

'You're fired!' **Roland's removal**

1.

The email from Roland

Dear John,

Many thanks for your offer of help. I'll be as brief as I can make it without leaving out what I think is necessary detail and context.

The MPhil student in question is the son of a friend of the Research Dean of our faculty. Three months into the project, I was asked to join the team as Director of Studies as it was felt it was inappropriate for the research dean to be DoS. A colleague was also asked to join the supervision team as the supervisor with primary responsibility for subject-specific support. The third supervisor is a visiting professor and is a free-lance consultant with an interest in the subject matter of the project. He is also the student's uncle.

We have been supervising for two years. Slow progress - the student has commitments at work and has had family illness issues. No problem on our part. All of the data had been collected and some drafts had been produced.

All of the feedback from us has been on time, we have a raft of emails, notes, draft comments to support the quality of the feedback and supervision. The first we (the second supervisor and I) hear of any problem is the email we receive from the student, copied below.

I have been registered as an MPhil student now since 2011. It is time I completed. More importantly, I really need to get my thesis completed soon as I need to prepare for my accountancy examinations which are crucial for my career and future employment prospects. I have found it difficult to keep up momentum because of several reasons. Some of these are personal, but they also include issues around feedback and the focus of my thesis.

After a great deal of thought I have decided that I need a supervision team who can support me in my objectives to produce a good thesis and to complete as soon as possible. I have discussed this with Phil Good and he has been supportive of this

decision. I have had an initial meeting with a new supervision team regarding the best way forward.

I wish to thank you for all your help up to this point. I hope that you will understand my dilemma and support me in this decision.

Q: How should Roland have responded to the student?

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Roland explains:

Basically, the student has been to our faculty Postgraduate Coordinator in June of last year with issues around timeliness of feedback and the focus of thesis. The PG coordinator has advised the student to speak with supervisors (as per the university code of practice copied below).

Excerpt from Code of Practice for students

8. Complaints procedure

You may raise a complaint informally with your Director of Studies, Dean of Faculty, or with the Chair or Secretary of RPSG/FRPC. In most cases it should be possible to resolve the issue amicably in this way without recourse to the formal complaints procedure. Where your complaint is so serious that it makes it inappropriate to deal with informally or where the informal procedure has not proved satisfactory, you may make a formal complaint.

For information regarding the formal complaints procedure please refer to the Academic Handbook ...

Please note: Any student complaint must be lodged before the final thesis examination and cannot constitute grounds for appeal against the outcome of an examination.

The Student Complaints Procedure does not cover the following, for which separate procedures exist: Complaints involving an allegation of misconduct by a student, an allegation of harassment by a student or member of staff, an allegation of misconduct by a member of staff.

Q: What should a student who is dissatisfied with the supervisory process do about it?

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Roland continues:

So I replied as follows:

Dear....

There appears to be some confusion here as at no point have you indicated to us that you are unhappy with your supervision. I am even more unhappy that a "new" supervision team has been appointed without any discussion with the present supervisors. If there were issues around supervision, the current team should have been notified and a first port of call would involve resolution of these issues. A unilateral decision like this without any consultation is highly irregular.

As a supervision team, we have been acutely aware of your employment situation and have tried not to burden you with too much work. Despite this, all your data has been collected, you have received feedback on and discussed your review and method. You have even had a first attempt at the analysis. Matthew has kept in touch with you throughout the process, despite consistently receiving no reply to his emails asking how you were doing.

As a first point of call, I will meet with Phil Good as a matter of urgency but under no circumstances should you with a new supervision team to discuss what is in effect partially someone else's intellectual property.

The student hasn't followed the correct procedure. The PG coordinator feels, quite rightly, it is inappropriate for him to raise issues with us until the student does so.

In meantime, without talking to me or the second supervisor (the other supervisor may have been involved we don't know) meetings have gone on with a prospective new supervision team.

These meetings involved the PG Coordinator but there was no discussion with us or awareness on our part of any of the issues raised by the student or that a new supervision team was being put in place. We were unaware of anything until we received the "you're fired" email in September.

Q: Discuss Roland's reply and the duty of a PG Coordinator in such circumstances

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Roland continues:

Apparently I was being accused of responding in an 'intimidatory' way. My response was guided by my belief that in terms of process, something was awry and nothing further should be done to compound the situation.

We were told that the student was going to officially complain about the supervision he received until we produced our "evidence file" and has since (on advice, I imagine) decided not to do so. He now wants to submit with us remaining as supervisors but having no further contact with us – on account of our claimed intimidation.

Q: Any further issues here?

