evidence of PhD standard work to continue, using her government's and UNIVERSITY's resources, with the likely outcome being a failed PhD.

It is not clear from you account whether she has formally suspended her registration during the past two years? if not, she could apply for up to a year's suspension to allow her to attend to her personal problems and make arrangements to restart in 12 months time. Of course, her visa and income might also be suspended, but I imagine her government would not be happy to continue her funding while she is not carrying out research as a full time student.

What do you think?

Best wishes

John

Q. Discuss John's response.

3

Dear John

Thank you very much for your quick reply. And your feedback is always spot on.

Now I am beginning to see which direction the panel should look at. If the student is not producing a substantial work, it is our (including students) best interests to call for a stop. I have been stressed about this over the summer and you lifted my anxiety up.

To fill you in, she has suspended her work while she was in a hospital for her complicated pregnancy/labour. I believe it was only for 3 months. The University does not allow foreign students to take any breaks while they are in the UK; they have to return to their own country immediately and re-apply for the UCAS number on their return.

It is the Home Office's requirement now. So basically she has to go home if she needs to sort out her problems like her psychological issues.

I am sympathetic towards funding issues - she may have to return the money in full if she fails to deliver. But life is life. We have to work towards a solution; my student cannot sit around waiting for somebody to pick her up.

The panel will meet next week. I will let you know how it goes.

I hope her primary supervisor realizes how it is not practical for the panel to keep waiting for the student to do the work (i.e. 'soft' approach).

Best wishes,
Naoki

4

Hi Naoki,

Just wondering how things are going? I'd be intrigued to hear.

Best wishes
John

5

Dear John

Thank you for your e-mail.

We had a meeting to discuss her options few months ago. We hoped that she would agree to take an interruption and come back later. She went back her home to seek out the options.

On her return she told us basically she has no options but to stay. Her funder accepts interruption, but her employer did not and asked her to come back for work which she did not want to do. A good news through this discussion was she could carry on doing a doctoral work in her home country even if she fails her upgrade exam again as long as she can prove that she has been academically active in the UK. That means she does not have to pay back to her funder for her academic failure in the UK. For that reason, we have to carry on no matter what.

Then she complained about her fatigue and bruises without any causes. She is waiting for a hospital appointment for that. Meanwhile she has not produced a single document. She basically does analyses and shows us outputs for approval. We are set to re-examine her on 13 May. It is very frustrating to work with the student who is not capable and no inclination for advancement. I suppose it is best for us to let her have her examination as scheduled.

I will let you know what happened after 13 May.

Best wishes,

6

Hi Naoki,

Many thanks. This is going to make a salutary case for my files...

I haven't been back over all your emails, but have you now got a student who has produced virtually no draft work nor chapters, no conference papers, no publications, and, after (how many years registration?) is still on a MPhil??

I think the examiners in May should grasp the nettle, but I have put 14th May in my diary, as I fear the worst...

Best wishes

John

7

Dear John

Yes - this is her 3rd year, but she produced nothing out of her PhD work. Not even seminar presentation (apart from her upgrade viva).

Examiners will be the same as the first one. It will be me (secondary supervisor) and one external.

Her primary said, 'I am glad that I do not have to make a decision that affects the student's life.'

I thought her remark was very unfair.

I honestly hope that the student will wake up and pull herself together to do what is required.

It is very unlikely from my last 2 years of experiences with her.

Still I will be neutral until the exam day, but I will firmly stand for the standards of the university and let not any poor work through.

I do not think if there are anything that I need to be aware of.

If you can think of something, I really appreciate to hear your advice.

Have a happy Easter.

Best wishes,

6

8

Dear Naoki,

Ok. Of course, whatever is decided will 'affect the student's life', but sometimes a tough decision is what is needed to address a situation such as this.

The University guidelines are clear, and should be followed to the letter:

(link)

The question is whether you are now able to confirm that the student has met University requirements? i.e.

