

Bunda's life-time opportunity

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Dear John,

Firstly I would like to thank you for the very insightful seminar yesterday. I was quite an eye opener on some of the things to take into consideration at the beginning of this PhD journey. It's funny that some of the issues you raised are not even known to our supervisors or school administration team. For example, I have been trying to find out whether am registered as an MPhil or PhD student and no one is sure. My supervisor doesn't even know the difference!

But the real purpose of this email is to give you an idea about how frustrating it is to be an International Student with a 'fees only' grant from the University. I hope my experience will help to inform others before they come to any rash decisions (as I must admit I did) and I hope you will include this in your report to the University as well.

I am a 31-year-old International PhD student at the University of Barchester in my first year of study. I am married with two children and my family has recently moved to Barchester to live with me.

I joined the University of Barchester in August 2005 as an international self sponsored student to pursue a master of laws degree. It was a year of productive study and I graduated in January 2006 with a distinction.

Prior to my graduation, I received an email from the school secretary informing me of the possibility of a school sponsored PhD starting the following year for International Students. The offer was a 'fees only' grant to do a PhD, beginning last semester.

So, in August 2006, responding to that email and information I had gathered from the website and school staff, I applied and was offered the scholarship to pursue a PhD. It was offered on a merit-based basis arising out of my performance at masters level and would run for 3-4 years until 2011.

I am a student from Africa and this is a once in a life-time opportunity, but one of the issues I raised with the administration before I committed myself to the project was whether the scholarship would include a teaching position at the School, thereby providing valuable teaching experience as well as income for myself and my family. I was told that although it wasn't explicit in the scholarship memo, it was a certainty due to the small number of PhD students and the need for teaching support. A statement to this effect was also posted on the School's website. (I have since looked again at the current University website and it still implies that teaching positions are available to international postgraduate students.)

I must admit that I was a little naïve in committing to the project without an explicit commitment to a teaching contract, but I trusted the School to live up to its undertaking. Also, I admit, I underestimated the expense involved in maintaining oneself and their family without a stipend or grant from the University.

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Now, six months into my research degree the School has backtracked on its verbal commitment for a teaching position and is instead recruiting three new junior lecturers and is therefore not able to offer any positions for the next five years to any of its PhD students.

I now have very serious doubts if it's possible to complete my PhD in the grant's allocated 3-4 years timescale.

The paramount issue is one of finance. My research area is an evolving one and I am therefore expected to carry out some sort of empirical research as well as stay at the forefront of developments in my field. Secondly, it's essential that I attend and participate in seminars and meetings that are discussing and making policy on my area of research. Both of these activities require money and time, and this is simply not available. Not from me, and certainly not from the University.

Without a stipend and no academic job, I've been forced to find casual employment elsewhere and although am only permitted to work 20 hours a week by immigration rules, I have to work close to 40 hrs in a call centre to maintain my family and myself so I can pay rent, buy food, essential commodities, transport etc.

Those sort of hours have left me with virtually no spare time to conduct any substantive research and a few months into my PhD, am seriously considering quitting.

Because of this difficult situation am in, I have only managed to read two books and a few articles and have written almost nothing in the first 6 months of my PhD. By the time I get home from work, I am struggling to keep my eyes open let alone conduct any significant research. I am severely demotivated and have recently contemplated giving up the whole project altogether.

I have tried everything to request the Law School to give me a teaching position in the School if only so I can stay within an academic environment and build on my research but I've been told that there's nothing available. It's simply a no win situation.

Meanwhile the Law School that offered me the grant is still offering up to four grants per year for International students and another four for EU students.

Last year only two of us were taken on. When I spoke to the Head of Postgraduate Studies about providing a stipend and a research grant (for empirical research), I was told that the money available was to cover 'fees only' and if they didn't get enough students, then it would be returned to the grantors until the following year! Now that to me seems outrageous and illogical. It's no wonder that there is such a high drop out rate for PhD students. Like you mentioned yesterday, the University happily announces how it has taken on so many international PhD students on grants but never how many have actually completed! I doubt if even one in four will complete their PhD's under these circumstances. I would be interested in knowing what the statistics for people in my situation are. (I found out that although the School was able to offer four scholarships this year, only two had been taken on, and over the past three years only three students still remained as the others had all dropped out.)

I am now trying other avenues of sponsorship but if I fail to get anything within the next 3 months, I will have to drop out and become a statistic. It's a shame that ordinary commonsense can't prevail over the bureaucratic nature in which our University is run.

What makes it all the more frustrating is that the School will have to return the unused grant for PhD students from this year to the University and will get another four grants next year although there is no likelihood that they'll receive enough applications or indeed have any PhD students left. The number of scholarships awarded to International PhD students is used as selling point at recruitment seminars all over the world but no one mentions the drop out rate. It would be interesting to find out how many international PhD sponsored students from the university actually complete their PhD. I have seen some of the surveys made by the postgraduate office and none seems to address this issue.

The reason for writing to you is not to moan and act ungrateful but to simply point out the hard facts. A fees-only scholarship is not all it seems to be and should be considered after a thorough analysis of one's individual situation. It is a harsh conclusion to come to but am starting to feel that we as international students are being somewhat exploited so as to boost international recruitment numbers by being offered these fees-only scholarship (with suggestions of paid teaching experience) when it is not in a position to provide teaching and it's almost impossible to study for a PhD without further funding.

If the university is serious about offering international students a chance at studying for a PhD, then there needs to be a review of these scholarships (and its website) so as to facilitate an atmosphere conducive to PhD research, even if that means reducing the number of grants a year and instead increasing the actual grant to include a stipend. Also, there is need to offer students a chance at gaining valuable experience through offering mandatory teaching assistantships as is done at other universities. In its current form, the scholarship being offered cannot sustain its intended recipients.

I hope others find this helpful in making a decision on whether to accept these scholarships.

As for anyone being offered a School of Law 'fees only' grant, my advice is: don't even consider it unless you can clearly get additional funding elsewhere. It's simply impossible to do a PhD when you are not sure where the next meal is coming from!

Kind Regards

Bunda Zuma

Team task

On the acetates provided list your suggestions for

- 1. International research students**
- 2. Supervisors**
- 3. Institutions**