



## 2 Reassurances

There was no offer to show me the original examiners' reports; nor was I sure that I should have wanted to see them if there had been. In any case of resubmission the examiners are still supposed to be following an absolute standard: does the thesis warrant the award of a PhD or not? The question of whether it was an improvement on the original failed/referred thesis was not strictly necessary. Nevertheless, in most cases of resubmission, the examiners are working on a memory of the original submission and (more critically) suggestions of the improvements that they themselves thought necessary to achieve the required standard. I decided that the fact that the original internal examiner was in place meant that that side of things was covered, and that I should not ask to see the original reports (or the suggestions made for improving the thesis). That is, I decided that I should make a virtue of my virgin status and try to judge the resubmitted thesis on uncluttered terms: was it up to standard or not?

I did, however, have one qualm, on which I sought the head of department's reassurance. I realised that the situation might hypothetically be very fraught if there had been any significant division of opinion between the two original examiners. If there had been a major difference of views between the internal (whom I also know, and know to be embittered by lack of promotion) and the external, my appointment as a second external might - depending on how I saw the case - just constitute a reflection on his judgement, as much as on the candidate's thesis. I was assured there were no significant differences between the original examiners, and with that reassurance I agreed to serve. Only with hindsight did I realise that there were other reassurances I should probably have sought as well.

Q1 What other information should Robert have obtained before agreeing to act?

Q2 What should he do now?

### 3 To viva or not to viva

I duly received the thesis, and read it with growing relief: there seemed to me no reasonable doubt that it warranted a PhD. This is particularly important in such cases, because the regulations (which in my experience are the same everywhere in this regard) meant that a further resubmission was out of the question. We could either recommend the award of a PhD, or of a Master's degree instead, or fail it. The only leeway we had at all was to allow for minor typos etc. to be corrected. (I might say in passing that I was surprised, given that it was a resubmission, just how many of these there were - that the candidate, for example, still had not got absolutely straight the proper form of the citation of a scholarly article. You might have thought that s/he would make an extra effort to get such things right, given what was at stake. Nevertheless, I did not think that this constituted anything like grounds for not awarding the degree, given that we could and did insist that these

the candidate had been so heavily tutored by his supervisor. He stopped short, but only just, of saying that the supervisor had written the thesis.

#### 4 Whose thesis?

This is, I suppose, the sort of issue that a viva might explore: it is certainly the job of a viva to test the candidate's knowledge beyond the immediate confines of the thesis, and his/her capacity to interrogate the premises on which the thesis was written. So I had to re-think my original proposition that a second viva was not necessary. But, firstly, it seemed to me that a second viva with an internal examiner who felt this way was not only going to be difficult for all concerned but might well be positively counter-productive: how was it going to be possible to disentangle the issue of the candidate's degree of dependence on the supervisor from that of the internal examiner's patent resentment of that supervisor for other reasons? Secondly, if the internal examiner felt that the level of dependence on the supervisor really was such as to invalidate the degree, why was s/he not insisting (as he s/had the right to) on a second viva? Thirdly, could I envisage any outcome in a viva which was going to change my original conviction that the thesis as presented warranted the award of a degree?

Any thesis is liable, by its nature, to be a product of on-going communication between a supervisor and the candidate: could even the most objective of vivas determine where supervision shaded into something more like substitution? I was happy enough that the language of the thesis was not that of the supervisor: it did not have the fluency and perceptive originality with which I am familiar. The whole situation might have been more straightforward if supervisors were required, in parallel with candidates' undertaking that a thesis is all their own work, to stipulate that they have not unduly shaped the work. This is one of those difficult grey areas

## 5 Questions hanging in the air

Under the regulations of the University of L., the proper procedure is that both examiners write a separate report, independently of each other. If these then agree in their recommendations, the internal examiner is expected to compose a single, agreed report from them, which both examiners sign and submit. Since, misgivings apart, we were both agreed on our recommendations, I sent him a copy of my report and waited for him to send me the joint report.

Three months and two e-mails later this had still not appeared. In some dismay I contacted the head of department/supervisor who told me that he knew the situation existed, that he had been urging the internal examiner to complete the report, but that he was currently out of the country. Some weeks later I received the 'joint report', which was in fact my own report with a brief final paragraph by the internal examiner endorsing my conclusions.

The whole business was both unsettling and unsatisfactory. I was reasonably happy in my own mind that the award of the PhD to the candidate, on the basis of what I had read, was the proper outcome. But everything else left a lot of questions hanging in the air. Because the head of department was also the candidate's supervisor, I could not turn to him/her for an impartial review of the internal examiner's views and action. For that I should have had to approach either the Dean of Graduate Studies (assuming they have such a person) or even the Vice-Chancellor. And I could not convince myself that such a drastic move was in the best interests of the candidate, which I took to be the primary consideration in the case.

It was between submitting my own report on this case and receiving the joint report back that I was approached by the head of department at the University of B. and asked if I would be prepared to act as external examiner in the case of a re-submitted PhD thesis ...I was less than thrilled. The circumstances were very

own experience in the past as an acting Dean of Graduate Studies) that there was concern that permission to submit the thesis early might have been construed, rightly or wrongly, as a comment, however tacit, on its quality. I also assumed that

6 To be or not to be...

I consulted with some colleagues in my own department and the general view, with which I concurred, was that the Board was not going to change its mind



## 9 Resolution

The viva itself was one of the less pleasant afternoons of my academic career. The candidate quickly appreciated that the questions of both examiners stemmed from a basic scepticism about the thesis as a whole, rather than reservations about parts of it. The defence ran very much along the lines of the thesis itself, relying on assertion rather than demonstration and repeatedly evading certain key challenges to the central arguments by falling back on anecdotes that did not actually answer the case. At the end of it all, we two examiners conferred and agreed to recommend the award of a Master's degree. This was not without some qualms: a Master's degree is a significant award in its own right, potentially opening doors to academic employment. But there was evidence of considerable scholarship in the thesis, of long hours in research libraries, of significant bibliographical skills: the pity was that it was all deployed in the interests of a thesis that simply didn't begin to hold water. At bottom there was evidence of totally inadequate supervision. Most specifically, the candidate should never - on this showing - have been registered for a doctorate.

Q1 Comment on the outcome.

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Team/Syndicate Tasks:

- 1 List up to 5 guidelines for institutions which would have been helpful in these situations.
  - 2 List up to 5 suggestions for someone invited to re-examine a thesis.
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