

Georgina' demands

1 Admission

As a senior member of academic staff at Middlemarch Metropolitan University I have considerable experience of teaching undergraduate students but, although I have a PhD myself, I have never been asked to take on postgraduate supervision. So I was pleasantly surprised one Tuesday in September to be passed an application from a self-funded applicant with a MSc from a top-rated English University.

Looking through the form and references the applicant seemed to have a clear idea of what she wanted to research, and bags of ability. So I invited her over for interview.

She impressed me with the quality of her replies to my academic questions and the ambitious, but exciting, nature of the proposed research project. So, on my recommendation, Georgina was enrolled as a post-graduate student.

Immediately upon her arrival at the University she met the Admissions Officer, completed the enrolment form and was provided with one of our postgraduate student 'starter packs' - an example of good practice at our University of which we are proud.

- Q1 Comment on the admission procedures for postgraduates at Middlemarch as they worked in this case.
- Q2 What should a 'starter pack' include?
- Q3 What are the immediate priorities for the Director of Studies now that Georgina has been enrolled?

2 PhD Registration

By December she had completed a registration form with only a little help from me as her Director of Studies, providing further evidence of her clarity of thought and academic strengths.

However, her fastidiousness in the preparation of her registration form took us perilously close to the deadline for submission to the Research Degrees Committee. As a result, late on a Friday afternoon it was rushed past the Head of School. He was impressed by the quality it demonstrated and the technical specification of the project and cast a cursory eye over the details of the funds required for travel and equipment maintenance which seemed very reasonable in the circumstances, based, as they were, on the historical availability of internal School funds to support research projects.

- Q1 Comment on submission process in this case. Do you foresee any problems ahead?

- Q2 What should be the role of the Head of School in the registration process? are there any special issues s/he should bear in mind before agreeing to registration?

3 Supervisions

I should explain that at Middlemarch each research student has a senior supervisor or Director of Studies and another member of staff, with more experience of supervision, who together make up the supervisory team. In this case the second supervisor is a busy man, much in demand inside and outside the University, but one who has often expressed great faith in my judgement.

I arrange fortnightly supervisory meetings with Georgina with a time limit of one hour. From the start I find that the sessions are frequently interrupted by undergraduate students knocking at the door, and coming in unannounced. I am proud of the very positive feedback they give me about my courses. I have always accepted the School's open door policy that to me means being available on demand. And since I am Year Tutor for the first year of our undergraduate degree, other members of staff often ring me with pressing queries.

Q1 Discuss the main features of supervisory meetings experienced by members of the syndicate.

Q2 How should a supervisor ensure that they are effective?

4 Resources

Georgina turns out not only to be very capable but also very demanding about the facilities provided by the School, by Easter constantly voicing her dissatisfaction with sharing office accommodation and the consequent disruption to her concentration by cross-talk between her colleagues, the poor specification of the desktop computer provided for her use, the unavailability of specialist books in the library, corners cut in the maintenance of equipment, and the insufficient funds for the cost of frequent visits to a collaborating institution. (Why, I wonder, if she wanted to spend so much time there, did she apply to come here instead?)

Everything seemed to be a problem: her financial circumstances, arranging supervisory meeting times to suit her rather than me, excessive inter-library loan requests etc.

As a result, she began to alienate her colleagues, the School technicians, the administrative staff, the library staff and gradually even me - as her Director of Studies.

- Q1 What are the minimum resources a postgraduate research student should expect from the University?
- Q2 What should the Director of Studies do now?

5 Breakdown

In June of her second year, at a crucial stage and eighteen months into the project, the equipment breaks down completely. Feeling a growing antipathy to Georgina, I charge her with carelessness in the use of the equipment. Georgina replies that the equipment was already old and had been poorly maintained. In any case, she claims to have had inadequate training in critical aspects of its operation.

Matters are made worse by an emergency cut in the School's revenue budget which means that any repair would be severely delayed and the original project specification now can no longer be fully met.

