

Offline: Be careful what you wish for

Caveat emptor. Queen Mary, University of London (QMUL), is currently promoting what it sees as its virtues. In one advertisement, under the heading “Investing in scientific excellence”, the university describes itself like this: “QMUL is one of the UK’s most successful higher education institutions with a reputation for excellent and innovative research that has a positive impact across the globe. In the last RAE exercise we were ranked 11th overall in the UK and from August, 2012, we will be a member of the Russell Group of leading UK research intensive universities. We recognise that excellent research is dependent on outstanding researchers and are making an exciting and significant investment in the development of future excellence with the establishment of a number of new Early Career Fellowships in our Faculties of Science and Engineering and Medicine and Dentistry.” It’s hard to imagine that anyone who believes in basic principles of academic freedom and human decency would ever apply for one of these positions. Take the case of Dr Fanis Missirlis. After being investigated by the university’s Redundancy Committee, Dr Missirlis, a lecturer in the School of Biological and Chemical Sciences (he studies iron metabolism), received his dismissal letter from the Principal of QMUL, Simon Gaskell, on June 28, 2012. Dr Missirlis was told that his last day of service to the College was expected to be just 24 hours later—on June 29. An email followed, from the Head of Dr Missirlis’s School, Prof Matthew Evans:

Dear Dr Missirlis (Fanis),
I understand that you have received a letter from the Principal informing you that your contract of employment is to be terminated and that you are being paid in lieu of notice. I will therefore be closing your email account and electronic access to Queen Mary IT systems, cancelling your security card and ensuring that you cannot access the building, your office or laboratory. I am assuming that all the contents of your office and laboratory were either purchased on Queen Mary funds or on grants which have now terminated and therefore are the property of Queen Mary. It may be the case that you have personal effects which you may wish to collect and you are welcome to arrange to do so by contacting Alan Philcox and/or Sue Brosnan who will accompany you to your office.

Matthew Evans, Head of School, Professor of Ecology, School of Biological and Chemical Sciences, Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Road, London, E1 4NS

No time was given by QMUL for Dr Missirlis to make alternative arrangements to continue his research. He

is entitled to 3 months notice and it would have been courteous if Prof Evans had asked Dr Missirlis whether he needed his QMUL email account to complete correspondence with journals and funders. It was also hasty to assume that the contents of his office belonged to the university. “I have a personal claim to everything in that office”, writes Dr Missirlis. Whatever the dispute, QMUL had a minimum obligation to treat Dr Missirlis with respect. It did not do so. Asked to respond to these concerns, Chris Pearson, QMUL’s Human Resources Director, commented that “any member of staff...made redundant has the right to appeal, and the College will follow due process and procedure”. As hopeful scientists prepare their applications to QMUL, they should be aware that, behind the glossy advertising, a sometimes harsh, at times repressive, and disturbingly unforgiving culture awaits them.

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Prof Anne Glover is Chief Scientific Adviser to the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso (she was formerly Chief Scientific Adviser to Scotland). Prof Glover started her job earlier this year. Last week, as European leaders gathered in Brussels to discuss the fate of the Eurozone, she held a consultation in the same city about how to accelerate science into (European) policy. 30 scientists and policy makers met to discuss ideas about how best she could use her term of office to advance Europe’s health. There are no simple solutions, only critical lessons. One lesson is that communication between policy makers and scientists needs to be radically upgraded. One of Europe’s strengths is its convening power. If European leaders used their influence to bring the continent’s best scientists together to address pressing problems, Europe might more rapidly make progress in unleashing the huge scientific potential that lies within its borders. Another lesson is that Europe’s leaders need to talk more about science. They ought to recognise that science can lay foundations for the elusive growth they so urgently seek. If Europe’s first Chief Scientific Adviser could embed science more strongly in the minds and actions of her political mentors, her achievement would be immense. She needs our assistance.

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