

PhD Student: Paid Help

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 8

You are a *PhD student* who has recently submitted your thesis, though you have yet to sit your viva.

Feeling a bit nervous about what is to come, you talk to another PhD student (**student X**) on your course who will also be sitting their viva soon.

During the conversation, student X tells you that **they did not collect all of the data for their thesis on their own**. Instead, they paid some other researchers to gather the data. Student X says that these researchers only gathered the data but did not help with the research design, data analysis, or with writing up the thesis (student X did all of those things themselves).

Student X also says that they are not very worried about what the external examiner will think of their thesis, as *the external examiner has worked with their supervisor* on a number of research projects.



Please discuss and decide:

1. What actions do you take?
2. Is it acceptable for a PhD student to pay others to collect data for their PhD?
3. Is it acceptable for an external examiner to assess the PhD thesis when they have previously worked with the student's supervisor?

Case study 8 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. Certain approaches are proposed but discussion of the case may well suggest others – there is often no single ‘right’ answer.

You can alter details during the discussion to explore the trainees' understanding of good practice.

1 What actions do you take?

It is not a student's job to investigate possible research misconduct. Any concerns should be reported to your supervisor or to the person responsible for research integrity at your institution. Your fellow student's remarks may have been serious however they could also have been joking or exaggerating.

2 Is it acceptable for a PhD student to pay others to collect data for their PhD?

When examining a PhD thesis, examiners look for original contribution to knowledge, demonstration of broader knowledge in the field of study and an ability to sustain an argument (thesis) in one's own words.

Depending on the discipline and project in question, it may be acceptable – or even sensible – for others to assist with data collection. **What is essential is transparency in how data was collected and analysed.** Fabrication, plagiarism and other misconduct are wholly unacceptable.

PhD supervisors should ensure that a student has carried out the work they claim to have done and has contributed enough to 'originality' and 'argument' to warrantably permit them to go forward for assessment.

3 Is it acceptable for an external examiner to assess the PhD thesis when they have previously worked with the student's supervisor?

External examiners of PhDs should ideally have no connections with supervisors. However, in a specialised field the pool of available candidates may be very small and therefore connections cannot be avoided.

It is vital that **any conflicts of interest are declared** and addressed appropriately.

University regulations and guidance for the conduct and examination of research degrees must be followed.

External examiners must carry out their duties in an honest, rigorous and objective manner.



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

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