

THE ROLE AND FUNCTION FOR THE PhD EXAMINER

Simulation Exercise

Based, with thanks, on original material from the Unit for Innovation in Higher Education

Information

- This exercise is designed to be undertaken over a 25 minute period, with 5 minutes extra allowed for summarising the main points.
- Group members should appoint a chair, a time keeper and a scribe.
- You should read and discuss each page in turn *without* looking on to the next ones. **Spend no more than 3 or 4 minutes on each of the first 3 pages of the story and about 10 minutes on the last one.** Complete all in 25 minutes.
- Based on the notes made on each page for each stage of the scenario, please produce on a flip chart page a list of the key points of advice you would give to a novice examiner. (These will be displayed in the Common Room for sharing over lunchtime.)
- Try to read the discipline specific material as illustrative only. Try to imagine a similar situation in your own discipline!
- Address any queries to the organiser now and then find a suitable spot for your deliberations.

- **Turn over only when you have appointed a chair etc and are ready to start.**

Section 1

You are a young, well respected but easy going lecturer in the Department of Topiary Studies at the University of Poppleton. As you arrive at a meeting in early December you meet a senior colleague who has been friendly towards you since you arrived in Poppleton, Professor Lapping, Head of the Coppices Department in your Faculty. He mentions to you casually that Darren Archer is about to hand in his thesis just before the four year deadline.

You express mild interest. (Darren is only slightly known to you, largely through a paper he gave on 'Garden Enhancement?' 18 months previously at your graduate workshop. You had not thought well of the material he had presented which seemed to you to be superficial and without evidence of a theoretical framework. Therefore you and one of your students had, over coffee, pointed him towards some basic literature).

To your surprise Professor Lapping invites you to act as an internal examiner for Darren's thesis. He feels that you would be more appropriate than many of his colleagues in Coppicing whose knowledge of the nitty gritty of small scale pruning is, he says, 'rusty'.

You feel somewhat flattered at the suggestion, think it would be useful to gain experience as an examiner, and in any case you suspect that he will be appointed as assessor to your department's approval event for your new MA course, so you agree. Further discussion is prevented by the start of the meeting which Professor Lapping leaves before the end.

What would you do at this point in such a circumstance?

Is it typically how things happen?

Is it professional or unprofessional?

Section 2

Reading your father's Daily Telegraph at Christmas you notice an item headed 'Bonsai in the Hands of Amateurs' which seems to be a brief account of a paper given at the National Association for Annual Conference on Arboreal Control in Margate by Lapping and Archer of the University of Poppleton and make a mental note that some of Darren's work is already in the public domain.

At the beginning of the Spring term you receive a bound copy of Darren's 500 page thesis. After a couple of weeks you skim through it and find that, although the references you gave him have been extensively quoted, Darren has made no attempt to integrate them with his fieldwork data which mainly seems to consist of extensive lists of local woods and forests and transcripts of interviews with employees of a local garden centre, a freelance tree pruner and retired gardeners.

What would you do at this point under these circumstances?

You are busy with teaching and filling in forms for your department's contribution to a Teaching Quality Assessment Exercise and decide that, in view of the time that has elapsed, you must continue to fulfil the undertaking you gave to Prof Lapping and you mentally put aside some time to read the thesis.

In the first week of February you receive a telephone call on your mobile during a second year tutorial from a Professor Harris at the Letchworth School of Forestry Management who says he has been appointed External Examiner and he wants to fix a mutually convenient date for the viva voce. He suggests a date which he knows will suit Darren, because he must complete soon, and, since you have a space in your diary, you agree.

What action would you recommend, if any, at this stage?

Section 3

You take the next weekend to read the thesis in detail, starting by marking every fault, omission, unsound argument etc, but after two chapters of endless marking up of the thesis you read with increasing doubts. You become certain that, had the thesis been submitted in your own department, no degree could have been awarded. Darren has used no recent literature nor produced a systematic analysis of the fieldwork data and the interview quotations are simply included in the text. It is perilously close to the viva date and so you press on with your reading.

On the day of the viva, Professor Harris is held up in traffic and has difficulty finding a parking space on the Poppleton campus. He arrives late at viva room, leaving little time for a pre-viva discussion, but jovially suggests that this won't be a problem as there is not much to discuss. You express your doubts about the quality of the thesis and, a little clumsily, suggest that you see no likelihood of being satisfied by Darren's submission no matter what happens in the viva.

Professor Harris seems taken aback. He had attended the December Conference and heard Lapping and Archer's paper and had been so impressed that he had personally offered to publish an account of the research in a paperback series he is editing: 'The Technical Horticulturalist'. You have a private suspicion that he has not read the thesis properly as he remarks that it only needs 'tidying up and typos correcting'. He is quite insistent that a positive outcome should be possible and notes that he only has an hour for the viva as he has an important meeting with the Vice Chancellor later in the day and therefore needs to get away "sharpish".

What are your comments on this current scenario ?

How would you have managed this situation?

Section 4

You go ahead with the viva. Darren and Professor Harris start to chat about their common interests but when you interject with your questions he finds great difficulty in answering and almost bursts into tears towards the end of your questioning. You feel shattered and guilty. Have you given Darren a fair chance? When Darren leaves the room to await your decision Professor Harris suggests that, in the circumstances, it would be helpful to have Professor Lapping join in as Darren's supervisor. You phone him and he agrees to come over straight away.

Professor Harris explains to him, in what you feel is not an all together unbiased manner, the nature of your disagreements and Darren's disappointing performance in the light of your approach to the viva. Professor Lapping explained that the topic finally chosen by Darren had not been the one that had originally been registered, but that he had lost interest towards the end of the first year. When he had then suggested the new topic the department had been pleased to see his regained enthusiasm and accepted the change, particularly in the light of his ambition to follow an academic career.

He also explains that, although Darren had not wanted it mentioned, he should inform you in confidence that Darren had had very difficult personal circumstances during his time at his University which had involved long, time-consuming, stressful and expensive legal proceedings. He had, however, been a model student and, despite living over 20 miles away, had been an excellent attender at the first year training courses and an assiduous student representative, from the Students' Union, on the Departmental Committee.

What are your comments on this current scenario?

What should happen next?

What key advice, based on reading this story, would you give to a prospective new examiner?