

## The Quentin difficulty

You've just been appointed to a professorship in a leading provincial university: congratulations. Unfortunately, your new department has also just made you Graduate Director. And in this capacity you've already received a formal letter from Jane, a Ph.D. student in her fifth year, who is due to complete but who wants you to tell her how to make a formal complaint about a senior colleague.

The problem is that she began as a student of Quentin, the department's research star, who recruits large numbers of graduate students but has a somewhat old-style approach which, under the department's regime of single supervisors (which the University still permits), has occasionally caused difficulties in the past. In particular Quentin lives some distance away in London, undertakes only the duties he likes, and clearly has his own postgraduate favourites (amongst whom Jane was evidently not numbered).

When she expressed dissatisfaction with his hands-off style in her second year and asked to change supervisors, the department re-assigned her to Henry, a younger and less eccentric colleague. At the same time it also stipulated that, because her work lay in one of Quentin's unique specialisms, he should remain her supervisor on a 5% basis, ostensibly so that she would continue to benefit from being associated with such a prominent figure in her field and perhaps in future be able to draw upon his expertise.

The trouble is that, while the relationship with Henry has been perfectly satisfactory and Jane appreciates his efforts to provide her with professional support, Quentin has actually done nothing at all for her since their rupture. Although she has spoken at a couple of conferences where he was present, he pointedly offered no comments to her (while other scholars in her audiences have been very gracious and encouraging about her developing ideas). Indeed, there has been every reason for the department to think that her work is of good quality: in particular, she has been interviewed annually by two others members of staff for the University's progress review system and

has always been able to satisfy them with her written submissions and interview performance that she is progressing more than adequately.

Unfortunately, the University also requires that supervisors, sole or joint, must formally certify that a student's dissertation has fulfilled all of the institution's regulations before it can be submitted: in effect, this mechanism means that Quentin as well as Henry has to sign off on Jane's work before she can hand it in. Henry did so four months ago but, despite her repeated emails, sending him thesis drafts, asking for his comments and requesting the signing of the relevant documentation, Quentin has not responded. The delay means she has already had to apply to the University for a later submission date at a time when she is actively applying for lectureships and urgently needs her doctorate to come to a natural conclusion.

Henry has told Jane that the cause of Quentin's silence could be illness but she has web-searched and found that he appears remarkably unimpaired in his many other well-publicised activities. Frankly, it now looks as though he might have decided to use the submission mechanism to exact revenge. But she is angry and determined to fight. What do you do?

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### Team tasks

Decide what you would do in this case, then list the lessons here for

1. Postgraduate research students
2. Supervisors, and
3. Institutions

## Epilogue

A Quentin update from yesterday: Finally responding to intervention by his Head of Department who is understandably attempting to forestall an official complaint from Jane by belatedly having him do something useful for her, he has now read her dissertation. But the result is that he has sent her a hefty list of fundamental criticisms that it would take a great deal of re-writing for her to accommodate and would clearly delay submission by several months. Jane, unsurprisingly, is still champing at the bit to complain.....