

Patrick's story

'We can work it out'

Chapter 1

As a graduate of Coketown University in the '70s you have kept an eye on its development mainly through its annual newsletter for alumni. You have noted reports of its successful research programmes; and so, when you were appointed as your firm's university liaison officer, you made a particular point of visiting it each year to seek out potential recruits and make contact with one or two of your old lecturers.

Today, however, you are surprised to receive a personal call from Professor Sir James Harthouse, the current Vice-Chancellor, inviting you to dinner later in the month, 'I'd like your views on how we might forge closer links with forward-looking firms in the new technologies'. Dinner a few weeks later at The Lodge is convivial, not least because Sir James' cellar has been stocked by a discerning predecessor. But you are not prepared with an immediate response when over coffee and liqueurs he invites you to join the University's governing body, Council, 'for a couple of years at least to give us some advice on building up our relationships with British industry'.

In fact, especially since you recall that your in-laws have only recently retired to the area, you readily agree, and are soon pleasantly surprised by the vast amount of information and invitations that now start to come your way. You attend university meetings most months and particularly enjoy this year's annual meeting of 'University Court' when the contribution of the University to the local and national economy was, to your pleasure, highlighted.

You also feed back your impressions to your Company Chairman, a highly-qualified man himself, who shows great enthusiasm and encourages you to look out for ways in which the relationship with the University can be developed to the Company's benefit.

In July while you are having a few days holiday in the Lake District you receive a call on your car phone from Professor Brian Taylor in the Department of Electronic Engineering explaining that they have just heard of a marvellous opportunity to get money to work on a collaborative project. Apparently a Government Research Council is offering universities three year postgraduate scholarships called 'CASE awards' by which a student could work for a company but be almost wholly supported by government funds. 'We've got some very bright students, and it will only cost you £2,500 a year. All the rest is covered by the Research Council. You can be in on the selection and we can always get out of it if it doesn't work', he explains. He says that he will draft particulars on a form which he will put in the post for you to sign. 'Let me know of any queries', he concludes.

Q1 How should you respond?

Chapter 2

In the event, when the form arrives it describes what looks like an interesting, if rather vague, topic area; and you note in particular that Company's intellectual property rights on work the student carried out on the Company's premises will be protected.

You have a short discussion with the Chairman who, despite being pre-occupied with the launch of a new line scheduled for August, feels that 'we shouldn't miss the opportunity to work so closely with such a prestigious department'. He is clearly looking forward to the experience and suggests that you put his name down under the column 'Company Supervisor'.

The next you hear on the matter is a call on early October from your Company accounts office querying a bill from the University for £2,500. You are somewhat taken aback. So, before authorising payment you phone Brian to check on progress. 'No problem', he explains. 'We've already found an excellent young man'. Asked about a possible meeting, he is very reassuring. 'No rush at all about that. He'll be spending most of this term on the training programme - a condition of the award, you know. Let's wait till after Christmas. Are you going away?'

You sense that the Chairman, when you explain the situation, may already be beginning to lose his original enthusiasm, even possibly to stonewall. But he agrees that you can authorise payment on the understanding that a meeting can be set up at the Company for January at the latest, perhaps among other things to arrange for Adrian, the student, to come and spend time in the Company.

Q2 What should you do now?

Chapter 3

Following this you immediately write to Brian, confirming a date for a meeting at the Company in January; and you ensure that Pat, the Chairman's PA, has put it in his diary and that a space in the visitor's car park has been booked for the day.

The meeting is held in the Director's room. Two lecturers from Coketown arrive a little late - apparently there had been difficulties with an out of date street map - together with Adrian, who turns out to be a rather scruffy youth in jeans.

From the start you find the meeting acutely embarrassing. The lecturers, who are the joint supervisors at the University, seem to have a different concept of research from the company and to be unclear about the key issues raised in the discussion. They also give the impression of rejecting each of the research ideas the Chairman puts forward. They present nothing in writing. 'We can't decide on a final thesis topic in just four months', one of them points out. 'Leave it to us and we will work it out when we get back'. You suggest that Adrian should go away write up what he has done and indicate what he might be interested in focusing on; and they agree to this idea.

Immediately after they leave, the Chairman calls you. 'Let's cut our losses and cancel it', he suggests. You manage to dissuade him, but only with difficulty and only on condition that you raise the company's anxieties informally on your next visit to the University.