- i) Is committed to pursuing research at the university leading to the PhD degree.
- ii) Has achieved satisfactory progress in the work, so far.
- iii) Has demonstrated sufficient awareness of the context of the work and completed such tasks as a review of the relevant literature and a bibliography.
- iv) Has demonstrated the ability to formulate a viable hypothesis or research question that could be completed within the normal time frame of the PhD programme.
- v) Has achieved satisfactory technical and generic skills development (students funded by funding bodies, such as the Research Councils, must meet the specific requirements stipulated by those bodies).
- vi) Has formulated a viable plan for the work.
- vii) Has considered the research ethics dimensions of the project and applied for ethics approval from the relevant Research Ethics Committee if appropriate.
- viii) Has completed the appropriate sections of the Research Student Log.
- ix) Has demonstrated English Language proficiency, both written and spoken.
- x) Meets any other Department or Faculty criteria.

or am I missing something?

bw

John

7

9

Dear John

I hope you are well. And there is another twist to the student situation. Well it is very near for her to submit her upgrade report; she has not completed yet and has still more analyses and writing up to do. Her theoretical approach to the chosen problem was not present.

The panel recommended her to interrupt her study. So the student e-mailed the graduate tutor and graduate school. The Graduate school office told her that she can take 2 months of interruption which does not affect her visa status. She jumped the opportunity, claiming that she is tired.

During the meeting she announced that she has to go to her home country for 10 days in May. She says she has to sort some legal matters on her own. Her upgrade viva is postponed for another 2 months.

Nevertheless her primary supervisor thinks this student can complete her PhD in 18 months if she passes the upgrade. The primary supervisor insists it is up to me and external examiner to decide the fate of the student who is in a huge emotional turmoil – having a PhD is only one good thing for her. I pointed out she has never taken doctoral courses or training and she needs to equip with right skills. Her primary supervisor agreed, acknowledging that the student missed two of training courses that she booked.

Still her primary thinks if we can find some clinical people, they are likely to pass her and awarding her with a degree even if analyses are not thorough. Even if she cannot pass the upgrade viva, she still thinks the panel can write 3 papers with her and go to a university like Westminster where award a doctoral degree based on publication.

So here it is, it is likely to be the upgrade viva to be in the middle of July. The student promised that she would send a complete report next week for us to comment, but I am not confident that she would submit anything in good time.

Her primary says that we cannot support her work while she is interrupting her study. So I am not even sure what implications would be for the viva in July.

So here is the update.
Have a nice weekend.

Best wishes, Naoki

10

Dear Naoki,

Many thanks. No surprises then? She is playing you along. I imagine July date will become impossible and deferred to September, when you will be faced with an inadequate contribution (if is good then check she wrote herself) and more excuses.

I really don't see what evidence the primary supervisor could have for forecasting that such a performance will be replaced by such a fantastic improvement to enable completion in 18 months? In any event, you should follow the upgrade rules (below). If you don't, she will still be in your hair in three or four years time.

The supervisor is right about one thing: you and the external make the recommendation.

I doubt if any university would award a doctorate for work carried out at another institution.

Keep me posted. It raises a lot of very important issues.

Best wishes - and condolences.

John

11

Dear John

Thank you for your feedback.

The student was supposed to send us the latest version of the report before her interruption, but she failed to do so, She will be going to South Korea tomorrow for 10 days.

Her primary emailed her that she will be on her own until she officially return from her interruption. We are not allowed to officially supervise her.

You are right about additional lies and possible deferral. We will be careful. Thank you very much.?

Best wishes,
Naoki

12

Thanks, Naoki. I assume you are looking for something on her return? I look forward to the next episode.

bw

John

13

Three months later

Hi Naoki,

Did the upgrade happen? or more delays??

bw

John

14

Dear John

Funny you asked. I was thinking about writing to you.

It was quite messy in the end, but the student took a formal interruption until April 2017 which is extendable for another 12 months.

Firstly she was trying to bend a rule by claiming that she is allowed to re-enrol the school 2 days before the re-sit exam. It means that the resit exam has to be postponed accordingly. We clarified with the UNIVERSITY student record system and indeed she cannot change the pre-agreed resit exam data (already maxed out). So we were strongly recommending her to submit the report 2 weeks in advance. She did not and asked an external examiner for extension which the examiner agreed (but not telling this to the rest). Even so, she did not send it in time. Few days later she claimed that she wrote the report without a reference list which she misplaced; she promised that she could send the complete file in a following day. That was 1.5 week before the re-sit exam. So we gave her ultimatum to send the report without the reference list.

Then She sent us a lengthy e-mail that she was afraid of failing and wanted to have assurance before she sends her report. She also complained about her poor mood. We have been communicating this matter with a Graduate Tutor. She recommended the student to take a formal interruption if she cannot send the report at this stage. The student was wondering how she could initiate the process, but the Graduate tutor contacted the student record and processed this over e-mail.

So I suppose we will not hear from the student until next year.
I really hope she can send a decent report if she decides to come back next year.

