

## **Sukhvir's complaint**

### **Summary**

The purpose of this document is to provide an account of S's experiences while working full-time towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Division of Applied Computing at the University. Some of the events documented can be supported by email evidence, while other events occurred in the presence of witnesses.

The key dates are as follows:

- 1st October 1998 – start date.
- 30th September 2001 – end of initial three-year period and end of EPSRC maintenance grant.
- 30th September 2002 – thesis required to be submitted.
- 25th November 2002 – viva voce examination.
- 28th November 2003 – revised thesis required to be submitted.

The main issues are:

- S was not given the supervision and guidance he was entitled to, as his two supervisors, Dr A and Dr R, were unavailable through large periods of his PhD.
- The first submission was made with very little input and guidance from S's supervisors. As a result, the thesis was not of the required standard for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.
- The second submission was also made under similar circumstances with very little input and guidance from S's supervisors.
- The Postgraduate Thesis Monitoring Committee System, as detailed in Appendix 8 of the Code of Practice for Supervised Postgraduate Research, failed to identify and address the problem.
- The Division failed to acknowledge and address the situation.
- S was not made aware of or given the option of changing supervisor, as referred to in Section 5.12 of the Code of Practice for Supervised Postgraduate Research.
- EPSRC, the funding council that sponsored S, would not be happy to hear that S wasn't given the guidance and support he was entitled to, to successfully complete his PhD, especially with the amount of money involved.
- As a PhD student S did everything that was asked. He is not in any debt to the University. All tuition fees, matriculation fees and resubmission fee have been paid. The first submission was made on time. The extra work as detailed in the examiners' report was carried out and the second submission made.

- The second submission was made on Monday 22nd December 2003. At the time of writing, a viva has still to be arranged. This delay is unacceptable as another PhD student within the Division submitted his thesis over a month after S, had his viva arranged before S and is now all 'done and dusted'. If Dr A and Dr N could go to the effort to arrange that then why could a viva for S not be arranged?
- These issues raise the question of preferential treatment given to others in the Division and prejudice being shown towards S, which are unacceptable from an equal opportunities perspective, as detailed in Section 5.1, paragraph (i) of the Equal Opportunities Policy.

The Division's failure to provide adequate guidance and support, as detailed in Section 5.5, paragraphs (a), (c), (f) and (g) of the Code of Practice for Supervised Postgraduate Research, has:

- Caused S unnecessary stress, which has damaged his self-confidence, self-belief, and general health and wellbeing.
- Left S in considerable financial difficulty.
- Jeopardised S's career.

What outcomes are sought?

- Not to get caught up with minor details but to look at the bigger picture of inadequate supervision.
- An acknowledgement from the Division.
- A formal written apology.
- The assurance that no one else will go through what S went through.

What outcomes are NOT sought?

- To get into a 'tit-for-tat playground fight'.

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Footnote: EO Policy para 5.1

**.1 Aim**

(i) The University aims to provide education of excellent quality at undergraduate and postgraduate level for a diverse range of students, whatever their background. In pursuit of this aim, the University is committed to using its best endeavours to ensure that all of its activities are governed by principles of equality of opportunity; and that all students are helped to achieve their full academic potential. The University upholds the right of each member of the University community to be treated with dignity and respect.

## Epilogue

Email 8 August 2005:

Dear John,

Please accept my sincere apologies for not getting back to you sooner. If you remember when we last spoke (last October I think) my appeal had been successful and my thesis was to be re-examined by a completely new examining committee. Everything has finally been resolved to a semi-successful conclusion and I would now be happy for you to use my experience anonymously, as we initially agreed.

The viva took place in January and, although I didn't have any say in the choice of new examiners, I was pleasantly surprised. The external would have been my first choice examiner, the internal perhaps only my second choice - he has a reputation for going for the jugular depending on his mood - and the chairperson was someone who I trusted and was confident would handle the re-examination fairly and professionally.

The viva lasted all day and was tough going. But I was happy that it was a fair and thorough examination and I was given a chance to defend my thesis. It was also frustrating for me as it was the same thesis from December 2003 that was being re-examined in January 2005 and, in the field of computer-mediated communication, things had moved on, as the external pointed out on several occasions. In the end, the external was not sufficiently convinced the work merited a PhD but the outcome was still far better than the previous outcome. If you remember the first time around, after resubmitting I was told the examiners could not award the PhD and that I would have to do more work for an MSc. This time I was offered an MPhil for the thesis as it was, or another 12 months to do additional experimentation and to resubmit for a PhD.

As you can imagine, by now I was tired of it all and, financially and emotionally, felt I could not continue. It took me a few weeks to weigh up the pros and cons and make my decision. Without looking at things such as poor supervision, the bottom line was that two external examiners were not sufficiently convinced the work merited a PhD. And so, in the end, I opted for the MPhil as I felt it was more important for me to get out into industry and get some experience under my belt. In terms of my career goals a Masters would be more than enough and I was happy with an MPhil considering all the hoops I had to jump through to get that far. If I did spend another 12 months on the PhD there was still no guarantee I would get it and I would be struggling along with the same standard of supervision.

Interestingly, although I'm trying not to analyse things too much now and to just forget about it, the two external examiners did manage to contradict each other on several issues, which I found quite amusing but couldn't say anything in the viva. For example, the previous examiner was happy with my parametric statistics but not the non-parametric statistics, whereas the new examiner thought the non-parametric tests were fine but didn't like the parametric ones!

Anyway, I am happy it's finally all over. The thesis was bound in March and graduation took place at the end of June. I'm currently stuck into the job hunt - I need to salvage what I can of my career and the problem I am facing now is the lack of recent commercial experience. Although I would have liked to stay in academia when I started my research, I'm not too keen on it now after my experience. So we'll see what happens.

I've attached the formal appeal document as it was submitted to the University, and the formal complaint document, which I will have to look at again and still have to submit. I hope to get this done in the next couple of weeks. The information I've provided in this email, along with my previous emails and the attached documents, should allow you to build up a picture of my experience and to prepare any training materials. Please get back to me if you require any more information and I will be happy to assist.

Finally, thanks for all your assistance and advice in helping me prepare my appeal and get everything resolved.

Best wishes,

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Email 29 March 2006

Hi John,

I didn't submit the complaint in the end. I requested a copy of my file from the department under the Data Protection Act. This file contained information about all the PhD review meetings, dates the supervisors were away, the examiners' reports, timeline of PhD, etc. It was upsetting for me to read through everything and see the disparities between the events as I saw them and how the department saw them. But then it became clear to me the department will always cover its own back.

The appeal was successful without having to go through a formal hearing so I must have had a strong case and, after reading through my file, I decided I wouldn't gain anything by submitting the complaint. With the semi-successful outcome of the re-examination i.e. MPhil for the thesis as it was with option to resubmit for PhD, I decided I wanted to draw a line under everything and move on.

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**Team task**

**On the acetate provided list the main lessons here for**

**1. PhD candidates**

**2. Supervisors**

**3. Institutions**

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