Unpicking quality in doctoral work

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Vignette A: Supervisor update training
One of us is sitting at a laptop in the office at home, logged into an online meeting at which the head of our doctoral school is about to update staff on new ‘quality procedures’ for supervision. The number of attendees is counting up in the participants window as colleagues log on from all across the university; 25, 50, 75 and counting. As the session begins we hear the administrator managing the event telling us that ‘I’ve got my colleague in the background who’s desperately ticking you off so we can update your training records’.

Vignette B: Tracking progress
One of our colleagues is supervising a Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) candidate. She, the candidate, is good to work with; highly motivated, effective and intellectually capable. She has produced a transfer report (the proposal for her doctoral project that must be approved before she can continue) and submitted it for evaluation. As well as being a valuable process for her, this is also a health check to give her, and the university, the confidence that the project can be successful. Because she’s such a high quality student she has submitted this several months before the deadline and is keen to start in order to capture time-sensitive data linked to the rhythm of the school year. However, there’s a problem. The traffic light on the university’s graduate quality management system is red. The proposal is not yet due; when it is the light will turn green and she and her supervisor can proceed. But for now there is nothing that can be done—no-one can turn the light green manually and until it does so ‘itself’ the forms needed to initiate the transfer meeting are not available. Everyone sits and waits while the school year ticks on …

In this chapter we want to explore the experiences of supervisors of EdD candidates in relation to the notion of ‘quality’. Our aim is to understand how quality measures are understood in the context of the doctorate; a higher degree which, like higher education (HE) programmes generally around the globe, is being reshaped to embrace greater access and diversity (Lunt, 2017) as part of the rise of neoliberal social and economic policy (Connell, 2013). Such policy change has, according to Deem (1998), led to a related rise in new managerialism which has involved the implementation into Higher Education of accountability measures normally associated with businesses. These include monitoring efficiency and effectiveness through the measurement of outcomes and performance. Our interest is in how, within this context, quality is constructed in different ways, by whom and with what effect in terms of doctoral study and supervision. The vignettes above, serve to initiate this discussion, but we also draw, more formally, on a study into doctoral supervision undertaken by both authors (Pratt & Shaughnessy, 2018), from which data is drawn to illustrate our thinking.

Over the last 30 years in England¹ HE has moved from being a publicly funded good for the most privileged 5%, to a massified, privately funded commodity, with record numbers of full-time

¹ Note that the English HE system is differently funded to that of the other UK countries and hence, though they share many common features, and students in the UK can apply to them all, we refer here specifically to England.
students year-on-year (Bolton, 2020; Liu, Green, & Pensiero, 2016; Mok & Neubauer, 2016). Whilst not quite mirroring undergraduate numbers, postgraduate research student numbers have also increased in the UK and globally, not least in the form of professional doctorates (Kot & Hendel, 2012). Managerialism, which Lynch (2014) refers to as ‘the organisational arm of neoliberalism’, has crept in alongside this policy change as a means to manage the transition; the aim being to be more economically efficient, to do more with less and to streamline HE as one would a business aimed at economic profit (Connell, 2013). Such is the pervasive nature of an economic model that this kind of efficiency has become the norm, certainly in England though elsewhere too; so much so that politicians readily complain that ‘too many [students] have been misled by the expansion of popular sounding courses with no real demand from the labour market’ (Donelan, cited in Adams, 2020) or combine such views with medical, best practice metaphors claiming that education is ‘the best inoculation against unemployment’ (Cameron, 2014). Of course some voices can still be heard to the contrary, such as Collini (2012, p.110) who suggests that:

\[
\text{rather than saying that extending human understanding is valuable because it provides the means to prosperity we should surely say that one of the reasons prosperity is valuable is because it provides the wherewithal to extend human understanding.}
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That such a statement somehow feels radical perhaps serves to illustrate what we mean by a system that has been changed so fundamentally by the effects of managerialism where forms of measurement and performance take centre stage. Whilst Collini’s words refer particularly to undergraduate studies, doctorates of all kinds have been subject to similar forces. The signs are subtle and often glossed over by university marketing systems that speak rhetorically of things being ‘world-class’, but scratch the paint away and one sees examples, such as Robinson’s (2018) observation of an increase in the combining of taught groups from several programmes to make numbers profitable, and Mellors-Bourne, Robinson, and Metcalfe’s (2016) claim of an increasing propensity for professional doctorate (PD) students to have only one supervisor, where the norm traditionally has been two. How, then, do professional doctorates manage to operate in this kind of environment? And, particularly, how does the notion of quality play a part in the doctoral process?

