

Yuriko

I failed my PhD because I am a mother?

I December 2007

Dear John Wakeford,

I am writing this email as I desperately need some advice from someone who really knows about PhD itself and also appeal procedure.

I had completed the thesis after 2.5 years (full time) and 2.5 years (part time) and one suspension between.

I had my viva in October and failed PhD and awarded Mphil.

I was told by my supervisor just after the Viva that the examiners thought that to ask me to change the thesis would be too much punishment considering my personal circumstances(meaning a mother with two young children) therefore they did not give me a chance to correct it. What is more, during the viva I was called 'unemployed', referring to me being the full time carer for my two children, by the internal examiner.

They were ridiculing me while I was defending the thesis. The Internal examiner snorted twice. He also said to me that I may feel sad right now but it would be better for me in the long run just after giving me the result. After the viva through conversation with my supervisor, I found out that the internal examiner called him before the viva asking about my personal circumstances in detail. The external commented that the work feels dated as there are now new corn starch based polyester developments (my study is about synthetic polyester). This is irrelevant to my study, and even if this was not the case I could easily add a section about this in the thesis.

Some of my academic colleagues told me that the wrong examiners had been chosen. I was too preoccupied finishing the thesis and did not expect at all to end up in this situation. I was preparing for my viva and all of the people who went through the viva experience told me that the examiners do read the thesis carefully and they asked questions page by page. This wasn't the case for me, there are several indications that they did not read the thesis with great care.

I had a meeting with the graduate school office this week as I was told by the university's secretary office to give them a chance to solve the problem.

However, they basically told me that I had to move on, forget about it and walk away with nothing or redo the PhD in a different subject and spend another 5 years as re-examination cannot be taken on a similar study.

They admitted the irregularities in the conduct of the exam, especially the examiners' preoccupation with my personal circumstances and the duration of my study.

The graduate office also told me that if I take the appeal further up, it will take at least 6 months to hear back from them. This means that I will lose all grounds to take them to court on charges of discrimination.

I was strongly hoping that the graduate school office could solve the issue but as this is not the case I will have to seek other advice. I just wanted to have my years of work assessed without bias. I had been looking forward to fruitful discussions during the viva but unfortunately this did not happen.

I am currently seeking an educational lawyer who is willing to represent my case. Educational specialists are few and far between but we are getting there.

Do you know anybody?

We talked to a few solicitors with specialisms in different areas but who advised that we have a strong and clear cut case.

I would be grateful if you could give any suggestions or advice.

Thank you very much.

Best Regards,

Yuriko

Q. Discuss how you would respond

2 May 2008

Dear John,

I finally have good news!

I was told by the university's secretary office that I can revise and resubmit the thesis within 12 months and the graduate school office will appoint new examiners. I asked for the thesis to be examined as it was at the time of its original submission but the panel mentioned to me already at the meeting that would be difficult.

After contacting you by email, I decided to look for a lawyer which was really difficult. The law firms in this city did not want to deal with a case against the University as the University was their client. After many rejections from law firms I really did not want to continue; however, with my husband's great support, he finally managed to find a lawyer outside of the county. He was very sympathetic and gave us the right advice.

My informal appeal was rejected by the Graduate School Office and at that point I contacted you. Then my formal appeal was submitted in January. Rejected again in March. The university secretary's office called an Academic Board of Enquiry and I had a meeting with them on 27th March. I was not accompanied by my solicitor as he thought his presence may influence what the panel may say at the meeting and might intimidate the panel. I was informed of the outcome of the panel meeting on 12th April and the outcome was confirmed by the graduate school office on 21st April.

It took me 6 months and I now understand why the Graduate School Office mentioned that it would be a long process. I went to see my supervisor a couple days ago and discussed revising the thesis and perhaps collecting new sets of data in order to update the thesis. Now I am facing my thesis and cannot help thinking 'why do I have to do this again? Why do I have to work an extra year because the examiners did not carry out the examination as it was advertised?' I know by the time I will have new viva, my thesis will be 2 years old and even if I had a viva now it would be with a 1 year old thesis. The University told me that the new examiners will not be informed about the previous 'procedural errors'. Therefore I need to include up-to date information and possibly a new set of data collection. I kept asking the university how this decision will benefit me; however, they just repeat what they have said previously.

I would be grateful if you could let me know if this is normal procedure or not. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you John.

Best regards

Yuriko

Q1. Discuss the situation that has arisen

Q2. What do you think Yuriko should do?

3 September 2008

Dear John Wakeford,

Thank you very much for asking me how things are. At the moment I am re-working my PhD study.

I did not get any satisfying answers from the University whether not telling the examiners of previous procedural errors will benefit me or not.

However, my supervisor told me that in the next round we should not leave any opportunity for the examiners to question the datedness of the study. I have managed to get in touch with my external supervisor, an expert in the area of study who I lost contact with during the suspension period. After reading my thesis she told me that she could help and it is feasible to submit within the time frame, however 'new sets of data are needed.' She is coming to see me and my supervisor in 2 weeks time so that I can get detailed feedback from her.

It is a little frustrating as I will have to repeat things which I have already done. Re-contacting my old supervisor and getting things moving seems to take longer than I expected. I guess that's life, isn't it?

I shall see this year as an opportunity to enjoy further work in my favourite subject.

Thank you very much John. I am grateful for your support.

Yuriko

Q. Any further comments at this stage?

4 July 2009

Dear John Wakeford,

It has been a long time since I last contacted you.

I had my viva last week and this time it went really well. I need to do some changes and I can see where the examiners are coming from.

This time around, I realised how wrong the last viva was. Last time, the examiners did not even look at the case studies part which they dismissed as too small a number and therefore not good enough. This time, the examiners told me that I had a very large number of case studies and one or two cases would have been sufficient.

This time, they were fair and their criticisms were constructive and well argued so that I could totally agree and see the benefit of these changes to my work.

After all, it all turned out good. But I can not help thinking about how many cases like mine there are happening? I had warm encouragement and support from you, family and friends but it was not at all easy as I had to redo all of my data collection and rewrite almost everything in 7 months, just because there are people who do not know what they are doing. My university told me that since what happened to my last viva, they have changed the regulations so that there will always be an independent chair in the viva.

Well, I just wanted to let you know my outcome and thank you very much for your support.

Best regards,

Yuriko

Team task

What are the lessons here for

- 1. Postgraduate students**
 - 2. Supervisors, and**
 - 3. Institutions?**
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