Best wishes,
Naoki

15

Hi Naoki,
OK. I'll put a note in my diary to get in touch in April 2017. It doesn't give me much confidence in university procedures. Anyway, she is not giving you much reading to do...
Best wishes
John

16

Dear John

I think the university wants to be soft to students as possible. Graduate tutors did admit that it is difficult to get rid of a student. The primary supervisor claimed that she is obliged to meet a student once per term. Lots of things could have been prevented if she kept seeing the student more regularly. I personally think that abilities of supervisors should be assessed periodically by students' evaluation. Her student log clearly showed that the student did not take many doctoral training skill classes. She was not present at many departmental seminars. Her writing was not up to standard. Despite these tell-tale signs, the primary supervisor kept saying that the student can pass her PhD with a 18 months correction time. One thing for sure is we will be more discouraged to take overseas students after this incident.
I firmly believed that PhD is a training process to be an academic researcher. Only fit person can be allowed in and passed. It seems that quite many are allowed in and passed regardless. There are no rigour in this process any more.

Best wishes,
Naoki

17

Hello Naoki,
I hope all goes well for you.
I am due to give more sessions at your university soon and I remembered that your case was due to be resolved this spring...
Any developments yet? (I will of course never mention it at your university.)
Best wishes
John

18

No not really.
I forgot if I told you this, but she contacted us in last autumn, expressing her wish to come back. We said no, explaining interruption is to resolve her problems (i.e. general anxiety due to stress) and we did not think they were resolved in a such short duration. Besides which she did not even show us her complete draft of her upgrade document. We told her that she should show us the report when she is ready. If she feels she is ready, she should be contacting us around Easter. So far no news.

Best wishes, Naoki

19

Hi Naoki,
It's now Easter. What's news?
Best wishes
John

20

Dear John

We have not heard from the student. I feel prompting her would cause more problems, so I leave this matter to her primary supervisor. Would it be a problem you think? Is it the panel's responsibility to get words (yes/no) out from the student?

Best wishes,
Naoki

21

3 days later
Dear John

I hope you had a good weekend.
Speaking of her, she just contacted us (panel and Grad tutor), begging for 'few' more months' extension on her leave. Apparently, student record prompted her to confirm whether she is ready to come back on 27 April or not.
In her e-mail, it is not very clear how ready she is and what will be different from now and 'few' more months later.

So I asked her to clarify her situation reminding her about her option to extend her interruption for another year. Just between you and me, I sense that she is not committed to come back. She got panicked and this is her usual avoidance of any problems to 'put off' her decision for a while and does the same repeatedly. Her initial decision to do a PhD is due to pressure from work and family.

I hope the student would come back to us with a clear picture.

Best wishes,
Naoki

22

Mmm. Keep me posted. Is she in the UK?
J

23

Dear John

Hard to tell.
You know she can come here with a tourist visa.
But definitely not with a student visa as students on interruption cannot use it.

Best wishes,
Naoki

Dear John

Just out of curiosity, I looked up the IP address from her email header. She uses google account which shows the IP address from California US. I am not sure if

Google does it to all account holders or she is in California now. I am not that IT genius.

.....

According to my husband, there are system to cheat around.
But I would say she would not be in this mess if she is that sophisticated.

I hope she will come back with an accurate picture of her situation.

Best wishes,
Naoki

24

Dear Naoki,

I am just wondering if your problem case has moved on at all since April, when a I think upgrade was being referred??

bw
John

25

Dear John

Thank you for reminding me. I have been thinking about the student over the summer. She has not yet replied to us with her plan. In her last mail, she needed few months to sort out her finances so that she can enrol. Her new due date for enrolment is this November.

Her Primary thinks she is not coming back and believes contacting her now would stir the matter up.

Whilst I agree with the primary supervisor, I think we still need to record evidence to support our position (i.e. termination). Passively waiting for her to withdraw from the process may not be feasible as she can keep saying, she is not ready for another 6 month, possibly longer.

I will write to the primary and graduate tutor for necessary forward action...

Best wishes,
Naoki

26

Thanks, Naoki. I tend to take your position. What if she now complains that she was not forewarned of the threat of discontinuation??

Keep me posted. It is an instructive story...

bw

John

27

Dear John

That is my point exactly even though she has not shown any evidence that she was able to take up the assumed academic challenge (cognitively and mentally).

I will speak to the primary supervisor.