Making sense of quality in doctoral work

Our intention, then, is to explore different notions of quality as they apply to the work of professional doctoral students, specifically those on Doctorate of Education (EdD) programmes, from which we draw our examples. Though we limit the discussion to these students we feel confident that our argument could be extended to candidates on all professional doctorates in social sciences such as health and social care, social science and law, humanities/theology and generic professional practice (see Robinson, 2018), and potentially beyond these too. To characterize our ideas and construct our argument we draw on Carol Bacchi’s notion of policy representation (Bacchi, 2000, 2009). Originating in Foucault and particularly his theory of governmentality (see also Dean, 2010; Foucault, 2014), Bacchi’s interest is in how policy comes about through ‘different rationalities or mentalities of rule (govern-mentalities), the different kinds of thinking associated with particular approaches to government’ (Bacchi, 2009, p. 26). A full exploration of Foucault’s ideas is beyond the scope of this chapter, but the following points illustrate the key ideas that Bacchi draws on.

First, there is a recognition that governing takes place at both the individual level through disciplinary practices—one example might be that supervisors not attending training eventually have their supervisory rights removed by the university (but see also Evans, 2020)—and at the societal level through regulation. The latter requires a full understanding of the population being governed
and thus tends to create a need for measurement and a statistical approach to understanding it—
ticking us off on the training register and correct time periods for transfer reports, serve as
eamples. From this evolves a second feature: the ability to govern ‘at a distance’, which manifests
itself in two ways. Measurement and its statistical analysis creates a conceptual distance in the
sense that it lifts governing from the direct regulation of individuals’ actions to the indirect
regulation of the population by the redefining of norms—literally, what it means to act normally,
rationally, reasonably. Note how the student in Vignette B above, was not prevented from moving
on because she had acted wrongly but because it is not ‘normal’ to be ready so quickly and hence is
judged inappropriate. Then there is a physical distancing produced by the online nature of record
keeping and training programmes. Through the connectivity of the internet and the postgraduate
student record system, those in charge do not have to physically be there. The red light induced by
the calculating software, not the administrator or the supervisor, holds the student up. In a context
where doctoral milestones are supposed to be the answer to supporting progress, the system
becomes punitive because it is disembodied from the process.

These are ‘dividing practices’ because in defining normalities the governing system thereby co-
defines abnormalities, and hence people are set in one group or the other. Supervisors are required
to undertake the ‘right’ actions, or be deemed to have acted ‘wrongly’; and students are either
successful or unsuccessful at each stage. Foucault refers to such systems of activity as ‘regimes of
practices’; the focus being on the materiality of doctoral work and placing ‘these regimes of
practices at the centre of analysis and seek(ing) to discover the logic of such practices’ (Dean, 2010,
p. 41). Importantly, such an analysis needs to look in the round and not default to simple cause and
effect. The training programme does not cause one to make use of the student record system. It
does afford that use though, but simultaneously its use reinforces the discourse that supports it.

In drawing on these ideas Bacchi recognises that there is a natural tendency in modern managerial
systems to look for intentionality, which leads to actors seeing situations as problematic and to
seeking solutions. As she notes though, ‘it is important not to think of these ‘mentalities of rule’ as
planned and intentional. Rather, they emerge from a complex array of developments’ (Bacchi, 2009,
p. 155); an array which, Dean (2010, p.37) suggests, becomes a regime of practices ‘whenever there
exists a relatively stable field of correlation of visibilities, mentalities, technologies and agencies,
such that they constitute a kind of taken-for-granted point of reference for any form of
problematisation’ (emphasis added). Bacchi’s trick is to rotate the perspective one takes. Rather
than allowing problems to be taken-for-granted and thus to focus on ‘their’ solutions she suggests
that we should focus on how problems have come to be represented as problems in the first place;
what is assumed or omitted in such a representation, what effects are produced by it and who
benefits or loses out as a result? Put simply, Bacchi recommends that we problematize the
production of problems and it is this analytical idea that we try to put to work in thinking about the
notion of quality in doctoral work, leading to different types of questions concerning obligations and
responsibilities placed on supervisors in developing the learning journey for the student.

