

Case study 2

There are concerns about the research of M, a PhD student in the School of Social Sciences.

A significant part of M's research involved interviewing a number of vulnerable adults about their experiences with the UK social care system. The interviews involved discussion of the reasons why the participants required assistance from the social care system and the nature and outcome of that assistance. The PhD project has been written up and M is about to sit her viva.

M identified potential interviewees according to the approved research design, provided them with information on the study and sought their consent to participate. All of the actual interviewees gave their consent to participate and did so in writing. However, it has since been discovered that:

- The study used a significantly modified consent form rather than that originally approved by the Ethics Committee. This meant that participants gave permission for their data to be used for purposes which the Ethics Committee had not approved.
- Some of the questions asked in the interviews were significantly different from those originally approved by the Ethics Committee.

The changes that have been made to the consent form and the interview questions are substantial, rather than minor or trivial – both documents have been significantly altered. The changes go far beyond any reasonable alterations to the wording, such as from proof-reading or other editing after ethical approval had been received.

The university has only begun to look into the matter properly. However, M has already said that her PhD supervisor within the university had confirmed that ethical approval had been given for the project and that the instructions of the Ethics Committee were being followed – i.e. that M was doing nothing wrong. As a PhD student, M had felt it was reasonable to take on trust the information she received from her supervisor.

- **What should be done in response to the concerns about M's research?**
- **Should M be allowed to sit her viva or not? Might there be an alternative solution?**
- **Are there any wider issues to consider?**

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Case study 2 – discussion points

- **What should be done in response to the concerns?** The matter needs to be investigated fairly and thoroughly, especially as human participants are involved. At present, all the university has is a brief report of some concerns – which may or may not be true - and a short statement from the student. Other involved parties will need to be interviewed. Documentation should be checked to determine what was the ethical approval for the work and whether this has been followed by M. If not, was this a mistake or deliberate? What was the role of the supervisor, if any? Most importantly, an investigation should assess whether the safety and wellbeing of the participants have been affected.

Action should be taken to safeguard the participants as necessary. Suspending the research until the investigation has concluded would be sensible; it could then be reinstated if the concerns were not upheld. The investigation should consider whether participants have been harmed, what actions should be taken if they have been, and how to communicate the situation to them and other involved parties, such as doctors or carers if appropriate.

It should be noted that people give their informed consent to participate in research with the understanding that the research has undergone an ethical review process and will be conducted in accordance with that review. Even if the safety, wellbeing or dignity of the participants have not been harmed *per se*, a breach of ethical approval in human subject research is still a serious matter and undermines their consent.

- **Should M be allowed to sit her viva?** The viva should be postponed until the investigation has concluded; possibly until any relevant follow-up actions have taken place. Depending on the outcome of the investigation, M may be able to resubmit her thesis but a serious breach of ethical approval may lead to termination of her PhD study.
- **Are there any wider issues to consider?**
 - M's statement that her supervisor allegedly approved of, and even encouraged, her actions, raises some questions. If M has acted improperly, whether deliberately or mistake, then the supervisor's involvement, if any, needs to be investigated.

It may well be that M's statement is incorrect and the supervisor is blameless. Alternatively, the supervisor may have improperly instructed or advised their student. If so, was this an isolated incident? Or might they have acted in the same way with M on other occasions or with other students also?

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- This scenario can be used as a starting point for reflection on the working relationship between PhD student and supervisor in general. The role of a supervisor is to support, encourage, guide and advise; students must not be 'spoon fed'. Equally, PhD students are expected and encouraged to work and think independently, while still accepting guidance. How straightforward is it to communicate and address responsibilities, needs, expectations and ways of working?

How can problems in the working relationship be prevented or addressed? If a PhD student feels that they have been instructed incorrectly by a supervisor, what actions can they take? If a supervisor feels that they are being blamed unfairly for their student's conduct, what should they do?

- How well do researchers, especially research students and early career researchers, know your institution's system for ethical review? What does it say about making substantial amendments once a study has started? Are researchers aware of what they should do and why failure to do this would be unethical? How straightforward is the process and could it be made clearer? What sources of advice are publicised to researchers dealing with these issues?