

Case study 4

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

Feeling a bit nervous about what is to come, you talk to a student on your PhD course who will also be sitting their viva soon. During the conversation, he tells you that he did not collect all of the data for his thesis himself; instead, he paid some other researchers to gather the data for him. He says that these researchers did not help with the research design, analysing the data, or with writing up the thesis – he did all of those things himself.

He also says that he is not very worried about what the external examiner will think of his thesis, as the external examiner has worked with his supervisor on a number of research projects.

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

Case study 4 – discussion points

- **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 he could have been joking or exaggerating.
- **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.

- **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.