

## **The price of Amanda's Chair**

**September 2006**

### **Episode I**

Having been promoted to Senior Lecturer only two years earlier, I had been both surprised and gratified to be approached earlier in the year by another university with the offer of a Chair. After some deliberation and discussions with the relevant personnel in the department that made the offer I decided not to accept the post. However, their approach raised the possibility that I might be considered for a Chair at my own university. So I made an appointment to see the Dean of the Faculty to ask her what I needed to do in order to present a convincing case to the promotions committee.

The Dean was very encouraging. She said I had a good case: two sole authored books and nine published papers in the current RAE, 2 international lecture tours, membership of several national policy making committees, a great deal of teaching experience and administrative responsibilities. However, the one area in which I had a limited track record was the successful supervision of PhD students. Though I had been the supervisor of a few over several years, they had all endured personal crises and problematic life events that had resulted in their intercalation or withdrawal. As a result I had seen none through to completion.

**Q1 What do you think about the Dean's assessment of the situation?**

**Q2 What should Amanda do now?**

## **Episode 2**

Not long after my meeting with the Dean I was approached by Martin, the Postgraduate Studies Coordinator in my department, who asked me to take on two new PhD students. This seemed like an offer that I shouldn't refuse. Yet both students carried with them concerns that made me uncertain about the wisdom of agreeing.

The first student was a GP called Colin. About 6 months earlier he had asked to talk to me about the possibility of doing a PhD. I had suggested that we meet in my office at 3.00pm one afternoon the following week and told him that would give us an hour before my next meeting. His response was that an hour would not be long enough and he would like to come earlier - so I agreed to see him at 2.30 instead. I was expecting to be 'rescued' by my 4.00pm appointment with Susie, an undergraduate. However, when Susie arrived she did not knock on my door as she heard talking in my office and - lacking confidence - didn't like to disturb me. It was only when Colin paused for breath at 4.30 that I said I should check there was no one in the corridor waiting to see me – there was Susie waiting timidly...

After the meeting Colin proceeded to bombard me by email with lengthy PhD proposals that needed a great deal of work. I responded to every one of his attempts with detailed feedback and suggestions for improvement, but each new version he sent lacked evidence that he had taken any note of my advice.

After 3 months I escaped on sabbatical leave but I had forgotten that I had unwisely given Colin my mobile phone number. My patience was stretched to breaking point when he rang me for advice on Easter Saturday despite the fact that I was on sabbatical leave. It was both a weekend and a public holiday, and he was not even a registered student. At this point I told my Head of Department what a pain in the neck Colin was being and he instructed Colin to leave me alone for the remainder of my leave.

So I was not thrilled when on my return from sabbatical leave I was told by Martin that Colin had eventually put together an acceptable proposal and wished to have me as his supervisor.

**Q1 How should Amanda respond?**

**Q2 If she agrees to go ahead, what should she do now?**

### **Episode 3**

In contrast, the second student Charles was an unknown quantity. I was sent his proposal by Martin and read it with interest, but despite working in the same broad field, Charles came from a different disciplinary background. While I was impressed by the proposal and interested in the topic, I was unfamiliar with any of the literature he had cited and knew nothing about the theories he intended to use.

I told both Martin and Charles that while I would be happy to act as second supervisor I did not feel able to be the main supervisor for a thesis that was not in my discipline. Charles had in fact suggested that Peter, an expert in his disciplinary approach, should act as his second supervisor. I could not understand why I had been asked to take on the role of first supervisor when it seemed clear to me that Peter would be much better equipped. However, when I questioned Martin about this it became clear that while Peter was the obvious choice he was planning to leave the university during the coming year, but that this information was confidential.

Martin said he would approach two or three others in Peter's department but if none of them agreed to take on the role of first supervisor, perhaps I could persuade Charles to "*re-orientate his study in such a way that you might be able to be the first supervisor*".

**Q1 How should Amanda respond to Martin's suggestion?**

**Q2 What else should she do at this stage?**

## **Episode 4**

### **January 2007**

Since Colin has been registered for the PhD we have had supervision meetings every 3-4 weeks I asked him to write the beginnings of a literature review and this was produced before Christmas to a high standard. He is attending all the faculty training programme options and has not expected any additional input or time other than that allocated to supervisions. Despite the fact that we occasionally encounter each other at professional meetings he has not used the opportunity for unofficial supervision. At this point things appear to be progressing well.