You also phone Brian Taylor to explain the difficulties. He expresses sympathy, and says that such problems often arose with CASE awards, especially in the early stages; but he adds little else of use to you in mollifying the Chairman.

Q3 What else, if anything, should you do at this stage ?

Chapter 4

Two months later an eight-page document arrives from Adrian, titled 'First thoughts on my CASE Project'. You read it with increasing disappointment. Nowhere is there a clear research topic, let alone any indication of what the student might be doing for the Company. Moreover, the area described is in the academic foothills compared with the material you have been getting from your collaboration with the University of Perugia.

So before showing it the Chairman you phone one of the supervisors at the University making three main points: that the project is ill-defined; that it is not a response to the Company's agenda; and that the level is rather basic compared with the Company's current knowledge. 'What do you expect?' he replies. 'Adrian's only a postgraduate student'.

The Chairman re-affirms his scepticism and recommends 'pulling out right away', but you persuade him that you would like first to have more informal discussion at the University to see what can still be rescued.

In the event, you never manage to make contact with anyone with responsibility for the studentship at Coketown; the weather improves, and with it the prospect of the annual holiday in the Lake District comes closer

The next written communication from Coketown is a second invoice for £2,500 arriving in early October.

Q4 What do you do now?

Chapter 5

You write back to the Finance Office, returning the bill and indicating that the Company does not intend to pay because, in its view, the University has failed to keep its side of the agreement. You also make several telephone calls to the Department, but these are returned at times when you are not in yourself.

At the end of the December meeting of the University Council you are taken aside by the Director of Finance who invites you for a sherry in his room with his deputy. After discussion of the equipping of the new library extension with new technology, they come to the point: apparently, any failure in the CASE contract would be noted by the Research Council and could have a severe effect on the University's reputation with them. In particular, it could damage the University's chances of being successful in its current bid for a major Interdisciplinary Research Centre for which Coketown has already been shortlisted. However, they are sure everything can be sorted out; and they undertake to speak directly to Professor Emily Pegler, the Dean of the Faculty, and put the problem to her.

You therefore postpone any further action, other than making your own calls to her office which, however, are not returned. A month later you get a call from Professor Pegler who asks 'What's going on?', and says that the supervisors are highly respected academics and that she herself had so far heard little about it. You explain. She says she will look into it. 'I'm sure we can work it out' she says reassuringly.

Q5 What action should you take now ?

Chapter 6

A month later, you are attending for a Chair Committee for another department. During the discussion the Registrar passes you a note asking what the problem is with the project. After the meeting you briefly explain, but he is too busy to stay long.

Two days later Pat, the Chairman's PA, passes you a note which indicates that unless a bill for £2,500 is paid within 14 days the Chairman is to appear before Coketown's Magistrate's Court for non-payment. She explains that he is adamant that the company should not pay, and asks you if you would 'sort it out'.

You immediately phone the University Finance Director who says 'It's only a frightener - ignore it. I'll have a word with Emily and get her to come to meet your Chairman and see what can be done.'

A month later Emily Pegler, immaculate in a smart grey suit, visits the company and has a constructive meeting with you and the Chairman over lunch (for which she offers to pay). She is, however, unable to explain exactly what the student is currently doing, although she puts forward three options:

- 1 to continue on an agreed project;
- 2 to replace Adrian with another student half way through the award; or
- 3 to drop Adrian and start again on a three-year award with another student.

You firmly point out that all three options are unacceptable to the company; and so Professor Pegler goes back to Coketown to think further on the matter and to discuss it with her colleagues.

One week later you receive a short document from Adrian labelled 'Progress Report' which you read carefully. Although the topic now suggested is much more interesting for the Company, the level of the content is still disappointing, well below your normal in-house provision.

Q6 What is your next move?

Chapter 7

At the end of May a second and final notice arrives, indicating court action for non-payment. You phone the Finance Director indicating that you are now so angry that you intend to take the University to court. 'Take us to court if you like', he replies.

You consider resigning from the University Council

Q7 What to do now?

Epilogue

You do not resign from Council but confidentially make a personal donation to the University from a Charities Aid Foundation account that you had set up to facilitate gifts to good causes, and reflect on the episode as a learning experience.....

Syndicate Task

Please list clearly the main guidelines for

1. companies; who plan to set up a CASE or sponsored doctorate programme and for
2. universities;
3. departments;
4. supervisors; and
5. students