

Jeffrey's query: a matter of integrity?

...and then there was a knock at the door

A few short weeks ago, I was sat in my office awaiting the arrival of a co-supervisor of a PhD candidate. This was one of our regular weekly update meetings about our candidates (we share four currently – I am DoS for all of them), a knock at the door and Lizzy joined me.

She looked, well, angry. The upshot of the proceeding conversation was that at the previous days 'Research Symposium' (a regular Wednesday PG Research event of a calendar of events for the PG research students), one of our most motivated and engaged overseas students had been asked in the forum (attended by fellow students, staff and research office colleagues) to explain her methodological approach as used in her work to date. She has upgraded to PhD and is about to start the field data generation stage of her PhD.

The question came from the symposium facilitator, a colleague, who has recently joined us from a local institution and, although he espouses an air of experience, has no completions yet.

Our student gave a response. The methodology that we are using is without question, experimental and has novelty; however it is based upon my methodological approach, one that has been used in many other successful completions and one that I am 'known' for within the field of Marketing and Entrepreneurship. Whilst I would not claim to be a 'guru' on such approaches, I am certainly associated with it and frequently cited in its usage.

The facilitator responded to the student's response with a long commentary about the inappropriate research design and the danger to her future work, PhD completion and career if she were to peruse the approach.

She was left shaken and confused. In the coffee break that followed she was cornered by the facilitator and 'old that she should without any hesitation have him on her supervisory team and that she should insist upon this.

Upset and concerned, she immediately spoke with Lizzy, who consoled her as best she could and hence her conversation with me.

Upon hearing this I went to see the candidate in the student's research office and asked her for her version of events, which matched perfectly and was subsequently corroborated by other students who attended the event.

An outcome?

I approached the head of school and we discussed the matter at length and I was assured that the issue would be raised as part of the colleague's progress review. The student has taken a few weeks to calm down. It has taken several meetings to reassure her that all is OK, but she is fearful that her current supervisory team will be replaced. The colleague has not approached Lizzy or myself about this particular student nor his ability to supervise her. He has however voiced several opinions on social media, openly criticising on Facebook our method, and suitability as supervisors in particular, but also shared with a wide number of academics from local institutions. I have reflected on the motivations behind this issue and can only assume that it would be easier for him to 'muscle' in on a team that has proven success rather than do all the hard work himself.

To date I have not had an update from the Head of School, and can report that this is the third time this year that unsolicited approaches have been made directly to PhD candidates of mine by colleagues, approaches that candidates have reported as being negative and somewhat intimidating. And then I received an email this morning...

A case of intellectual theft?

This morning I opened my email to find a rather surprising email from the editor of a professional journal. Surprising, because I have not submitted any work recently to this journal. To my greater surprise I was informed that the paper that I had co-authored had been received and was being reviewed by the journal in preparation for publication. The paper was about a concept developed in a recently completed and submitted thesis (submitted last week) by one of my PhD candidates who is also a junior faculty member. The fellow co-authors were the candidate, my fellow supervisor, a colleague and a colleague who has recently left the school. It appears that I am the last on the list of authors.... yet it is my co-developed conceptualisation!!

To make matters even more outrageous, the fellow supervisor was unaware of the submission and the two colleagues (who it appears were the instigators of the submission) are not remotely expert in the field and have not contributed to the work in any way. However, and again, this candidate has in the recent past been approached by colleagues, wishing to pressure him into asking for them to be placed upon the supervisory team.

I have written to the Head of School and am awaiting a reply. I have written to the Dean, who suggested that I write to the Head of School.... I have also arranged a meeting with the best IP lawyers to discuss the situation and made the university aware of this.

My dilemma, is now manifold. The supervisory team were not consulted in this matter – and the chosen journal is a weak publication – given that the candidate and the supervisory team had planned out a quality publication plan (post viva and completion). If the paper is subsequently withdrawn, would the 'ghost' co-authors now claim that any further and future publication of the PhD work be attributed to them also? I suspect that the candidate was coerced into allowing the work to be used in this way... I feel that my intellect has been and continues to be devalued within the school and that management are unsure as to how to respond to such 'theft'.

Team task:

What are the lessons here for:

1. Research students
2. Supervisors, and
3. Institutions?