

**“Thrown to the wolves’  
Philip’s failed PhD**

Dear Professor Wakeford

I have been looking at your website and related articles and I find PhD supervision and Viva experiences which mirror my own. Permit me to offer you a brief synopsis:

I submitted my PhD in September 2008 to the University of Barchester. This was a very difficult time in my life, I was homeless and unemployed, I was told by my supervisors (the fifth University supervisor since I began research part-time in 1999) that I had to submit my thesis by the end of 2008 or fail and there was no possibility of an extension even though in addition to what I was going through from 2006 onward was incredibly stressful. In addition to that I am dyslexic - and when I mentioned this to my first supervisor he responded 'I hear this all the time and it is just a poor excuse for sloppy writing'. In 2000 and 2003 I also underwent relatively major eye surgery.

The fear of PhD failure combined with the anxiety of not having a job and the added complications of not having somewhere to live (all my books and papers had to go into storage) was not conducive to writing up a research thesis. Because of my dyslexia and eye problems I asked my supervisors to pay particular attention to grammar and spelling and the university 'style' of writing. I also had others to read my thesis.

I was assured by my supervisors that my thesis was ready to submit and I did so at the start of September 2008 because it was either that or fail. In retrospect when I look over the draft submissions which they returned to me in the year prior to submission their comments and corrections are detailed for the first twenty pages and disappear altogether after the first fifty pages.

The Viva was a nightmare. The external examiner was a Professor who had retired from the department the previous term. She was not examining in an area of interest or expertise. That said she more gracious than the internal examiner who never let me finish an answer to his questions, or those of his colleague for that matter. I was really quite intimidated by his ranting and shouting. The Viva lasted two hours in a room with fluorescent lighting despite the fact that I had specifically telephoned the department in advance to request a room that did not have fluorescent lighting because of my eye problems.

I was told that I would not be awarded the PhD but I could resubmit with major changes for the MPhil. I was wholly unprepared for the Viva experience.

I stayed overnight in Barchester with a friend who had successfully completed his PhD under the same supervisors - we began our research on the same day - and the penny dropped when I phoned my supervisor to tell him the outcome (I heard nothing that evening from the departmental supervisor). Both supervisors were totally uninterested and I realised that I had been thrown to the wolves. My friend informed me how during his final year he had a weekly turnaround in material he submitted and was even given a mock viva by our departmental supervisor. The turnaround for work submitted by me in the last year was about a month on average.

I telephone the departmental supervisor next day to discuss what happens next - at no stage did he ever contact me - and he made some vague comments about supporting me in the rewrite for the MPhil. The response from my supervisors to the examiners' report was 3/4 of an A4 page.

I went through the University appeal process - the departmental appeal was conducted by the Head of the Department who was also the internal examiner and they would not allow a case review stating that I did not present a *prima facie* case. I ran out of time and could not take the case to the Ombudsman (OIA). I felt I had no alternative but to let the matter go.

In the Autumn of 2009 I went back to my local University for a year to do a Masters. I did so because, academically speaking, I needed to 'get back on the horse' and I needed to 'fill the whole' in my CV and cover some of my academic nakedness.

Some months ago I heard from another friend living in Barchester who had started on the same day as me with the same supervisors and I discovered that his experience was very different to my own, it mirrored that of my other Barchester-based friend. What startled me was the discovery that he did not submit his thesis until thirteen months after mine. If I ran out of time and had to submit at the end of 2008 with no possibility of an extension, albeit my personal circumstances would have justified one, how is it that he did not? I went back through the university complaints procedure and got the response that I had made my case, it had not been upheld and therefore they could not hear any additional information or complaint. I argued that new evidence came to light that supported my claim that I did not have equality of opportunity as a researcher with at least two colleagues. I then wrote to the Vice Chancellor as the senior officer of the university, and he forwarded my email to the person I had already been dismissed by. I wrote again to the Vice Chancellor and said I believe that this was a rights issue and a justice issue, which the university needed to address.

The response was that the University had already fully considered the matter and reserved the right not to reply to any further communications on this matter.

