**The Devil's flame-thrower**

A tradition of dissent and self-rule among heretics and rebels makes Cambridge successful, says Ross Anderson

The Devil's flame-thrower

For some people, it might have been just a bag of lizard shit, but to me it represented seven years of painstaking work searching the rainforest with a team of PhD students. We were keen to find the faeces of one of the world's largest, rarest and most mysterious lizards. I didn't realise just how much my bag of lizard shit meant to me until it was "accidentally incinerated" at the University of Leeds early in the third year of my PhD.

Whether it was the largest collection of lizard shit in the world, or uncertainty about its provenance, I didn't care. For his PhD, Daniel Bennett had built a unique set of faecal samples from a rare lizard. When it was destroyed, he really hit bottom.

My team and I studied the animals by searching the forest floor for their distinctive faeces and using clues from their shit to estimate dietary patterns, population size and structure and activity areas. After five years of shit-searching, I felt that I could collect enough reliable data about the lizards to earn a PhD. On the basis of my work, I was lucky enough to be awarded a scholarship by Leeds. By the beginning of the third year of my PhD, I knew more about lizard shit than I had ever thought possible. Returning to Leeds from fieldwork, I was surprised to find my desk space occupied by another student and to see that photographs of my daughter, my girlfriend and my favourite lizards had been removed from the wall.

The lab space where my samples had been stored was empty. Irritation turned to fear as I realised that my personal effects had been carefully stored in boxes, but there was no sign of my 35kg bag of lizard shit. Fear turned to anger and bewilderment when I learnt that my samples had been "accidentally" removed from the lab and incinerated.

The department's reaction to my plight was to say the least, muted. In fact, it took 16 months before I received an official response to my complaint, which offered me £500 compensation and announced that new proposals would be established to ensure that no other students suffered a similar mishap.

The loss of my PhD samples did not prevent me from finishing my degree. But the effects it had on my motivation and enthusiasm were profound. The samples represented the only primary evidence for my study and, as such, were the only way anybody could verify my findings.

They also had the potential to be used for a great deal of postdoctoral research. The apparent indifference of the department to the destruction of my collection compounded my feeling of despair. By the time I received its reply to my complaint, it was 10 weeks before the final deadline to submit my thesis – and I was 10 weeks away from finishing.

The day after that, my girlfriend of ten years left me. People are rarely at their happiest when writing a thesis, but I threw myself into waterproof keyboard to finish mine.

I drew a blank when I tried to find other examples of PhD students who had suffered similar experiences, although I asked many friends and counterparts in other universities. Most people react incredulously to my story. And no, I didn't accept the university's £500, and I still see them in court. Watch this space.

Daniel Bennett