Phil's First Year

1.

I came to the Department of Computer Science at Coketown University by answering an advertisement for a research studentship in computer modelling. My first degree was in mathematics (I had gained a First) and I did not really think the department would be interested in me, though I was very interested in the subject matter. I was lucky in that the department was looking for someone with a mathematical background for the project. It all seemed very easy at the time. I went over to Coketown to look around the department, had a twenty minute interview with the Graduate Tutor and was accepted there and then. The department did not already have a supervisor for me but I accepted their assurances that '... this can all be tied up when you arrive'.

Comment on any problems you have identified at this stage.

What should be done now?

2.

My problems started once I'd settled in for my first year. I had done some reading around the topic before starting but the area was completely new to me and the groundwork had been done at Coketown the year before by one of their 'academic superstars'. She was the only real expert in the field and I quickly realised that I would need quite a lot of help from her in the early stages of my research. Unfortunately for me she was on a two year secondment to an Australian government department. The member of staff appointed to be my supervisor at Coketown did not really understand the model I would be working on and our first few meetings were frustrating for both of us.

Comment on any issues that you think should have been addressed at this stage.

What should be done now?

3.

It took me most of my first year to get to grips with the basics of the model and I put a lot of effort into refining and developing my own version of it. I thought I was making progress but my supervisor was unable to form any critical judgement on my work. By the end of my first year our meetings had become rather cursory affairs at irregular intervals. When I raised my concerns over the direction of my research I got the impression that it was assumed I would be sharp enough just to get on with it. Initially I had found this flattering but I'm sure I wasted a lot of time and effort in developing ideas that eventually came to nothing. I felt I needed a lot more guidance in the first six months of my research.

What support could have been offered to Phil in the early stages of his research?

What should be done now?

4.

By the time of my first year review meeting with the Supervisory Panel I was behind schedule though I had learned a lot about the topic. I was feeling disillusioned and worried. As I saw it, I was being asked to complete the work of a prestigious academic with almost no support. Somewhat cynically I had begun to wonder who would eventually get the credit. I felt isolated and alienated and would have welcomed any opportunity to talk to other computer modellers. It was difficult not to feel exploited. The Department had apparently applied for the grant to continue the research on the strength of a member of staff's reputation and then left me to get on with it with no support.

As I tried to set my experience in perspective before the review meeting I realised that the expert in Australia had been very helpful when I had managed to contact her, but most of my e-mail messages and faxes had gone unanswered for long periods. She was frequently away at international conferences and government briefings just when I needed help the most. My progress had been slow and halting as a result. My difficulties were compounded by the inadequacy of the software I had been using. It had crashed several times while running the model I was developing. No one seemed to understand enough about it to get me started again quickly.

Nevertheless, I had built up my own expertise enough to discover that some of the equations clearly did not work and some of the data were incomplete. At least I had a clear picture of the gaps in the model and some idea of the direction I would need to take to fill them. I went into the review meeting hoping that the board would share my perspective.

As the Review Panel, how would you respond to this situation?

Team task

What lessons are there here for
    1. Research students
    2. Supervisors, and
    3. Departments and universities?