

Derek's Problem

Dear John,

I am writing to you for some advice. As I mentioned, I have recently taken over as Head of Department and inherited a problem from my predecessor. I have been going through the files and talking to colleagues and it has been suggested that I should share it with you in confidence.

Six years ago a PhD application was received in my Department. Passed as usual to my colleague, Gerry, the most relevant potential supervisor, who in this case was a junior recent appointee, still on probation, it was rejected on the grounds that he considered the applicant a poor prospect. Partly this was because the proposal was itself neither coherent nor well constructed. Specifically, it seemed to rest on a series of uncritical assumptions that scholars familiar with that particular field had long known to treat with considerable scepticism. At the same time, and probably helping to explain this deficiency, Richard, the candidate, who was of mature age and appeared to have a distinctly colourful employment history behind him, also lacked any first degree or formal academic training.

Unfortunately for Gerry, this was far from the end of the matter. First, this University had recently been taking steps to encourage mature applicants at all levels of study. This Department and the wider School had a student body in which such people were deemed to be significantly "under-represented". Second, the applicant had managed to solicit a reference from Conrad, a senior colleague in the Department, who happened to be Richard's neighbour. Because Conrad is notoriously dilatory, this key reference, and so the completed application, had actually been somewhat delayed, thus holding up proper consideration of Richard's application until a relatively late stage in the academic year. There therefore seemed to the School Postgraduate Officer to be reasonable grounds for asking Gerry to take re-consider his initial decision in order to avoid needlessly embarrassing Conrad, whose administrative deficiencies might potentially have appeared to the candidate to be a factor in his application's failure.

That second examination, however, proved no more favourable. Indeed, Richard's basic faults as a serious prospect for doctoral study remained as clear as ever to Gerry. Accordingly he declined, politely but firmly, to take him on. But this was not regarded as an acceptable outcome by either the School's Postgraduate Officer or by the University postgraduate office. The virtues of admitting people with no formal prior qualifications to postgraduate programmes, and of rewarding enthusiasm and energy rather than specific academic qualifications, were now very strongly insisted upon. The potential problem of a formal complaint arising out of the delayed reference was also highlighted. On this basis Gerry was asked to re-visit the application yet again.

Feeling increasingly vulnerable, as a probationer, particularly once his own Head of School also became involved in aggressive cheerleading for a favourable outcome to an obviously problematic application process, he finally relented and agreed to admit Richard as a PhD student under his own supervision. He did not, however, receive any written or other documented instruction to do so. Rather he felt that it was necessary to act on the basis of the cumulative pressure of verbal instructions from senior and more experienced staff members who clearly believed—though he did not believe this himself—that the various problems could best be solved by accepting this student.

The relationship between grudging supervisor and unwanted student got off to a bad start and deteriorated even further thereafter.

Partly this was because the academic basis of the PhD project remained deeply suspect to his supervisor. Gerry retained grave reservations across the board—about the student's technical proficiency, about his analytical skills, about his approach to evidence and to argument. But Richard's personal characteristics also gave serious cause for concern. He swiftly acquired a reputation for belligerent behaviour towards other staff across the institution, more than once raging violently at clerical staff in the University administration because he had received bureaucratic news that displeased him. He also became identified by his contemporaries and by office staff as a difficult and unpredictable individual that it would be best to avoid in normal circumstances.

His reluctant supervisor felt all of this and more besides. Indeed, because he preferred in principle to give his PhD students a loose rein, and to allow them to work largely independently, Gerry was more than happy to see relatively little of this student and to permit him to work for long periods without interruption. As was also his normal practice (since Gerry is famously no bureaucrat), formal records were not kept of his periodic contacts with the student and the upgrade and monitoring process did not identify any significant problems.

To some extent because Richard wished to have much more direct support from his supervisor, but also because Gerry's explicit judgments about the project and the emerging PhD thesis, when they were offered, were much less favourable than he had hoped for, Richard, who clearly found criticism of any kind very hard to take, progressively developed a strong antipathy towards his supervisor. Relations, by the time the thesis was finally submitted with Gerry's formal but unenthusiastic agreement, had effectively broken down completely.

The doctoral examination was a bloodbath. The thesis was vehemently criticised by both internal and external examiners. It was rejected outright.

This outcome shocked and appalled Richard. He argued—plausibly or not no-one else can now know—that he had not been given sufficiently explicit warnings by his supervisor about the problems that his thesis had apparently had. He also argued that the supervision had been inadequate both in quantity (on which one suspects that he may well have had a point) and in quality (about which it is impossible for me to make judgments). He made these observations in a formal complaint to the (now different) Head of School and then to the University.

At the resulting tribunal Gerry's conduct was only partially exonerated. Rather to the surprise of some of his friends and colleagues, he had elected not to make an issue of his own reluctance to acquiesce in the student's original admission (of which, it should be noted, the complainant himself had never been aware). He reasoned that he could not document precisely the process by which his own academic judgments had been over-ruled by senior staff. He also feared that drawing attention to the unpropitious beginnings of their relationship might in any case make him look like he had always harboured unfair prejudices against the student.

The outcome, mainly based on the institution accepting that the supervision provided could not be shown to have been sufficiently diligent and robust, was that the student was permitted to re-submit the thesis in substantially different form. Another colleague in the Department was persuaded, very reluctantly, to act as the new supervisor. Richard, whose stridency and belligerence are undiminished, continues to talk provocatively of possible legal action against the original supervisor.

I am now awaiting further developments with some apprehension. Have you any suggestions?

Many thanks in anticipation.

Derek

Team task 1

On the acetate provided please

- 1. list the main headings of a risk assessment of this case, and**
- 2. suggest the main specific points you would make in your response to Derek**

then turn to next page....

Epilogue

Richard, now working under the direct supervision of the Head of Department, re-submitted his dissertation a year after the tribunal's decision to allow him another chance. The Head fully agreed with the judgments of Gerry and of both examiners about the candidate's academic limitations but did everything possible to persuade Richard to change significant aspects of his dissertation. He also made sure to see Richard regularly and to document their interactions meticulously.

Great care was also taken to ensure that the examination process offered the greatest possible chance of a successful outcome. A new internal examiner was chosen from amongst the members of the Faculty Postgraduate Committee, all of whom were familiar with the case, and a suitably compliant external, fully informed about the background, was selected from amongst the Head of Department's friends. To no-one's surprise, Richard passed second time around.

Richard has now withdrawn his threats of legal action against Gerry and the university. Gerry, however, took the whole affair very badly, believing that he had been undermined by senior officers whose interventions had unnecessarily and unreasonably exposed him to a series of wholly foreseeable problems. Obviously alienated by this experience and feeling that his professional reputation had been shredded, he has since left the university.

Team task 2

On the acetate provided please

make a list of the main issues that should be addressed in this department/school/university.