

## **Marian's – or the university's – PhD failure?**

Hello,

I searched the Internet for information regarding the conditions for Doctoral studies in the UK after I underwent a highly negative experience as a pg researcher a couple of years ago. Your contact details were mentioned in a 2002 Guardian article on failing PhD degrees. I'd like to describe what happened to me. Actually, it's amazing to me that I am able to write the words.

When invited down for an 'interview' after submitting PhD work that was admittedly shoddy & did not pass (and which I knew was inadequate - I wanted to end matters for myself - you might say I was too terrified to do otherwise), I was asked to write a letter to the Department describing what had gone wrong with my supervision "to help the Department". What about help for me? I had been prescribed anti-depressants and after numerous visits to the Doctor and an unhelpful counselling session with one of the University Counsellors, I found myself a job as an escape route and left the University in a state consisting of anxiety, depression and despair. The years I spent as a fully funded Doctoral student in the Arts at the University concerned were quite the worst I have experienced thus far and the emotional consequences have been on-going, affecting my entire existence. It was a time when, although an adult in my twenties, I had my powers of decision making taken away from me as a result of the supervisor concerned bullying me and intimidating me in all sorts of insidious ways (mostly verbal). It was after I saw my *third* counsellor that I was able to rationalise what had happened and let go of the terrible feelings of guilt and responsibility that were ruling my life. It seems so odd and unnecessary to me now to have been victimised so thoroughly and to have been unable to cope with it when all I wanted to do was to pursue research in an area where I could profess a great deal of interest, some publications, sufficient success to net me a pg award and a keenness to work through new ideas. When I left the University I could not speak or write for a while and I still have severe trouble asserting myself professionally, which has also had consequences for my way of life. A few years ago I had the graduate job, the excellent degree and a confident outlook on life. Now, I have to start again without any confidence at all, and a chronic cynicism, particularly towards people in education.

I have been advised by many people, including academics who are family friends (some of whom wanted to approach the University on my behalf voluntarily), that I should contact the University and challenge them regarding their neglect. However, given that Universities are feudal institutions, I don't see any point: all I would achieve would be more stress for myself - the University would protect itself. Moreover, the Supervisor concerned was very influential in the small University world at the highest administrative levels and the current Head of Department was taught by him. At the time, just before I

left, I tried in vain to communicate some of my concerns to the H of D and the Head of the Postgraduate school. No luck. I could have at least tried for a lesser degree, or taken a leave of absence, or had a secondary supervisor to alleviate some of the problems I was having, stemming from a series of vain attempts to communicate effectively and proactively with my supervisor. All of these routes are described in the Postgraduate Handbook. None of them were seemingly possible for me.

As a very eminent Professor said to me (he is an old family friend & therefore trustworthy) when he talked to me about what happened, Universities used to work on a system of attrition, whereby students who did not make it were necessary ballast to ensure the *supposed* success of the *presumed* elite (my additions in italics) but these days, the approach is to try to minimise the possibility of failure. For example, some students could be given extra revision time. He also said to me that studying for a PhD is a highly personal experience that, if it goes wrong, can be very difficult to come to terms with. Having been through the experience myself, I agree wholeheartedly with this statement. Three years of my life are missing, which seems like a lot when you're in your twenties. I haven't heard any more from the supervisor concerned or from the Department, and yet, unlike undergraduates, postgraduates have much more contact with them. But then, I am merely a statistic, aren't I? And, after all, if you cannot get through the 'rite of passage' then you don't exist. I've worked in business as a researcher and a manager and in education (of various sorts) and I have never encountered such unprofessional attitudes as I have in academia (where lecturers have to deal with many people every day). Moreover, considerable amounts of public grant money were expended on my education to no result. Why did I not leave sooner?? I still don't know the answer to that one.

I don't think I'll ever get over what happened to me.

### **Team task**

**On the acetates provided list the main lessons in Marian's email for**

- 1. Postgraduate student advisors**
- 2. Supervisors**
- 3. Departments, schools, faculties, universities**