

# Research Integrity and PhD Viva

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*For Trainers*

## Why case studies?

A core function of the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) is to provide independent, expert, and confidential advice on the conduct of research, from promoting good practice to addressing allegations of misconduct. We have been doing this since 2006.

Each request for assistance received by UKRIO increases our body of knowledge. These 'lessons learned' not only inform our response to subsequent enquiries but also underpin our other activities, especially UKRIO's education and training work.

We have found that illustrative case studies are an excellent way to raise awareness of research integrity and research culture and to illustrate the complexities and 'grey areas' that can occur.

Case studies are not literal accounts of any enquiry to UKRIO. Instead, they are scenarios, based on real-life situations, which illustrate recurring or notable issues and problems that have been brought to our attention. While some case studies may mention a particular discipline or setting, they contain themes that are relevant across subjects.

Please note that this case study is fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons, organisations or events is coincidental.

## Case study 10

You are a *PhD student*. In your viva, your **external examiner** asks you the following three questions:

*“How did you approach the design and conduct of your PhD study to take account of ethical issues?”*

*“When analysing your data, how did you ensure the integrity of your data?”*

*“If you plan on publishing your research, how would you go about demonstrating to a journal editor that your work was conducted to the standards of integrity that are expected?”*



**Please discuss and decide:**

1. How would you respond to the external examiner?

## Case study 10 resolution

### Trainer tips

You should see your role as guiding the discussions. The resolution below is intended as a starting point for debate and reflection, drawing on the major themes of the case study.

You can alter details during the discussion to explore the trainees' understanding of good practice. For example, you could ask:

- If you supervise PhD students, how would you advise your students to respond if they were asked these questions in their viva?

### 1 How would you respond to the external examiner?

As with questions of an academic nature (such as literature, methodology, etc.), providing justifications for decisions taken during research is a fundamental part of a viva voce examination. *External examiners explore the content of a thesis; they can also explore what they feel has been left out of a thesis* and whether such omissions are reasonable or not.

Considering the ethical issues would best be done by explicitly including such considerations in the text of the thesis itself, which demonstrates to examiners that this was part of the design and conduct of the study. As with other areas of academic work, not including something in the thesis is ripe for potentially difficult questions.

The most straightforward way to respond to the first two of the external examiner's questions would be to show where ethics and integrity matters had been addressed in the text of the thesis. If the student has not done this, then the student ought to be prepared to field questions in this area. **An examiner who raises such questions directly in the viva may have concerns about the way the work was done**, so oral answers in the viva itself may not suffice to satisfy those concerns...and may also lead to amendments to the thesis being required in this area.

## 1 How would you respond to the external examiner? *Continued...*

When publishing research (the subject of the third question from the external examiner), it would be important to demonstrate that the project had undergone appropriate *ethical review and received all required ethical and regulatory approvals*, and for researchers to be able to produce data/evidence if requested by editors.

As with the examination of a PhD thesis, the explicit consideration in the text of ethical issues would be particularly helpful, especially given ongoing moves to increased openness about research methodologies and data.



Promoting integrity and high ethical standards in research  
Providing confidential, independent, and expert support

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