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Roland's question:

My issue is this - our research programmes committee at university level consider that our there is no issue with the manner in which this has been handled. According to them, our faculty PG coordinator has acted appropriately and it's all a question of perception.

I don't think that's right. The whole process has been poorly handled and to organize a meeting with a prospective new supervision team without any discussion with current supervisors whose supervision has been questioned is inappropriate.

There was no investigation by the faculty to ascertain the quality of the supervision before planning to put a new supervisory team in place. The student obviously felt that a new supervision team was a done deal, hence the 'you're fired' email. I've asked how I might be able to complain about the process and have been told that there is no means of doing so unless I complain about a specific member of staff. I don't want to do that, I just want to draw attention to the flaw in our system. At least I think it's a flaw!

1. The student in this case was obviously unwilling (or didn't feel the need) to speak with the supervisors to try to resolve the issue, as indicated in the code of practice.
2. To me there is a loophole here that needs closing. Surely there should be some form of resolution for both parties BEFORE meetings to discuss new supervisors can take place. Or at least some communication between faculty and supervisors. Has the supervision been questionable or not? Clearly, there has been NO attempt by anyone to resolve the situation.
3. Should we have some form of third party or mediator (independent faculty member?) for student and supervisors where the student feels unable to approach supervisors to discuss issues?

I think that's the bare bones of it, John. I really do appreciate you taking the time to read this and look forward to receiving your reply. I'm not sure if I'm being too uptight about all this but it just doesn't sit right with me at all. Please let me know if you need me to clarify anything.

Many thanks and best regards,
Roland

Q: how would have replied to Roland?

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John's reply

Oh what a tangled web..... I do appreciate how you feel. (I had a case some years ago of a student whose reaction to criticism was to transfer to another more friendly supervisor who told her the thesis would pass. Unsurprisingly the examiners confirmed the perspective of the first one and decided on complete revision and resubmission - which she couldn't bring herself to do, and I'm not sure from your account whether your candidate is part time and is still MPhil? he is now in 3rd year but refers to being an MPhil candidate. ...)

My thoughts are as follows:

1. Be clear with yourself. What do you want out of this? on the face of it - by some means or other - you have both been relieved of responsibility for a candidate who thinks, rightly or wrongly, that he has found a better arrangement which will speed up his completion, So, given the circumstances you are probably better out of it. Imagine if the student still supervised by you were to eventually be failed by examiners you nominated or be told to resubmit, it now looks as if you and your co-supervisors would have been in the firing line?
2. The arrangements for changing supervisory arrangements sound very unsatisfactory ('flaw in the system') and need addressing, but maybe your contribution could be to focus on this general issue and suggest that the procedures need to be clarified. At the very least the original supervisors should be consulted as they might have important information for the new team.
3. Some institutions allocate a mentor or buddy to each new candidate. Possibly the University might consider this as well. So that they can discuss in confidence any perceived problems and possible resolutions
4. You do not mention annual reviews, transfer etc. If carried out thoroughly these should have thrown up whether the student was on target and was having adequate supervision.

You want to avoid sounding persecuted. All in all, what have you got to lose by a magnanimous response, suggesting that maybe in future there should be a clearer set of procedures with role of Postgraduate Coordinator clearly defined? and that you would be happy to take part in such a review if that helped. You then take the high moral ground and there would be no need for recriminations. What do you think?

bw

John

Q: Discuss points made in John's reply

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Roland responds:

Thanks very much for your swift reply, John. It's much appreciated.

It is a bit of a tangled web isn't it? To answer your questions, the student is PT MPhil but has suspended for some of his candidature. The second supervisor is probably more annoyed about the whole thing than me as he has had more contact with the student. The third supervisor has written a letter in support of his nephew. The letter is full of inaccuracies, but I guess that's a separate issue. The student has not indicated in any reviews that he was dissatisfied with our supervision.

I am very much focused on making our procedures 'fit for purpose' and clarifying regulations so that this does not happen again. What I would like to do is put a paper together showing how our procedures could be improved and, as you suggest, offer to take part in any review. There are several issues that I feel need clarifying:

1. Behind the scenes meetings with new supervision teams are inappropriate without some attempt at resolution with the initial team.
2. If a supervisory team's supervision has been called into question, this should be investigated to see if the student has grounds for complaint, which I guess is the PG coordinator's role, along with the faculty research programmes committee?
3. I'd be really interested in seeing how a mentoring / buddy system might work. Are you aware of any universities who publish their guidelines online so I could get a feel for how they operate?

Thanks again for taking the time to help. Any further suggestions welcome.

Regards,

Team task

1. What lessons are there here for students dissatisfied with the supervision provided?
 2. What lessons are there for supervisors from this account?
 3. What lessons are there for institutions?
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