

How to balance an academic life and be successful

A personal perspective and hopefully some useful tips!

Professor Liz Jones
September 2010

The problems of an academic life

- Research-
 - Leads to promotion in the main
 - Important for RAE or subsequent metrics, REF
- Teaching
 - Brings in the UG or PG intakes, which underpins departmental finances
 - Important for teaching quality metrics
- Administration
 - Increasingly important in an ever 'open' and litigious world

RTA- an accident waiting to happen!

- Each element gives a pressure point
- Often the pressure points are driven by different deadlines which leads to conflicts
- The key is to prioritise...

.....But which first when they are all required by yesterday.....

Research

- Scientists
 - Write grants to get in money to do the research
 - Write papers to support the grant applications
 - Manage the research team so that you get the best out of them
 - Disseminate results both in the UK and abroad via seminars and invited papers
 - Get involved in policy making

A lot to do, so make sure you have a mentor who you can communicate with and who can help to advise you

Teaching

- Lectures preparation and delivery- a public humiliation if they are poorly prepared!
- Practical classes- often a week long, everything else is dropped
- Tutorials- an academic exercise, but can carry a considerable element of pastoral care
- Seminar assessments- time consuming in both preparation and assessment
- Examination marking- with increasing class sizes becomes an increasing burden in summer months

Administration

- Attention to student records
- Involvement with Departmental management issues
- Involvement with University management issues
- Outside commitments- a major one for me!
 - Research Council Committees
 - RAE committee
 - Refereeing of grant applications and papers
 - External examining
 - Involvement in professional scientific bodies

The central importance of your mentor

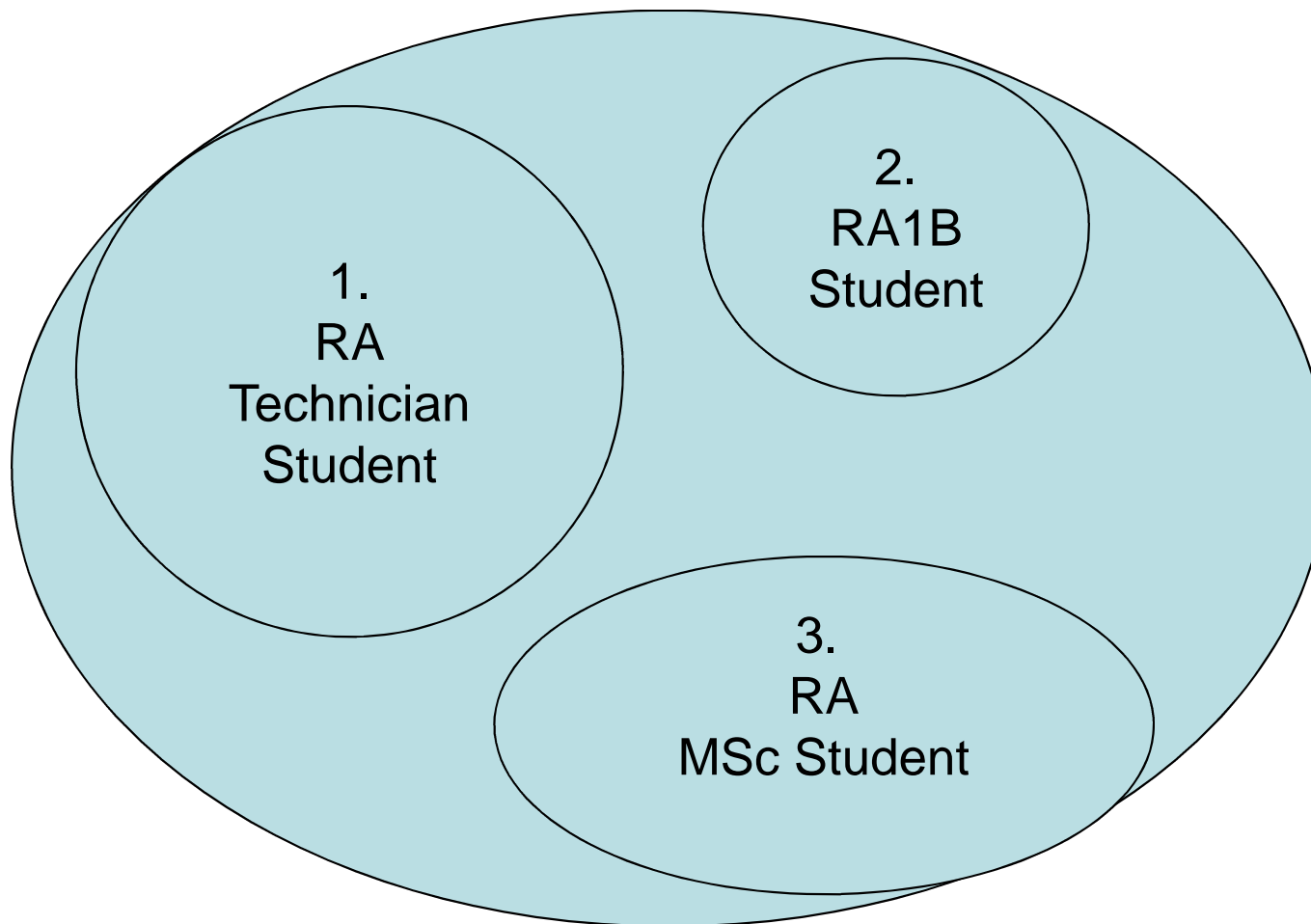
- Should tell what is never written down
- Will help you focus
- Will advise you how to fill gaps in your CV
- Should be able to critique grant applications
- May be able to advise on other matters-group management?

