

From a graduate tutor's inbox updated

Team task

At the beginning of the new semester, as departmental postgraduate tutor, you review the main issues that may need attention.

Read through all these notes and on the acetates provided

1. Agree an order of priority
 2. Working from the most to least urgent suggest how they should be tackled
 3. Finally indicate the lessons here for departments/schools/institutions developing their postgraduate research profile
-

1 The problem with Rodney

It has come to your attention that a senior professor, who unfortunately is also your Head of School, uses his PhD students as a sort of reserve pool of unpaid private labour. For example, he has them mowing his lawns, felling trees and building walls in his garden. He even jokes to the secretaries that this is why he tries to recruit "strapping young Canadian men" as doctoral students. Understandably, the latter are unimpressed by what they see simply as exploitation, going far beyond normal expectations about the tasks a supervisor might set for his students. Equally understandably, they are reluctant to confront him, fearing that this might damage their relationship with him and that it could even have worrying implications for their career prospects. You have heard all of this from the secretaries rather than from the students themselves. As Graduate Tutor, is there anything you might do?

2 Rethinking residential training programmes

Your department has a deserved reputation for sociability. But in its extreme form this has become an excuse for excessive drinking and partying, in which you usually avoid participating. Unfortunately the department's PhD students, perhaps because some have discreetly declined to attend in the past, are now being required to attend a compulsory weekend "reading party" whose ulterior purpose, it seems to them and to

you, is predictably Bacchanalian. Some of the students are mature part-timers with family and employment responsibilities with whom this prospect, particularly the element of compulsion, rankles. Even some of the younger ones have learned from previous experience that the staff's antics when drunk can cause acute embarrassment. But none is willing to raise this formally, fearing that they will be thought anti-social, or even that it might jeopardise their supervisory relationships. Instead, since you are the most senior non-participant (the Head of Department is actually one of the worst offenders) and are widely assumed to disapprove, they have raised it confidentially with you. What should you do?

3 Exploitative work experience

Your department has a full programme of extra-curricular activities, including weekly evening seminars, a range of day colloquia and regular weekend conferences. Inevitably this generates a considerable body of mainly tedious organisational work. Unfortunately the department lacks in-house administrative support, the secretary having primarily clerical skills and a heavy workload. Accordingly the junior academic staff, to whom responsibility for running this programme has conventionally devolved, have in turn passed virtually all of the practical arrangements on to the department's PhD students, arguing, with the acquiescence of the Head of Department, that this is good preparation for professional life and is also likely to enhance their employability. As a result certain students now spend a significant part of their time administering an important and prestigious part of the department's activities. They have already revealed their resentment at this situation to the secretary, who has passed it confidentially to you. They feel that it is inappropriate for them to be negotiating with academics at other universities, ordering supplies and accommodation, and attending regularly outside normal working hours, particularly when it is all unpaid work. They also maintain that it is reducing their focus on research. Is there anything you can or should do about it?

4 Indira's indecision

A colleague has a first-year PhD student about whom he is increasingly concerned. She was admitted, with your support as Graduate Tutor as well as her intending supervisor's, because her application materials suggested an impressive and hard-working individual with the ability to produce good-quality research. But the supervisor has since discovered—indeed, the student now makes no secret of the fact—that she previously dropped out of a PhD programme elsewhere because she found it hard to focus sufficiently on a specific plan of work. Ever since her arrival, the supervisor has noticed that she has seemed unable to identify a clear way forward with

her research. She spends a great deal of time agonising rather than acting, and appears crippled by indecision. The supervisor now thinks that there is a real risk that she might fail to pass her end-of-first-year review. What would you advise?

5 Deanne's dissatisfaction

As Graduate Tutor, you have been approached by a student about a developing problem. A PhD student, who is an academically able but obviously rather brittle mature student, has become seriously dissatisfied with her supervisor and wants you to arrange an alternative. She alleges that he devotes insufficient time to her; that he is only intermittently in touch with her; and that he offers relatively little useful feedback on her work. Unfortunately, there are two complications. First, the student lives a significant distance from the university, having declined to come into residence, and she is willing to pay only the occasional visit in person: accordingly it is arguable that she bears at least a share of the responsibility for the failure of a sufficiently close and communicative relationship to develop between her and her supervisor. Second, she is working on a particularly obscure topic and he is actually the only person in the department (some would say, the country) with remotely-relevant interests: in short, as far as subject-specific expertise is concerned, there is no plausible candidate in the department to take over as supervisor. Nevertheless, she is adamant that she has lost confidence in him and that she wants to be supervised by someone else. She has even hinted darkly that she would consider a formal complaint if she does not get her way. How would you handle this?

6 The external examiner's resignation

The resignation of Julia's PhD external examiner (on the grounds of a dispute with the Finance Office about payment) means that her resubmitted thesis will be examined by a replacement external. Julia emails you to confirm that the new external is merely checking that she has adequately met the requirements in the original examiners' report. She fears that the new examiners may not expect to be bound by the views of the original examiners, and in any case, suggests that if they are not willing to pass her, there should be another chance of resubmission. She says that the Registry has told her that most resubmissions lead to a pass.