Forms of quality

Surely, no-one would dispute that we want doctoral work to be of high quality. We, certainly, can
see no argument otherwise; it would be strange supervision indeed that was deliberately done
badly! And, since we would want this for all students a logical consequence is that we want to assure
quality too. But this is rhetorical. Clearly, quality is not such a simple thing and so if ‘seeking quality’
is the solution, what is the problem represented to be?
In the research we have undertaken, and from our own experiences working as Programme Leaders, we see two broad responses to this question, though others are, of course, possible. First, seeking quality might be seen as the response to a problem of economics; of market choices and product improvement, processes which must be controlled through careful management. We might, from this perspective, ask: how can we manage supervision in such a way as to solve the problem of the need for ‘high quality’ productivity, output and timeliness? Second, seeking quality might be seen as the response to the problem of supervision which develops strong student academic practices and scholarship. From this perspective we might ask: how can we cultivate supervision that solves the problem of the need for students to develop ‘high quality’ academic work, originality and intellectual rigour. And, of course, crucially the argument as it is often presented by those overseeing it is that these are compatible; that the former can lead to, or at least afford, the latter. Thus, managers might seek to quantify doctoral work as a series of milestones on the way to a doctoral award in the belief that these milestones and the requirements behind them support the development of knowledge, skills and dispositions and the kind of intellectual risk taking which leads to discovery. To consider this argument we turn our attention to understanding how the problem is constructed in each version of quality, making use of both our reading and the empirical data from our study (Pratt & Shaughnessy, 2018).

Quality assurance

In the context of managerialism, education becomes seen as a product to be consumed; one which must be managed in order to ensure its quality. Moreover, markets must keep consumers happy. In the consumption of physical goods such as, say, electronics it is relatively straightforward to define the parameters for this. Customers need to be happy with their purchases, both in terms of their style and substance and their longevity and reliability. However, in education it is fundamentally the role of educators not to provide attractive, long-lasting knowledge (whatever this might mean) but to disrupt thinking and to challenge students’ ideas. What is being offered is not a feeling of comfort and satisfaction but of discomfort and disruption. Not surprisingly, our conversations with doctoral supervisors were littered with this kind of disruptive activity:

Students often say “I want to do best practice” and I say, “don’t do that because you’re locking it down and you’re bringing a hierarchy to play with it, you’re better than that”, what we’re interested in is looking at practice as practice in order to theorise it and discuss it in ways that allow us to think of it, perhaps changing, the mutability of ideas can be reflected in the mutability of practices. (Diane - supervisor interview)

I start really quite early when they’re producing their proposals. You know, “How are you going to theorise that? What are you thinking? Try and have a conversation around why you think what you think and how it might be possible to think differently”. (Gina, supervisor interview)

In a managerial HE environment however the imperative is to control productivity and timeliness. Experts supervisors are those who can develop students’ thinking but who can also manage the control of their passage through the different stages of the programme effectively. Miller and Rose (1990, p. 10) suggest that the language of expertise is important here, ‘its norms and values seeming compelling because of their claim to a disinterested truth, and the promise they offer of achieving desired results’. In managerial systems of doctoral supervision, we suggest there is a shift in expertise. Rather than being centred solely in the wisdom of the supervisor, expertise shifts towards the supervisory structures, premised on the idea that the system, with its ‘disinterested truths’ will...
take care of success, if only it is adhered to and maintained. As Deem and Brehony (2005, p. 220) note, one key feature of managerial systems is that they emphasise ‘the primacy of management above all other activities’. Thus, although responsibility for success in the ends of the doctorate still lies with the supervisor, its means start to lie in the system which will guide the student through all the (normative) necessary stages. We see this as a process of responsibilisation:

>a technique of governance, [which is] fundamentally premised on the construction of moral agency as the necessary ontological condition for ensuring an entrepreneurial disposition in the case of individuals and socio-moral authority in the case of institutions. (Shamir, 2008, p. 7)

Whilst not wanting to deny the academic expertise still required of supervisors, the tendency is for the work to become seen as technical and simply conceived with milestones and progress reviews. In moving this way, one effect is that the moral agency shifts from its traditional focus on academic integrity and professional judgement to an economic moral responsibility focused on completion rates and timeliness. To achieve this, supervisors, like ourselves at the start of this chapter, must be trained in the system. As Erica describes, at her previous university this training,

