

Geraint's opportunity

I completed my BA and MA in History with excellent results; I received several Departmental awards for receiving the highest marks for my BA and MA dissertations. For all my dissertations and my thesis I had the same supervisors, I was told I could not change or ask for a new supervisor. For both my BA and MA, the supervisor told me in the last few weeks before the deadline that it needed to be entirely rewritten. Fortunately, I did not have time to make the recommendations and I was pleased to find I had passed spectacularly. This undermined my confidence that my supervisor knew what he was talking about.

On the strength of this remarkable success, I received a full Arts and Humanities Research Council award for my future PhD research. The conditions were, however, that I would keep with the same supervisor and with a topic that he had largely outlined himself. I tried changing or decreasing the topic size but was prevented by my supervisor.

I had heard that other PhD students in other universities had complained about a total lack of contact or interest from my supervisors. I could not fault my supervisor; my supervisor met me once a week and was continuously revising my drafts with hundreds of comments. I felt I could challenge these comments because my supervisor had more experience and expertise than me, but it was very stressing to have my work controlled and altered so much in this way.

From 2005 onwards I became increasingly concerned that my topic was far too large. I repeatedly raised this issue with my supervisors and my Head of Department but they reassured time and again that it was a perfectly manageable project. Yet my PhD examiners pointed out that the topic was far too large and I was effectively writing 3 theses not one. Despite these fears of mine, my supervisors wanted to add two more chapters - which I refused.

I became ill for a year and half 2006-2007 with a serious virus, though my supervisors did think that it was due to stress. When I returned in late 2007 I found that my main supervisor had stopped supervision and the secondary supervisor had become my main supervisor. He agreed that the topic was far too large and had caused me a great deal of stress. But after a year the supervisors swapped roles again. So by 2008 the thesis had returned to its original enormous size.

I continued to raise the issue and problems of this too-large thesis but my supervisors made me feel obliged to listen to them because they had the experience and expertise. I was particularly concerned when archive staff were surprised that I needed so much information and this alerted me again and again that my thesis was far too large and unmanageable.

I then compared my thesis to other theses and pointed out to my supervisors and Head of Department the differences, but I was told again that my project was comparable and perfectly manageable as anyone else's.

I even asked for another supervisor but was told that due to 'university politics' it would seem very strange for me to have a new supervisor, and in any case, there

was no one with a similar amount of expertise and experience.

At no point was I made aware, either at the start of my PhD or before the viva, that the supervisors' advice had no influence on the examiners and could not be taken into consideration.

At a particularly abrasive meeting in February 2011, I brought up all these issues and was accused that I had not done the work they had asked, despite the fact that it was far too large. I felt deeply humiliated.

The examination result

I continued working on drafts and I sent these to my supervisors by email and they returned them with comments. I then altered my final draft and submitted in November 2011.

After the viva the Examiners reported that my thesis was far too large; I was writing the equivalent of 3 theses. As a result, my thesis lacked any depth. They told me I had not passed and would not award me a PhD but offered the opportunity to resubmit in two years.

The Examiners said that my thesis felt as if I had put too much into it, and that it was also half-finished because I had been unable to do everything I had been told to do.

The Examiners also raised the issue that the whole structure of my thesis was wrong and unworkable, even though I had followed a dissertation plan worked out with my supervisors, and which they refused to alter.

I feel in the end to be in a Catch-22 situation. If I follow my supervisors' advice again then I would be doing far too much work – which I had found out from my Examiners that it was entirely the wrong advice; or if I stick out independently now I open myself to the accusation that if I fail again then it will be because I have not worked with and listened to my supervisors. And I am just wondering if there is any point spending 2 years of problems with my supervisors (they still refuse to give me a new supervisor) and still being in the position I am in now. I can't understand how they expect me to have the money and time to carry on as I have already spent 5 years doing this.

John: what is your advice?

Team task:

- 1. How would you have responded to Geraint?**
- 2. List the main lessons here for**
 - a. Postgraduate research students**
 - b. Supervisors**
 - c. Institutions**