Having made many sacrifices and battled many obstacles to complete the PhD I feel very hurt that the university should cover up the inadequacies of my supervision and abandon me, indeed treat me with such contempt. A PhD would have opened a number of doors which, professionally, will remain closed to me. I do not have the financial resources to undertake another PhD and I also find that having failed a PhD other universities really don't want to know when I apply for another research degree funded or otherwise.

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The attached documents as promised chronicle something of my appeal. As I read through them again, in particular the early one, I realise just how naive I was. I really did expect that the university would hold its hand up and say sorry old chap let's sort the thing out. How wrong I was!

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I am also planning to send off a Freedom of Information request to Barchester University to find out about success/failure rates in the department, previous appeals and complaints, the policy of the university in relation to former staff acting as external examiners. I also plan to request any and every document, memo, emails in relation to my appeal.

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When my PhD was failed I did ask my supervisors if they would fight my corner in terms of being allowed to re-submit for the PhD or as a compromise an alternative doctorate which Barchester was offering at that stage. No support was forthcoming. .... I have been reluctant to pursue the MPhil because the degree has been somewhat debased ... Then again there is the problem that Barchester University has stopped communicating with me!

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I never thought to obtain a doctor's letter although I can raise the matter with my GP. There were all sorts of factors which left me stressed and exhausted .... I do remember the period after the viva as frenetically busy and intensely lonely as I tried to understand what had happened and why it had happened and if I really was capable of research at this level.

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In answer to your question about the time lapse. It was due to mental, physical and emotional exhaustion, when the complaint was turned down and a case review refused I lost heart. ..

I did not pursue the MPhil option primarily because I had lost confidence in my own ability as a research student after the viva. I also lost confidence in my supervisors to see me through whatever was required prior to resubmission (one supervisor said the

changes could be made in a week and the other suggested that a substantial rewrite was required).

.... certainly negotiating a solution is the way that I would want to go - I have great affection for Barchester University and I'm not seeking my pound of flesh ... I called one law firm and spoke to someone who was helpful. The fees are, as I thought, prohibitive in my current long term unemployed state - primarily because my desired outcome is not financial compensation be re-admission and completion of the PhD. I really don't want to explore or entertain the thought of financial compensation - I feel appalled at the thought that any appeal I instigate might be taking money out of the university pot which may well have a knock-on affect upon other students - I simply want the PhD I worked for.

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Is it possible to submit a rewritten thesis such as mine to another university? I would not like the past decade and more to count for nothing and I believe, had things been dealt with in a fair manner then I would have my PhD by now. I have made a lot of sacrifices to do the research and to take forward the appeal... I am sending off something like five job applications a day but I fear I am out of full-time employment too long to be taken seriously by employers and without a PhD any prospect of an academic job is dead in the water. ... I fear Barchester have done me a great disservice!

I would like to get on with another PhD but maybe the timing isn't right. I did look at the possibility of publishing mine in some shape or form but publishers who might have taken risks with academic monographs a few years ago are more reluctant to do so now.

I fear I am left without any form of closure or redress.

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Team task 1:

How would you respond to this email?

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Points arising from subsequent correspondence:

1. Is it legitimate to use a former member of staff as an external examiner? Is this covered in your university regulations?
2. Is it legitimate for the appeal to be carried out by one of the examiners?
3. Equality of opportunity. If a candidate has evidence of discrimination, can they demonstrate that the University had been informed about dyslexia, eye operation and the problem with fluorescent lighting?
4. Are the same people still in post and in power in the Department?
5. Is there any potential internal 'champion' who could help broker a solution?
6. Students can request information about the information held on them under the Data Protection Act (rather than FOI).
7. Is it really too late to take this case to the OIA? (OIA now publishes annual letters to each university summarizing number of cases and outcomes):  
<http://www.oiahe.org.uk/decisions-and-publications/annual-letters.aspx>
8. What opportunities could there be for negotiating a solution? Mediation rather than settlement? Help is available from [www.idras.ac.uk](http://www.idras.ac.uk).
9. Is there any source of funds for getting professional legal advice?

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Team task 2:

What are the lessons here for

1. PhD candidates
  2. Supervisors, and
  3. Institutions?
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