I have also seen Charles regularly for supervision and he has produced copious quantities of material for me to read in advance of each meeting. He is very theoretically orientated and has gone 'back to basics' in a way that surprised me. I have had to dredge up my memories of undergraduate sociology in reading his interpretation of Marx, Weber and Durkheim that for some reason he feels is necessary to underpin current health care practice. He too is attending all the Faculty training sessions and is very diligent. I have had only one meeting with him and my co-supervisor Peter, but it is clear that Charles (and Peter) regard me as the primary supervisor (though I can't think why as there has been no further mention of Peter leaving the University) but I have come to accept that Peter will be very distant and 'hands off' in his approach. One complication is that the access to data Charles had originally thought would be offered through personal contact now seems to be problematic and an alternative way of gaining access will have to be sought. As the area he is researching is politically sensitive this may present some difficulties that have yet to be resolved.

**Q1 Discuss progress of the students and supervision so far**

**Q2 Have you any comments on the recruitment of supervisors at this university?**

## Episode 5

Just before Christmas, Sara, a friend and neighbour asked to talk to me about the possibility of doing a PhD based on an innovative technique she had introduced into her clinical professional practice. I knew that she did not have a first degree and said that I was unsure if it would be possible to register for a PhD without first enrolling for a Diploma and upgrading to an MA. However, I gave her the name of the Postgraduate Admissions Tutor, Mary, whom she met and who was very enthusiastic that she should begin the MA mid session to get a start.

Mary's suggestion was that she apply for a funded CASE studentship for Sara and that if her proposal was for a 1&3 version the application would not specify the student's identity. The fact that Sara did not have a first degree would not then be apparent, it being the PhD that was funded rather than the student. The funding if awarded could subsequently be allocated to her as the named student if and when she had been upgraded from a Diploma to an MA.

Sara was asked to begin to fill in the proposal form which was then sent to me and to Mary between Christmas and the New Year.

I was slightly uncomfortable about the prospect of becoming the supervisor for a friend's PhD and had only agreed to talk to Sara informally rather than to be her potential supervisor. However, it seemed that by virtue of spending several hours with Sara discussing the prospective study it was assumed that I had in fact agreed 'tacitly' to take on her supervision.

It was suggested by Mary that I should have a co-supervisor to mitigate the problem of Sara being a friend. However, the prospective co-supervisor, Karen, was concerned about taking on a non-graduate for a PhD as she felt that we would have to take her through both first degree and Masters levels at speed and that a great deal of work would be necessary on our part to make the proposal into one that would be likely to be successful in attracting funding.

The concerns held by both me and Karen at this point are:

- That a great deal of work will be required by both of us in order to raise the standard of the proposal to one that would stand a good chance of funding – this is time that neither Karen nor I feel we have at the moment and neither of us have agreed to act as supervisor as yet. (Karen is also hoping to apply for a Chair and needs more PhD students)
- Even if the proposal was funded by the Research Council, the danger is that if Sara's standard of work on the Diploma is not sufficiently high for her to be upgraded to an MA it will not be possible for her to be allocated the project and thus funding for her doctorate. However, to award the studentship to anyone else would be impracticable - given the proposal is based on her innovation in professional practice.

However, Karen is now thinking of renting a room in my house. So coordination of our supervisory duties should be easy if the proposal comes to fruition.

Latest from Amanda:

- Am currently making case for Sara's CASE award as Karen and I have agreed (somewhat reluctantly) to supervise. She starts MA next week will have to pay upfront and of course if I+3 Case is not funded will be doing MA rather than PhD she has bargained for...
- Karen is going to move in on a part time basis and guess what - her husband is coming too...he is looking for (academic) work so will not be out during the day...I think we all know there might be challenges so we are trying it for a few weeks to see how it works
- other 2 students seem to be relatively unproblematic...

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### **Team task**

**One the acetates provided please indicate**

- 1. Issues that should be taken into account in admission of new doctoral students**
  - 2. The main responsibilities of a main, or first, supervisor**
  - 3. Your advice to Amanda at this stage**
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