Best wishes,

Naoki

28

One month later

Naoki is informed that

1. The registry had written to the student informing her that her intermission expires 31 October 2017
2. The student had replied that she would like to return mid December
3. The principal supervisor had confirmed that it would be acceptable if she re-registered before the 22nd December
4. Student responded that she was moving into a new house and that her child is re-entering school by 2nd January. She confirms that she will return to the university by the end of January.

Naoki emails:

Dear John

I really cannot get my head around why this is happening.

The supervisory panel agreed that we are to interview her to assess her readiness to resume her work prior to her return.

Since (the primary supervisor) pre-agreed to the student's return, I cannot see any other ways to raise any concerns over the student's academic ability.

Best wishes,

Naoki

29

Dear Naoki,

Incredible! This is turning to be an instructive allegory of how not to address such a problem. Has the supervisor the right to make such an undertaking? At the very least you should think of airing in writing your perspective on the current situation, just in case it is assumed you are happy with this turn of events? of course, if you are (justifiably) uncomfortable, you could inform the Research Tutor that you wish to withdraw from the supervisory team? her command of English seems pretty poor too.

(It could be that the PhD registration is a way of getting access for her child to the UK education system. Then, if the university tries to apply 'academical insufficiency', she would appeal on the grounds of disruption of her child's education etc etc...)

My sympathies... Do keep me posted.

bw

John

30

Dear John

When she was expressing us to her desire to come back, the panel agreed to assess her readiness prior to her return. Apparently the student thought she could come back regardless. I wrote to the graduate tutor, what is not happening and I said she is not capable of doing the work. She is a single mother, John with 3 small children! This is insane. If she and her primary thinks that is all right, I insisted to have a written contract. Primary thinks upgrade can be postponed up to 2 years, and viva can be passable with major revision. But in her case, it is resit and her time is running out. I wish this primary would be banned from supervising any students near future.

Best wishes,

Naoki

31

9th February 2018

Hi Naoki,
Has she returned to 'school' I wonder? any update most welcome.
Hope otherwise all goes well with you.
Best wishes
John

32

The primary really thinks she can do the study.
But the person has not contacted us about actual return date.

Last time when we spoke, she suggested doing her work in her country, which we opposed. She is also pressured to return her funds to the government if she withdraws. So she is pressuring us to extend her 'disruption' further since her condition is exceptional.

I have never seen a person who is in so much mess, personally and financially.

If I hear from her, will let you know. But if we do not hear from her soon, her disruption will finish and she will be unregistered from our system.

Best wishes,
Naoki

33

April 2018

Dear John

Here is the latest development.
The student was asked to confirm whether she would come back earlier this year (Her 2-year interruption is up).

She did not respond immediately.
Later she says she is a victim of domestic violence and have two (previously one) children who need special care. She says she cannot pay back to the funder. She insisted that she wants to finish, but she asked for extending her interruption.

The Faculty approved extension of the interruption for another year (31 January 2019), but they are adamant that they do not give any more extension. I wonder what will happen on 31 January 2019.

Best wishes,
Naoki

34
September 2019

Hi Naoki,
I hope you are well.
I can't find anything from you since April 2018. Just following up my unresolved narratives and wondered what is happening now - if anything?

With all good wishes
John

35
Dear John,

The student was supposed to be contacting with us earlier this year. Then we were told that her funder accepted her to pursue her degree in South Korea. So she withdrew from the university.

From what I had a personal conversation with, her life was upside down since she took up her studentship. But she did not want to say she wants to stop because she had to pay back to her funder. She was too afraid to come back and being failed again, meaning she had to pay back to her funder and lose her job at her university.

Her academic ability was substandard to start with. She should have not been accepted in the first place.

Best wishes,
Naoki

36

Dear Naoki,

Many thanks. The best outcome available to her I imagine?

I would like to add a summary of your experience to my collection, anonymised of course. I think we agreed to do anything till the case was resolved. But it does raise important questions for supervisors and institutions. It will need some updating, but do you think we could do this?

bw

John

37

September 2019

Dear John,

Yes, definitely. I would like to hear what others would suggest or do differently.

She wanted her autistic son to receive special education in the UK, while she was in the UK.

The panel advised that she needs to have child care arrangement to make progress.

But she did not follow it up very well, arrangements were all very short term.

I believe she eventually sent all her kids to South Korea?, apart from the autistic one.

Anyway, I hope you will have a good session.

Best wishes,

Naoki

Team tasks

What would have done differently if you had been Naoki?

List the lessons here for

1. Students
2. Supervisors, and
3. Institutions