

Charlie's First Year

Act 1: The very beginning

I did not know I was going to the University of Barchester until about one month before the start of the new academic year. When I heard that I had been awarded a one year faculty studentship I was so relieved. Pauline, the Departmental Officer thought that I may not be pleased with just the one year, but after five near misses of PhD studentships of one kind or another, it felt so good just to know what I was going to be doing. Obviously, I was also very excited. I had found out the news whilst at work (secretarial temping for a marketing company in London) but when I got home even better news was waiting. On my answerphone was Pauline saying that somehow more money had become available and that now I had three year's funding. With this news and the fact that I was about to go on a two week holiday abroad, I was simply 'on top of the world'. However, it did mean that I only had just two weeks to sort out what I knew was going to be one of the biggest changes in my life.

First I had the difficult task of finding somewhere suitable to live. I did make inquiries about campus accommodation but I was much too late. The accommodation office sent me some details of rooms available, but not knowing Barchester at all made looking virtually impossible. Luckily a friend of mine from Middlemarch Metropolitan University (where I had done my first degree) had a sister living nearby. So I went to stay with her. I met this complete stranger off the bus and she put me up for a couple of nights while I attended the induction week and searched for somewhere to live. It was very important to me to find somewhere which would not be a problem when my partner came to stay. The flat I found was great except for three snags. First it was two bedroomed, therefore, I needed to find a flatmate, as I could not afford the rent on my own; second, it was totally unfurnished and third I could not move in for two weeks.

Life seemed hectic, new and exciting but it also felt very scary at times. I could not believe that here I was miles from home and on my own. What on earth was I doing. I was in the north of England and my partner, family and friends were all down south. On top of this, I was the only external applicant in my department. I did not know anyone nor even the way around the campus and here I was just about to start a PhD having come straight from my undergraduate degree. Experiencing all these changes at once and having had so little time to prepare left me feeling rather stressed.

On a more positive note I had found Sue, my colleague who I was sharing an office with, and she seemed very nice. Also the other postgraduates in the department had left me a note welcoming me to Barchester which felt good. Then on the second day of the induction week I bumped into my co-supervisor who then promptly told me that he was going to be away abroad for most of the first term but that he would arrange to see me before he went. Immediately following this, the Postgraduate Tutor, who had interviewed me some five months back, came around the corner. After welcoming me he then informed me that my main supervisor was going to be on sabbatical for two terms. Sue just looked at me and said later that she could not believe it. I nearly burst into tears. Too much was happening too

Act 2: Researching sensitive issues

I had not anticipated the extent of the effects that my research area could have on me. Here I was researching an emotive and highly sensitive topic: 'Childhood Sexual Abuse' and I had gone and left my total support network in London. I knew, however, that I had not lightly chosen this area of study, having already devoted much time on this subject at undergraduate level, including my dissertation. Which I must say was the best thing I had ever done. However, I believe I could not have guessed totally the implications that this research might have, perhaps not only for myself but also for my supervisor. Remembering back to my interview, I distinctly felt the interviewer's (Postgraduate Tutor) discomfort in asking me about my own experiences of childhood sexual abuse. He first apologised that my intended supervisor (a female) was not able to be present at the interview through sickness. I knew

I was now feeling extremely nervous about my supervisor's response (even though I liked my supervisor and felt that I could talk to him). My supervisor came into my office and sat down. He looked puzzled and said he was not quite sure why I had left him the "story" to look at. I explained again that it was simply to illustrate the technique of using stories. He looked relieved, and commented to the effect that he had thought I was trying to tell him something in an indirect way, about how I might be feeling in our supervision sessions, as he was an older man and in a position of power. I assured him there was no hidden agenda and thanked him for his concern. However, I still felt rather silly and embarrassed.

1. Comment on the supervisor's situation and response to Charlie's research problems.
2. What should Charlie do now?

out I feel that I have hardly made a difference. At the beginning the letters (which range from 1 page to 30 pages) were taking at the most 5 hours to code. Of course we have got a lot quicker with practice. The latest problem for me has been in not having a computer with a big enough memory to take the database. It is very important that I can have access to a computer in my office, due to the sensitive nature of the letters where confidentiality is so very important. At present I feel very frustrated and so very tired. However, I never think about giving up because I know that my partner and I have come too far, both having returned to education as 'young' but 'mature' students. I also know that I am in a very fortunate position with many excellent opportunities and furthermore, at the end of the day it is my choice to be doing the PhD. However, I just wish that things could be easier.

Q1. What support can supervisors really give?

Q2. What should Charlie do now?

Team task

On the acetate provided, provide some guidance for

1. postgraduate research students
2. supervisors
3. institutions