

Dr Warren's Diary
A new PhD supervisor's log

Episode 1
May 2007

Background

In November 2003 I submitted my PhD thesis (Department of Geography, University of Wessex

The two projects

1) CASE studentship joint with the museum. Principal supervisor: Warren. Co-supervisors: Two at Barchester (Charlotte and Gary), one at the museum (Bob). Initial field work funded by National Committee, additional field work and laboratory consumables funded through the research council studentship. Note: research council funding is only available to UK passport holders or fees only for EU citizens.

2) The University of Barchester studentship with contribution from the Botanical Gardens. Principal supervisor: Warren. Co-supervisors: Two at The University of Barchester (Stephanie and Gary), one at the Botanical Gardens (Peter), and one at the University of Moulinsart (Paula). Initial samples in storage at Barchester, but no money to cover any additional costs.

Studentship recruitment and selection

Advertising for the two studentships began in September 2006, prior to any guarantee of funding. The adverts were put together with the help of my co-supervisors and other members of the department also going through the process for their own projects. These were advertised by Barchester at recruitment fairs, fliers to other university departments and on the web. In addition, as principal supervisor, I wanted to make sure that I recruited the best possible candidates therefore I proactively promoted the projects on e-mail list servers and specialist web sites.

Response was varied. About seventy-five percent of the applicants were either not eligible or unsuitable for either of the projects and were easily rejected at the 'first cut'. This left 15 applicants whose CVs required consideration. Next I went through the CVs in details and in consultation with co-supervisors (principally Stephanie who had overseen the student recruitment procedure for the department the previous year). This resulted in six of the applicants' references being taken up. Four were then invited for interview on the basis of these reports and their CVs.

Interviews were held in April 2007. Of the interviewees 3 were UK based and invited to attend an interview day at Barchester, the fourth was from Argentina and a telephone interview was therefore arranged. The formal interviews at Barchester were conducted by a departmental panel (which I was not part of but included Gary). Bob, Stephanie and I were able to informally interview candidates and show them the facilities at Barchester during the day. Two of the candidates were outstanding and there was a disagreement between the formal and informal panel regarding the ranking of these two. Following discussions with Gary and Stephanie I decided to offer the research council project to the candidate that I had thought to be the stronger of the two (Wayne); the Argentinean candidate was ineligible for this funding. I phoned him that evening at home and he accepted on the spot.

The telephone interview was a few days later and conducted by myself, Gary and another member of Barchester staff not involved with the projects. This was a slightly

strange experience sitting in a room talking into a microphone in the centre of the table. Even so the candidate came across as extremely enthusiastic and well qualified with a reasonable grasp of spoken English. The official verdict was that this candidate was also appointable.

This meant that a decision had to be made between the next top candidate from the campus based interviews and the telephone interviewee. This was when it struck me how much this decision would impact on these people's lives; particularly with one of the candidates being from abroad. I was initially slightly unnerved by this realisation until Stephanie pointed out that these were all grown ups who had made the choice to apply for this project. Once calmed down I phoned the Argentinean candidate (Christina) and offered her the second project. She immediately accepted but I told her to read the information on the project and think about it over night at least. She confirmed her acceptance the following day.

Additional notes

I will also be co-

Episode 2
September 2007

Preparation for arrival of students

Having recruited Wayne and Christina I now had 6 months to prepare for their official start date of 1st October. I divided the tasks I had to do into two types: i) preparation for the arrival of the students, and ii) things I had to get done before they started encroaching further on my time. The latter of these categories included the submission of two research papers¹, and conducting the field work that was funded by the National Committee. However, the field work became an advanced taster of PhD supervision when Wayne accepted my offer to support him on the field work if he could cover the cost of his flights himself.

General preparation

The laboratories were my major concern regarding general preparedness for the arrival of the students. Firstly, there was no cold store to keep samples in and secondly, there was no equipment to carry out preparation procedures. I got the department to agree to purchase the necessary equipment and it arrived slowly over the course of the summer. In addition, a number of estates works needed to be carried out as I was taking over an old laboratory. Most of these have now been carried out and the majority of the equipment is now in place. One outstanding item is a particular chemical that we require which now requires a Home Office licence to purchase. This restriction has come in since I was last in the UK and I was unaware of it until I tried to order the

Preparation for Christina

The preparations for Christina's project are less advanced. Initial samples are in storage here at the University of Barchester but there are still no extra funds in place to cover the costs of sample preparation or additional field work. Given my previous success I have submitted a pre-proposal to the National Committee to try and obtain funds from them for this. However, previous versions of this project have already been rejected for funding from two other grant awarding bodies. As a fall back Stephanie (project co-supervisor) as agreed that her lab will underwrite any additional costs from commercial work they are carrying out. I am slightly nervous about the funding of this project but feel confident that the science behind the project is exciting enough to attract fund with perseverance.

The other concern regarding Christina's arrival was the necessity for a student Visa. For my part this required some additional paper work but the university (which has c. 50% international PhD students) handled the rest very well and there were no problems. In addition, it was necessary to find somewhere for Christina to stay when she arrived. I made a number of enquiries and visited a number of properties on her behalf and I think found her a nice place to live. It is within walking distance of the university and shops, and she will be sharing with other Barchester PhD students although the rent is a little high. Hopefully it will be good for her settling in period at least. Tomorrow I will collect her from the airport and her adventure into UK academia will begin. I hope that I can deliver a PhD program for her that will be worth her moving half way around the world for.

Concluding comments

Now, on the evening before I collect Christina from the airport, I think I have the laboratory just about in order and facilities in place for the commencement of the PhD projects. I have submitted neither of the research papers I have been working on, but the final draft on my final paper based on my PhD research is with my co-authors. Exciting times.

Episode 3
August 2008

Looking back at the first year as a PhD supervisor I have lots of memories of events and can't quite believe that it has been almost a full year since I wrote my last entry. I guess this reflects one of the key things I have learnt about PhD supervision – it takes up a lot of time. Below are some examples of the events that have happened during this busy year.

1) First impressions and induction

I successfully managed to meet Christina at the airport and we seemed to get on well chatting about work and living in a new country for much of the journey to Barchester. Her spoken English was extremely good, but not fluent, and I learnt that she had arrived via her aunt in Portugal; I hoped that the, relatively, close proximity of family would make settling into life in the UK a little easier. Upon reaching her new accommodation we met her new house mates and found her room and key. Christina seemed very pleased with the set up so I gave her my mobile phone number in case of problems, wished her well settling in and left her to get on with things.

know what to expect. However, one of the courses I am working on has had a number of 'hidden' tasks which were not explained to me when I committed myself. This has led to some bad feeling and a new guardedness when being asked to do teaching related jobs. I want to do teaching but I don't want to be taken advantage of to the detriment of my other responsibilities (i.e. PhD students, research projects). Time management is continuing to be a key challenge as more demands are placed upon me. The next big challenge is to organise the field work for the three of us for an extended >1 month period. We will find out then exactly how well we get on...!!!