

Robin's Responsibilities

Act 1: The Middlemarch Initiative

My University is a member of a six university 'Joint Supervision Consortium' set up in June 1995 for five years to enable a university in the Middle East raise the level of higher education for females in San Seriffe by enabling selected women graduates to obtain a doctorate from a British university.

Under this arrangement the students are expected to study in San Seriffe with supervision provided by fax, phone and twice-yearly visits of 5/6 days by the students' British supervisor, who must be a woman. The titles are agreed by the Academic Board of the British University but vivas will be conducted in San Seriffe by examiners flown out for the occasion. All fees and

Act 2: The invitation

As Director of the Archaeological Unit at Middlemarch University I was surprised late one Friday to receive a call from the Postgraduate Registrar asking me to consider taking on the supervision of a San Seriffe student who had apparently applied to register for a PhD under this agreement. It seemed that I was the only woman with a PhD in Archaeology in the University. "Even if you are not strictly teaching staff," he explained, "your Camford

Act 3: The First Year

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Act 4: A Question of Resource

The Women's Campus at the University of San Seriffe is made up of impressive buildings, but has few resources for a research student. Its library has few books and not one on archaeology. The women would be allowed to use the library at the Men's Campus for a

Act 5: Arranging supervision

I made some hurried phone calls and insisted that the students would need at least access to the men's computerised library catalogue and that their orders would be delivered. I also found that Blackwells, the Middlemarch bookshop, were prepared to set up an overseas account for postgraduates. When we discussed the computer problem, both students, being quite well off, offered to buy their own PCs and modems for use at home, and the San Seriffe authorities promised add-on equipment like digital cameras which can be downloaded, and sophisticated printers.

When we discussed supervision in more detail, I discovered that Magda would have as a joint supervisor, Dr Hassan Al-Hazni, a male lecturer from the Men's Campus.

This raised a number of problems. All lectures in San Seriffe are segregated, so that a male lecturer can only lecture in a room of male students, any women having to watch a video link in a separate room. There was to be no interaction between male and female students or between students and tutors of the opposite sex. However, we arranged that supervisory meetings could be held off campus at the Medical Centre, uniquely neutral territory, if I was also present. Otherwise Magda could only communicate with Dr Al-Hazni by phone or fax.

Q1 How satisfact are such supervision arrangement?

Q2 What improvements do you think should be negotiated?

Act 6: Difficulties at home

On my return to Middlemarch I got Magda and Hiera registered, but then discovered that the whole idea of the Supervision Consortium with San Seriffe was to be reviewed by the University Postgraduate Committee. I was summoned before the Committee some members of which suggested that we should not be collaborating with San Seriffe which they referred to as a 'repressive regime'. Although I argued strongly that, even if this was the case, which I didn't accept, only good could come from giving such students access to postgraduate education. It was also argued that I was not a suitable supervisor even though I had been invited to be so by the Registrar. (He apparently had not raised it with this Committee.)

I pointed out that both students were now properly enrolled and were having their fees paid and that my substantial expenses had been covered. So, whatever the feminists on the Committee might feel, the University was obliged to provide supervision.

After a long and acrimonious debate various restrictions were put in place and eventually opposition to the collaboration diminished. (Incidentally, I discovered later that there were initially five other supervisors at Middlemarch each with one student at San Seriffe but that the number had diminished to two as one had left the University and others had found the problems of communication insuperable.)

- Q1 What are the outstanding problems for the supervisor at this stage?
- Q2 How should they be addressed?

Act 7: But how to supervise?

I had no experience of, or training in, how to supervise postgraduates. My own PhD had been done virtually unsupervised over a period of seven years with no regular meetings with my supervisor. Research methodology was unheard of when I was a student and so I could not advise my students about it. In retrospect it would have been useful to have attended a course, or been given advice, on supervision. And I felt particularly isolated because I was not on the teaching staff, my students were not on campus and some suspicions remained about the collaboration.

