

Introductory information

1. The case studies are not literal accounts of any particular enquiry to UKRIO. Instead they are scenarios, based on real-life situations, which illustrate recurring or notable issues and problems which have been brought to our attention.
2. This pack is suitable for any audience but may be of particular interest to research students and early career researchers.
3. While some case studies may mention a particular discipline, they contain themes that cut across all subjects.
4. Each case study is accompanied by some suggested points for discussion. These are 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 cases may well suggest others – there is often no single ‘right’ answer.

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.

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

This material may be copied or reproduced provided that the source is acknowledged and the material, wholly or in part, is not used for commercial gain. By kind permission of © UK Research Integrity Office 2014 | www.ukrio.org

Case study 4 – discussion points

Below are some suggested points for discussion. These are 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 cases may well suggest others – there is often no single ‘right’ answer.

- **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.