>was about what regulations had changed each year, so it was dry rather than moving things [forward]. “Crikey, 4.1 has changed and what are we doing this year?” and then you would genuinely be tested on it, you had an exam to pass each year and people would tell me how to cheat the exam and all the rest of it. [Incredulous] As a supervisor, you had an exam to pass on the regulations! (Erica, supervisor interview)

We note the interesting manner in which this university instilled its staff with the necessary ‘moral agency’ to operate the regulations willingly! But training is part of the logic of responsibilisation and necessarily implies two other aspects of a supervisory system. First, there must be proceduralisation; a process that one can be trained in. Or, put the other way, training, and the process that needs to be learned, form part of the logic of supervisory practice. But processes also demand commodification (of time, effort etc.) so that one can define the stages by which one acts out the process—or by which students are processed, perhaps.

There are two important points to note here. First, the elements of a system do not imply causality. We do not have training because we have commodification; but training, commodification, proceduralisation and responsibilisation all work together in creating and maintaining a logic of practice that responds to the problem of ‘high quality’ doctoral work as productivity, output and timeliness. Moreover, it operates at both an individual level and at an institutional level, through the establishment of governing practices which draw their moral imperative from making supervisors accountable for and to students. The catch-all position in this system of accountability is second-hand in the sense that supervisors are professionally accountable not just for their students’ outcomes but by means of those outcomes. Second, though we are critiquing these systems we are not critical of them per se. Structure, in time and in demanding products, is often a good thing; and, anyway, pedagogical decisions are never black and white and always open to interpretation. There is no ‘best practice’ (Biesta, 2007, 2010); and hence no suggestion that supervision simply becomes mechanical. What we describe above are logics of practice, but individuals are not determined by them. Rather, they afford certain activity; but as part of a milieu of different affordances, not least of which is the long history of academic supervisory practices, themselves multifarious (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel and Hutchings, 2008). For example, despite her previous draconian training, Erica also noted that:
I’m sure that training in her new workplace is going to be far more engaging [and] I think conversations [about practice] need to happen an awful lot more between colleagues so that it isn’t just me and my anecdotal conversations that I’ve had with friends and colleagues because … I’m just sat as an isolated person going, “I hope I’ve got this right because I’m supervising somebody”. (Erica, supervisor interview)

Within this, one can make out the distinction between responsibility, which Erica seems to take on freely, and responsibilisation which is constructed through a system to govern forms of activity. Meanwhile, Larry describes how he seeks to share this responsibility with his students:

I try to avoid saying, “Don’t do it like that, do it like this”, because then it’s that question of ownership again, it’s me trying to mould them [doctoral students] into the way I would do it. I think as a supervisor, I would like to think that I want to maintain their ownership and that I want to make sure that it’s their project and one that they’re responsible for. [But] I know other supervisors are perhaps less concerned with that and want to mould it in the way, direction that they think is right. (Larry, supervisor interview)

Hence, in our interviews, the overriding sense was of a struggle in supervisors, and the doctoral systems themselves, around how to mediate these competing imperatives, recognising that whilst academic freedom is vital, systems are also important, such that for Amy,

it’s made me reflect on what complicated work it is. It’s exhausting as well, to try to be a different supervisor to each student because that is the reality for me of how it’s been. (Amy, supervisor interview)

That said, we noted above that supervisory expertise can be thought of as shifting from the supervisor towards the system and there is one more aspect of this shift that we think is noteworthy, namely the way in which student/supervisor and doctoral centre can work together at a distance. Through the collection of information—nowadays at any distance via the internet—‘centres’ are formed where data can be calculated upon and weighed up in the making of decisions. Such systems only work through the engagement of those involved in providing such information and being willing—consciously or not—to engage in the practices of the regime. Whilst disciplinary coercion can be involved, the formation of systemic networks is often revealed,

because one actor comes to convince another that their problems or goals are intrinsically linked, that their interests are consonant, that each can solve their difficulties or achieve their ends by joining forces or working along the same lines. (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 10)