Your ability to communicate with your mentor could be critical

- Research.....
 - What are the problems of managing a research team?
- Teaching ✓
- Administration ✓
-and family pressures.....

What is the research Group?

- Not a homogeneous group- all with different management requirements



- Different projects
- Different personnel
- Different expertise
- Different social skills
- Dynamic

In fact, the group leader is on to a loser!

Does this make running an internationally successful group impossible?

- No, but it makes it difficult
- Experience helps, but each scenario is different
- There often is no 'right way' to deal with things
- There are always conflicting calls on your time

But...the job can be very rewarding!

.... a few illustrations of what can face you....

Scenario-1

- You have hired a postdoctoral researcher, from a choice of 2 candidates, who does not work very hard and who is pretty useless at the research that they are hired to do- it is still in the first 6 months of the project

What do you do?

Solutions?- maybe or maybe not

- You have a responsibility to the people who work with you (try individual meetings, technical training, use examples of successful individuals as role models, group meetings)
- Try and establish whether there is anything wrong out of the work environment which is causing the problem
- Remain interested in the project even if it is not going well

If the problem persists....

- Fill in probation forms honestly, you may need them later
- Be honest about the individuals' ability to fulfil the project since ultimately you have to justify the expenditure to the grant sponsor
- Recognise that you can actually solve the problem, but you will need professional help from personnel or from other individuals in the department
- Document your meetings to provide an evidence base

What could you have done to avoid the situation in the first place?

- Use experienced people with you on the initial interview panel
- When you have only 1 or a few grants they have to work for you
- If you have any doubts at all at interview do not proceed to appoint- it is better to re-advertise

Scenario 2

- You have a senior postdoctoral worker who is extremely valuable to your research effort, but they cannot get on with an overseas MSc student. You suspect that there is a racial element to the problem

What do you do?

Solution?

- Monitor the situation very closely
- Try to talk to the post-doc about the way they handle the student- this can be done in a staff development manner
- If this does not resolve the problem, remove the conflict by handling the student directly in all situations

The outcome in this case was an MSc student with a distinction, but it was very hard work!

How to avoid this situation?

- Difficult as often not predicted
- Perhaps have regular lab meetings early on which might indicate strained dynamics in members of the team
- Recognise that this is not always a problem and that international students often bring great colour and expertise to your group
- Act early, and don't put your head in the sand

Scenario 3

- Two post-docs are on separate projects one of which is perceived to be more successful than another- this leads to jealousy between the post-docs and subsequent rivalry.

What do you do?

Solution ?

- You need to get members of a group to pull together
- This can be helped by awareness of the other projects through group meetings
- You can, through these meetings emphasize the team element and perhaps get people together by co-authorship. This depends on the relationships of the projects to one another
- This can be turned to the groups' advantage by injecting an element of competition, but this needs to be handled carefully

Scenario 4

- You have a PhD student who is not as good as you thought they would be. It is well into the second year and the student is starting to operate a 10-4.30 day and becoming demotivated.

What do you do?

Solution??

- Always a difficult one- but quite common
- You have a responsibility to help the student, but they must help too
- Redefine the project so that it has some distinct elements that are fully achievable within the remaining time
- The satisfaction of achieving often helps to re-motivate the student
- Have regular meetings (recorded) with the student and work towards and with a thesis outline- knock off the experiments/achieve realistic goals. Set the meeting times at the beginnings and ends of the day
- Potentially set a mock viva well in advance of the actual one to illustrate the level of knowledge/ defence required

How to get your research group to work

- Hire the right person!
- Communicate with all of the members of your group- it is one of the keys to success
- Show by example how you wish your group to work, but recognise they might not be as motivated as you
- Be open, honest, sympathetic but realistic
- Get excited/give praise/celebrate the high points
- Be clear about the group strategies and goals
- Give support when it is within your area of knowledge

If it all goes pear-shaped...

- Avoid getting too socially involved with your team
- If you are out of your depth seek advice from colleagues or other professionals, you are an amateur in personnel matters
- If you have made a bad appointment, recognise it and act early
- Remember that running a group can be fun, but you will always have to work at it

The world of metrics

How to deal with both REF and your individual University

- Understand what metrics are being used to assess performance
 - Research
 - Grant funding (grant income per annum)
 - Papers published, citations, impact factor (total citations per annum, individual papers with greater than X citations per annum)
 - Graduate student training (how many, completion within the 4 year period, contribution to taught graduate courses)

- Understand what metrics are being used to assess performance

- Teaching

- Student assessments
- External awards of excellence
- Internal certificates of teaching
- Undergraduate and graduate teaching portfolio
- External examiner

- Understand what metrics are being used to assess performance
 - Administration/esteem
 - Departmental committees
 - University committees
 - External committees
 - External seminars to other departments in the UK
 - Conference invitations/plenary talks
 - PhD examinations

How to be successful in academia

- Focus on gaining an international research portfolio with maximum grant income (use colleagues with grant panel experience, RSS and Business Development as appropriate to help)
- Publish in the highest profile journals (Use colleagues to read manuscripts)- be ambitious
- Collaborate both within and outside of the University to widen your research impact- network
- Teach well, but recognise that your future is likely to be rosier through a high research profile
- Get involved in external activities (Committees, Advisory boards etc) which raise your esteem values

The essentials

- Focus on the important elements of the job
- Hope that your parents gave you good genes
- Find a good partner to support you!

Above all enjoy...

.....and GOOD LUCK!