

Robert's predicaments: an external examiner's story

I The first invitation

Within the space of two months, two universities both invited me to act as external examiner in cases of re-submitted PhD theses. Although strictly the two cases had nothing to do with each other I undoubtedly approached the latter in the light of the former. And since the experience of being examiner for the second submission of a thesis, when you have not been examiner for the first, is neither common nor something that university regulations have much to say about, I have decided to describe both.

Any resubmission case is potentially difficult. The candidate has failed to make the grade once, which must increase the chances that s/he will do so a second time. But at least the first of these cases initially *seemed* to pose no problems of principle. I received a letter from the head of department at the University of L., outlining the situation where a thesis had been 'referred' (an interesting euphemism, I feel) but with the recommendation that the candidate be allowed to resubmit for a PhD. In the mean time the original external examiner had fallen ill, and was not able to serve for the resubmission, though the original internal examiner was still in place. The head of department was someone I knew quite well and had worked with in the past. He did not actually name the original external examiner, but supplied enough information for me to infer who it must be - an extremely eminent lady from one of the ancient institutions, famous for her more than exacting standards. He also explained that the original viva had been an extremely bloody and protracted affair, and that under the University of L's regulations it was not actually necessary to hold a second if both examiners agreed to waive it.

Q1 Have any syndicate members experience of examining or re-submissions?

Discuss the main issues that arose.

Q2 What should Robert do as a result of this invitation?

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 things were attended to.)

Having reached this conclusion, and written my report to that effect, I contacted the internal examiner by e-mail to say that I was broadly satisfied with the thesis, and that in the circumstances I could see little point in conducting a second viva. A second viva would surely only go over much of the same ground as the first, albeit with more positive inflections, and was bound to be traumatic for the student (given what I knew of the first). I was also aware that it might awkwardly expose the different situations between internal and external examiner, with myself as a third party 'innocent' to whatever had happened in the past.

The reply from the internal examiner agreed that the thesis probably passed, and that a second viva was not necessary, but did so with singular ill grace. The venom of the piece was directed not at the candidate, but at the candidate's supervisor who (and this was where hindsight came into very sharp focus) was also the head of department. This was not exactly news to me, though it had never been openly stated before, because the thesis was very much written around a recent book by the head of department - applying its approach to areas of the discipline that he had not covered in any detail. The main weakness of the thesis was really that it had done this somewhat mechanically and repetitively, showing originality and initiative only in limited and controlled circumstances. It seemed to me that, if doctorates were classified like first degrees, this would have been somewhere on the 2/2 / 2/1 border, scoring high marks for diligence, scholarship and coherence but less for flair and independence of mind: nevertheless, a clear pass. The internal examiner in effect conceded this, but proceeded to disparage the original book in question and to imply that the resubmitted thesis had only reached its present standard because

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.

Q1 What contribution to a thesis would you expect would be legitimate from a Supervisor?

Q2 What should Robert do in these circumstances?

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 in the whole business of doctorates, where so much depends on the integrity/originality of the thesis. In the end, I decided that a second viva was not going to make this any less grey, and stuck by my original decision.

Q1 Comment on Robert's decision.

Q2 Is there anything he should include in his report?

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 different, though in some ways no less dismaying. In this case the thesis had been examined, and the candidate vivaed, and the recommendation of both examiners had been that the thesis should be referred and only resubmitted for a Master's degree. This recommendation had, on the appeal of the candidate, been overturned by the University of B's Board of Graduate Studies on the technical grounds that the student had been given permission to submit the thesis before completing the minimum period of registration that was normally required. Resubmission for a PhD was granted. That is, the Board made no judgement about the quality of the thesis, or about the examiners' recommendations, but judged (I am inferring here) that the inadequacies of the thesis *might* be due to the candidate not taking the full time to complete it. I saw nothing in writing of the Board's decision but assumed (from my

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 there was a whiff of the law courts in the air.

I had been approached at this stage because *both* of the original examiners had resigned on hearing of the Board's decision, refusing to re-examine the candidate for a doctorate. This posed an immediate issue of principle: if I agreed to act as an examiner here, was I undermining the integrity of the original examiners, who clearly resented the fact that their professional judgement had been set aside on the basis of a very dubious technicality? (It did not help in this respect that one of those examiners was the wife of the man who, many years ago, had been my own research supervisor ... but I tried not to let such personal dimensions affect my judgement, and certainly did not get in touch).

Q1 What further issues arise in this case?

Q2 What should Robert reply to the second invitation?

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 on this and that they would go on looking until somebody did agree to do it. There was no doubt that, in terms of subject matter, seniority and long experience of graduate studies, I was a highly appropriate examiner - anyone else they finally convinced to do it might be less so. I decided that (subject to clarifying some of the issues raised by the case at the University of L) I would agree to do it, in the conviction that, while the situation should never have arisen, I was probably better qualified than most to resolve it.

I quickly established that the head of department was not the candidate's supervisor (indeed, it latterly appeared that the candidate had only had a makeshift supervisor for some time, since the one originally appointed had retired). I also established that the new internal examiner was someone I did not know personally, but whose work and academic judgement I knew and respected. In this instance, because neither examiner had been previously involved, I decided it would be perverse not to know on what grounds the original examiners had made the recommendation they had. The University of B clearly thought hard about this, but finally agreed to let me see the reports of the original examiners - which, however, I carefully did not look at until *after* I had read the thesis and made my own mind up about it. With all these assurances in place, I reluctantly agreed.

Q1 Comment on Robert's reaction to his invitation.

Q2 Is there any other information he should have sought?

8 No way

My reading of the thesis induced the opposite effect from that I had experienced reading the previous one. From the beginning I could see that it was perverse and wilful in the mode of its argumentation, making assertions not based on established evidence, making generalisations that were not warranted by the data, restricting the data in the first place by quite arbitrary criteria, and proceeding with a blindly mechanical methodology to demonstrate an array of 'facts' which had hardly been in dispute in the first place but which certainly did not substantiate the thesis supposedly built upon them. In fact, the original examiners' reports proved to be completely redundant: they merely said about the original thesis exactly what I intended to say about the re-written one.

Under the University of B's regulations there were no ifs and buts about it: there had to be a second viva. Their system required both examiners to submit separate reports *before* the viva (which we did, both in fact saying very much the same thing), and then a brief joint report about the viva itself. But this was an instance (only the second in my career) where I went into a viva knowing that there was no way that the candidate could be awarded a doctorate, either immediately or subsequently.

In fact, the University of B's bureaucracy almost overturned this certainty by sending the candidate formal notification of the viva, in which it was stated that one possible outcome was that the examiners could require a further resubmission, for which the outcome could be a PhD. This was a pure and (in the circumstances) ludicrous *mistake*. The regulations quite explicitly made *any* further resubmission impossible: someone had simply used the form letter for a first examination, rather than for a resubmission. I learned of all this from the internal examiner, about a week before the viva was scheduled. I immediately contacted the head of department and said that I would not conduct the viva unless the candidate were sent a clarification of the situation, and was prepared to stipulate *in writing* that s/he understood the regulations which would be operative for the re-examination. The candidate in fact went further than this, not only so stipulating, but also disclaiming any intention of suing the university, whatever the outcome!

Q1 Comment on the situation and Robert's reaction so far.

Q2 What should he do before the viva?

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.

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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