In fact, as I later discovered, the contract between Middlemarch and San Seriffe had not been signed for several years, that my students had inadvertently been sent letters of exclusion for non-payment of fees (when San Seriffe had never been invoiced) and that there had been several other dreadful administrative errors.

Q1 Comment on these issues.

Q2 Suggest any actions at this stage.

Act 9: Arranging support

I decided to discuss matters with the readers of the upgrade report. They made it clear to me that their concern was the research methodology – mainly caused by my ignorance. I decided that Magda and I had to learn very quickly what was necessary and acceptable to the Postgraduate Committee.

First I enlisted the help of Dr Al-Hazni and any staff at Middlemarch with methodological expertise. Then I negotiated for Magda to spend a term in London to attend a University course on research methodology. (Theoretically the San Seriffe students were not supposed to be taught in England, but in practice officials turn a blind eye to it if the visit is short and a male relative accompanies the student, but I was advised not to talk about it.) I also did a lot of reading ...

I also extended by next visit to San Seriffe to meet archaeologists and arrange for my students to meet them in my company.

I found out about learned societies in the UK specialising in Arabian studies. I got Magda to join one and to participate in their meetings. This proved most productive, although one San Seriffian scholar she met, very unethically, tried to poach her for his own university. Jointly with Magda we approached journal editors and offered articles. In some cases Western preconceptions worked in our favour – the novelty of finding an intelligent and articulate woman from San Seriffe led to a number of commissioned articles.

A book editor approached us for a joint chapter on archaeology in San Seriffe, and Magda is increasingly invited to write articles for magazines. However, while her family are pleased to see her work in print (especially in glossy magazines) they have mixed feelings about her other achievements. She remains unmarried at 30 because she believes that she would not be able to complete a PhD with a traditional husband.

Most recently the arrangements I made for her to give a lecture to a major International Seminar were torpedoed by her father. He refused to allow her to present her paper, although he agreed to attend the Seminar with her. I have found that I have to be diplomatic with her family whom I have met socially several times, and, while respecting their views, use every opportunity to gently push Magda's career.

- Q1 Comment on the supervisor's reaction to the Committee's decision.
- Q2 Suggest any further actions she should be taking.

Act 10: Confusion

I eventually heard that both Magda and Hiera had been upgraded to PhD status. This latter decision slightly surprised me, because I thought her work weak in some areas. She is less open to new ideas than Magda, but twice as persistent. She won't visit England because she is married with grown-up children and more religious and traditional than Magda. But I phoned her too as soon as I heard the good news.

But, six weeks later, when I received the formal minutes, I found to my horror that my informant had got my two students' names confused. She had met Magda and been very impressed by her, and for some reason thought that it was Magda's transfer report that she was reading, not Hiera's. She clearly had not read the report properly and passed on the 'news' on the mistaken assumption

Epilogue

I could have kept quiet about the whole thing. Nobody but me knew she has passed the wrong student. But I blew the whistle, and the Research Committee are now in the embarrassing position of having approved, in writing, Hiera's transfer to PhD.

I let them wriggle about on the hook a bit, then proposed that Hiera should write a short theoretical essay and present one case study, for their final approval. She was a bit mystified by this, but it was a useful exercise for her. I sent it to the Research Committee who confirmed the transfer with several caveats.

Perhaps because students have had to fight in their different ways to get this far, I am fairly confident that both will succeed. And because I have had to fight too – against my own ignorance and the prejudice of colleagues at Middlemarch – I am determined they will. It could all have been a lot easier, and I've certainly learnt a lot – probably more than my two students.

Thinking back I sometimes wonder whether many of the supposed difficulties were really down to a covert xenophobia. The supervisors seemed to talk about San Seriffe as though it was a third world country. One of them asked her PhD student if she knew what a computer was, and drew a computer in the air, which caused great offence. There was a lack of understanding of the social, cultural and religious background of the students. The