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Student Strike

by Lesley Dawson

“The physio students have gone on strike!” greeted me as I walked through the main gate of the university. I was head of the new occupational therapy (OT) course, but my students took classes with the physio students. My heart sank as I thought of all the difficulties we had already faced and how they would now increase

My students swirled around me uttering frightened cries and complaints, all trying to get my attention at the same time. The physio students stood on the other side of the courtyard, arms crossed, scowling and making threats. What had happened? On Friday when we left for the weekend everyone had been friends and both groups of students had wished me a happy weekend.

Pushing my way through the press of students, from other faculties now as word had gone round about the strike, I made my way down the corridor to the office of my dean. Her secretary squeezed my hand sympathetically and quickly ushered me into her boss’s office. There I found my colleague who was heading up the physio course sipping Arabic coffee and looking complacent and triumphant. Eventually my mind cleared enough to realise that he had told the physio students that the standard of their course would go down and that they would not be recognized as professionals internationally if they took classes with the OT students.

This was a blatant lie, of course, but it was believed at the university by staff and students, consultation by gossip being a way of life in Palestine. This situation was the latest outcome of the Academic Vice President's decision to make Ahmed Acting Head of Physiotherapy. He did love "acting", it was so much more real to him than life.

"What are we going to do, Lesley?" Dr Jaqueline had not had to deal with a situation like this before. "The Academic Board supports you, but the Student Council want you to appear before them and answer these charges"

Fortunately, by this time, Bethlehem University was connected to the internet. I asked for twenty-four hours to consult with colleagues in other countries and spent the next twelve hours glued to a computer. I emailed Sarah who had been the external educational evaluator of a similar programme in Southampton; she confirmed that their graduates had been able to register on graduation with both the Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy Associations.

This was good but I did not think somehow that experience in the UK would be enough to sway things in my favour, so I contacted the World Confederation of Physiotherapy and the World Federation of Occupational Therapy who confirmed my findings. I was now armed with evidence to convince the Student Council and mad enough to take on all comers.

Six senior students invited me to their office, all men, of course, and started to grill me. I sat directly in front of them, determined not to be intimidated clutching my file of papers. As I presented my case, I gradually saw a change come over their faces and their department became less confrontational. At the end of the meeting one young man, majoring in English Literature, smiled, "I wish that my course leader was as caring of his students as you are. I think I might switch to physiotherapy." I smiled back with relief but prayed he wouldn't change majors.

The strike was over, thank goodness, I thought. Not quite, some of the more militant male physio students maintained that nothing had changed. The Vice Chancellor got involved at this point advising Ahmed to resign before he was brought before the Faculty Council, which would probably lead to dismissal.

Such a mess, all the result of appointing a man from Gaza to an "Acting" position. Possession is nine tenths of the law there.