

Huw's Enquiry

July 2005

Dear John

I really enjoyed the course last week

I mentioned that I'm involved in a rather unfortunate situation in my Research Institute concerning PhD students and the early retirement of their supervisor.

Essentially both students were accepted to register for PhDs under the supervision of Professor Friend (one on a Research Council studentship and the other on a Teaching fellowship). At the time Professor Friend did not have research funding of his own and so the bulk of the lab work was funded from consumable funds awarded to me as part of a career development grant.

At the time I was also supporting my own PhD student (who is now writing up) and was also working in the lab. The projects the students were working on were closely related to my own work and used techniques and reagents I had generated and established. Due to this overlap it was a natural progression for me to take on the day to day supervision of Professor Friend's students in the lab while he carried out his rather heavy teaching load.

At the end of 2004 after a difficult period personally and professionally Professor Friend was signed off with work-related stress which was made official at the start of January 2005. He has since taken early retirement effective from 1st July. So I have suddenly become the only person at the University qualified to complete the supervision of Professor Friend's students. However my contract was due to run out on the 30th of June.

It became clear earlier in the year that Professor Friend was not going to return and that early retirement was a real possibility. However the students received no contact from the Graduate School at any point nor was I contacted about my role in supervision. It wasn't until the students filled in their 2nd year progress reports (in June 2005) and sent copies to everyone including the PVC that things started moving.

While I was awaiting the decision on a research grant at the end of June, the students were effectively presented with 3 scenarios if my application failed (this came from the Director of the Institute and not the University):

1. Give up and start again possibly here at Barchester, or somewhere else.
2. Move to another lab and start a new project in a new system but with an extra year's maintenance and registration - effectively a PhD in 2 years.
3. Move to another similar lab elsewhere in the country, again with an extra year's registration and maintenance.

Unsurprisingly none of these were considered acceptable by the students. Since I took over their supervision their projects have become productive and both are keen to have me continue as a supervisor for the rest of their PhD.

Of course the inevitable happened and my grant application failed (perversely one of the reasons cited was my lack of a long term commitment from Barchester forcing me to request my own salary as principle applicant). This suggests that until I have a secure University position I will have problems getting funding (from this research council at least).

So at the moment the University and the Institute are organizing what amounts to a part-time position for me doing a significant amount of teaching but also allowing me to continue supervising the students. Unsurprisingly as far as a career move for me it is not an ideal situation as I will be unable to carry out my own research during much of this time. With the RAE in 2008 most Universities who are currently recruiting are most interested in publications and research so the teaching experience I would gain is of limited value. So not surprisingly I have been seeking positions elsewhere.

There is now a possibility of a senior lectureship at another university. If appointed I would only be too happy to take the students with me if they are prepared to relocate which would essentially be option 3 (see above). I suppose a lot of what happens will depend on my success in obtaining such a position.

However assuming this or one of my other applications is successful, I was wondering what sort of position the students would be in as far as sorting out a deal with the University to move with me, length of possible extensions to registration, maintenance grants etc as well as support for their research in the new lab.

The University has been pleading poverty which has been contributory to the whole situation in the first place and is why the cheaper option of paying me to teach and supervise has been preferred to extra years of registration, maintenance and running costs etc for 2 students.

I'm reluctant to use the situation to improve my own "deal" because

- a. much of the financial input and support is coming from my colleagues in the Institute,
- b. I can't risk alienating the people who could potentially referee my grants in the future should I move, and also
- c. much of this has been done off their own backs in response to the inactivity of the Bioscience faculty and the University.

I am concerned the University/Biosciences will attempt to pass on any additional costs to the Institute (effectively what they are already doing). I'd just like to know that the University cannot use its lack of money (mainly due to gross financial mismanagement) to shirk its responsibility to the students.

Anyway, any advice that I can pass on to my students would be greatly appreciated. I will let you know of how things develop (if you are interested).

Thanks,

Huw

Team task:

Discuss this enquiry, and then on the acetates provided

- 1. List the main points of your reply to Huw, and**
- 2. Indicate the main suggestions you have for the Institute and the University to address the issues raised**