Using Latour’s notion of ‘action at a distance’, Miller and Rose illustrate how data and calculations can create ‘the exercise of a form of intellectual mastery made possible by those at a centre having information about persons and events distant from them’ (ibid.), such that ‘it becomes possible to link calculations at one place with action at another’ (p. 9). Students and supervisors often engage willingly with these systems, not least because in some ways they form a sensible logic of practice: for supervisors, there are procedures that help in putting together examination teams, or in recruiting and registering students in the first place; as well as, perhaps, a sense of security in the system. And for students there may be an implicit assumption that this is simply the way things are. However, the anecdotes at the start of this chapter illustrate that there are also some challenges
presented too. In a managerialist system where efficiency, in the shape of successful outcomes and timeliness, is paramount it is these things–time and product–that become encoded as data, allowing them to be calculated upon and normalised. Thus the logic of progress is no longer gauged on the readiness of students’ thinking, but on whether the traffic light says ‘go’ or not; and on staging posts, in the form of transfer documents and theses, which must take particular forms. As Erica describes:

> Exactly, so I had all these lovely ideas from a personal perspective when I started my own PhD and eventually, bit by bit, my supervisors wheedled them all out, they kind of allowed them to sit there and I know I do the same with my [PD] students because I want to lead them to something that is going to be recognisable easily to somebody else. (Erica, supervisor interview)

Mitigating risk and following convention exemplifies this supervisor’s efforts to support successful outcomes. When we represent the supervision as a problem of the need for ‘high quality’ productivity, output and timeliness, it is this kind of normative thinking which comes into focus.

**Doctoral quality**

What then happens when we frame supervision as a problem of helping students to develop ‘high quality’ academic work, originality and intellectual rigour? How does the focus shift for the work of supervisors and students? Adkins (2009) describes supervision in the social sciences as ‘a complex three-way transaction between teacher, text and student’, an extremely difficult task implying a major responsibility for those working with doctoral students. The logic of practice here is not the temporal one, marching from staging post to staging post, but the need to understand and conceptualize the whole doctoral journey and break it into parts that scaffold learners to work in a way that they understand. This includes developing a research disposition, in which coming to a new understanding through critique and analysis are central.

One major challenge for supervisors is to make such critical discourses visible within research, such that academic practices become more transparent and students come to understand how to operate with criticality and awareness. To do this means moving thinking about the practices within doctoral work from generic discussions of knowledge and skills, that we might typically see in doctoral training courses, to focusing more on the learner and their development of expertise and understanding. Elkana (2016) describes this in terms of the development of an academic identity that reflects the complexity of how expertise and growth of understanding work together; with the emphasis being on how the learner takes an active role and shapes their development through pursuing the connections between the problematic for the research and how it might be explored, understood and transformed.

In our discussions with supervisors (Pratt and Shaughnessy, 2018), this was expressed in terms of understanding critical perspectives, ‘unpacking’ where are you coming from in the world. One EdD programme, for example, described this in terms the concept of history. The notion of *provenance* of a painting was used as a way of understanding ‘where they’re coming from and where they’re positioned historically, politically’ (George, supervisor interview) along with the origin and starting point of dominant ideas, before situating the research problem within the professional setting. In this way, what we are wedded to and how we are positioned starts to become clear—a key question in students’ development of criticality being to understand where they come from and the path they have travelled; what concepts and ideas underpin taken for granted assumptions. Quality understood this way, therefore focuses on the exposure of students to otherness and difference and
demands that they find responses. The pedagogy of doctoral work is therefore complex because it involves making aspects of research and scholarship visible and explicit in a situation where it is normally implicit. For students, this process is highly uncomfortable because it exposes the learner and reveals ‘what is unknown’; uncertainty rather than certainty.