Georgina makes loud and repeated objections to all concerned to what she sees as the dilution of the standard of her PhD project, claiming that she had discarded alternative offers from other universities precisely because of the ambitious scientific objectives in the project plan agreed with the University. (I wonder whether this may be why she did not stay with her home university. They may have seen through her personality as well as the costs forecast for such an ambitious project, and have been only too happy to cast her off with an excellent academic reference).

Q1 Discuss the situation as it now stands.

Q2 Suggest possible courses of action for the Director of Studies at this point.

6 Complaint

Before I take any further action Georgina demands a special meeting with me as her Director of Studies. From the start she only wants to voice her complaints in a sharp and aggressive tone. I do not make a detailed response but reply that, if she is unhappy about her Director of Studies, she is free to ask for a change, since I am doing my best for her project.

Without further advice she writes a letter of complaint to the Head of School about both resources and also her Director of Studies.

Q1 Comment on the Director of Studies' response to this meeting.

Q2 Suggest what should be done now.

7 Response

At this I refuse to talk further with her about the research. Most other members of staff (who have had little involvement with the project) keep out of the way of such a troublesome student, but my co-supervisor calls her in for a meeting.

He admonishes her for going to the Head of School without first having arranged a joint meeting with both supervisors to discuss any differences of opinion over the supervisory process. Moreover, he points out to her that she may be trying to advance the project at an unusually fast speed, aiming at an exceptionally high standard. He tells her that she too needs to compromise in the light of the circumstances in the Department, since, with the best will in the world, the Department is unable to fix the equipment and pay additional field costs for the foreseeable future.

The Head of School, noting that there are no suitable alternative supervisors in the School for this specialist area, informs Georgina that he has no option but to advise her that the School is doing its best within current constraints.

Georgina, incensed, writes personally to the Vice-chancellor - who replies advising her to follow the University's grievance procedure, and goes as far as arranging a meeting with the Dean for Postgraduate Studies.

- Q1 Comment on the actions of the supervisor, Head of School and the Vice-Chancellor.
- Q2 Suggest any alternative courses of action either the supervisor or Head of School could have taken.

8 No Conciliation

The Dean attempts conciliation, but this fails - because by now the personal relationship between Georgina and me has completely broken down. Instead, Georgina insists on bringing a further formal complaint against the Head of School for failing to honour the full travel and maintenance costs agreed in the project plan on her registration form, and against me for my 'totally inadequate standard of supervision' and for failing to provide proper training in the use of equipment essential to the successful completion of her PhD.

Q1 Discuss the situation now.

Q2 Suggest any actions that could be taken by any party in the dispute.

9 Resolution

The Chair of the School Research Committee is put in touch with a senior staff member from the Faculty of Law to form a team to represent me at a formal grievance hearing. Georgina is represented by an officer from the Students Union, having also taken advice from a firm of solicitors.

The meeting thus involves the Vice-chancellor, as chair, with the University Registrar in attendance, Georgina presenting her case advised by the Students Union Officer, and the Chair of the Research Committee, defending the case, advised by the law academic. I, the other supervisor and the Dean of Postgraduate Studies are called in individually as witnesses. During the hearing Georgina articulates well the shortcomings of the supervisory process, making frequent references to the supervisory ideals set out in the University's recently published Code of Practice and more to the point the practice portrayed in the School's Postgraduate Handbook - which had itself been somewhat half-heartedly prepared in order to meet requirements for 'best practice' imposed to a needlessly laborious extent by the Research Degrees Committee.

The Vice-chancellor feels obliged to measure Georgina's case against the ideals publicly set out in the University documents and the resources set out above the Head of School's signature on her registration form. Consequently he arranges for the Registrar to oversee a series of supervisory meetings, instructing Georgina and the supervisory team to find a way to work together - since there is still no alternative supervisor available in the University.

- Q1 Have any members of the syndicate experience of dealing with complaints?
- Q2 Discuss the way the University dealt with this case.
- Q3 What should Georgina do now?

On the acetate provided please list the main guidelines for

1. postgraduate research students
2. supervisors
3. institutions