The issues around identity and practice are challenging—this is disempowering/decentring. Students are asked to think about what they do and who they are in a very different way to what they are normally. (Amy, supervisor Interview)

For supervisors it implies a form of responsibility, not to the morality of the market to form an entrepreneurial disposition, but to the morality of care and support of their student through these difficult, but necessary, experiences. The logic of these practices focuses on the ‘quality of ideas’ recognising how to engage, generate and evaluate new knowledge, and the relationship between the past and current understanding of the field of enquiry. They require sophisticated engagements where the practice of academic work is made transparent rather than obscured, and consideration of how we support this kind of critical, academic judgement is an essential ingredient for doctoral work. For example, Delamont, Atkinson and Parry (2004) draw on the work of Dorothy Sayers to consider how we make critical judgements where we have sophisticated notions, such as what is good or bad taste in art. Within our research, supervisors’ support for students in understanding critical practices was embedded within pedagogical opportunities to understand how to develop ‘good taste’ in research and managed by embracing structure and freedom in their supervisory approaches, scaffolding learners to welcome and inhabit uncomfortable spaces. For example,

I start with reading and I try to direct them to existing research that has got and is written from the insider perspective and show them how you can be critical. I encourage them to challenge taken for granted assumptions and the things that become normalised (you know) trying to get them to look with fresh eyes at that as what is a normal questions and challenge it. I also try to challenge them theoretically, noting the limitations of theories but as a lens to apply to the research that they are doing. Theory and existing literature are important. (Stephen, supervisor Interview)

The time and space for consideration and discussion of doctoral practices and the qualities of doctoral work appeared to receive limited attention in supervisors’ reports in our study. There appeared to be limited opportunities for supervisors to examine the pedagogy of research and understand tacit practices that enable doctoral students to build bridges between the known and the unknown, in a critical space where knowledge creation is possible (Walker, et.al, 2008). Moreover, time and resources within doctoral spaces are also increasingly under pressure related to research funding and outputs and the pressure on supervisors to be current, conditions which all work against opportunities for communication and collaboration related to student learning. Logics of pedagogic learning within the doctoral space appear to be taken for granted and receive little attention as they sit outside of the traditional ‘teaching’ programmes. Where training does take place it appears to be generic across disciplines, which may be especially problematic for doctoral work in the social sciences where the cross-disciplinary nature of the work has potentially complex implications for both the kinds of knowledge needed by supervisors and the subsequent relationships between them and the student (Adkins, 2009). Our investigations suggest that many assumptions are made about doctoral process with limited understanding of how the pedagogy and processes, tools and contexts for research are understood.
What is at stake for doctoral work?

In this chapter we have brought into view two versions of how quality, and their associated logics of practice, are constructed for student and supervisor. Through the use of Bacchi’s (2000, 2009) notion of problem representation, we have highlighted the logics of practice that lie beneath each version of quality and revealed the challenges they pose for doctoral work. We have also shown how the confluence of new managerialist practices that seek to regularise, regulate and measure, (Miller and Rose,1990) create pressure for supervisors and students to meet doctoral milestones in a timely fashion, with supervision being in danger of becoming too linked to time, speed and output. This is contrasted with a version of quality as embodied and largely taken for granted within doctoral work, focusing on notions of critical judgement and immeasurable qualities such as developing good taste and critical judgement, where discretion is critical. Our argument is that far from being comfortable bed-fellows, these two different conceptions of quality are in tension and that this tension originates at the moral level. Where morality is economic and founded on the systematisation of doctoral work, rather than on the different morality of academic judgement, responsibility becomes responsibilisation and the development of supervision matched to an entrepreneurial disposition. In so doing supervisory expertise and ‘quality’ start to become disembodied from supervisors and candidates, sited instead in procedures and ‘delivered’ through supervision. We close the chapter with a final vignette from practice which we think illustrates this claim … and invite further reflection on how we might engage in developing student learning in the doctoral space.

Vignette C: Upgrade meeting

One of us is involved in a student upgrade meeting for which she had submitted her methodology chapter for evaluation. Alongside the other member of staff involved, an independent report has been written with both of us agreeing on the substantive points, carried over to the oral meeting. The student is still very much working through the coherence of the chapter and the outcome is for them to resubmit, with written and oral feedback provided to support the student’s progress. At a later date, this upgrade process is repeated with a resubmitted chapter; but one which remains very similar to the first submission. Both of us, as supervisory staff, comment and give feedback, but with limited further engagement from the student. Our judgement is that the student should not be upgraded because the chapter and progress made have not fully engaged with feedback and suggestions from the first upgrade meeting. Later we discover that there is an appeal against the decision from the upgrade meeting, though no real details are offered to us. The student’s appeal is upheld. As part of the QA system those of us involved in the upgrade process highlight to the Director of Research that this action has undermined the whole QA process, and us, as gatekeepers of quality, in particular. But the student marches on to the next stage.

References


