

## **Academic History of Suzie Ling**

Dear Professor Wakeford,

My ex-colleague, Stan Barker, who had been arguing with the University of Wessex for years and sought your help, now graduated with a Doctor degree, highly recommended me to contact you re my study.

I've read the Guardian website about your research and found, sadly, that myself fitted into many categories of your research interests. Started as an overseas research students and later transferred to be a home student, had been supported inadequately, and found nowhere to turn.

I attached my complaint document - "Academic History of Suzie Ling" with the hope that you can help me. Other reports which were mentioned in the complaint are not attached, but are available if needed.

So far, I am in the last stage of the formal complaint, but had not been informed for any progress for a month. Guess all I can do is to wait.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

With regards,

## The history

This is a brief account of the proceedings which have taken place to date that have motivated my complaint against the School of Education and Social Work. I believe that, through my time at Wessex as a PhD/MPhil student I have been badly treated and that the actions taken by my supervisors have been unfair. My work on the PhD has often been hindered rather than helped and I currently do not know the best way of remedying the situation.

The topic of my thesis is on the differences in study motivations and perceptions for students who transferred between a university in China and Wessex Universities between 2002 and 2005.

From September 2000- June 2005 Dr. Terry Villiers who was, at that point, in charge of the Certificate of Teaching in Higher Education Course supervised me. During that time I did not have any second supervisor. From September 2001- September 2002 I took a break from my studies because of a family illness and to do some background research/collect initial data at The Chinese University. While I was in China there was a change in the university structure as the University Education Department merged with that of another College. As a result of this, the first half year of my break was granted by the Faculty Board of the Arts and Social Sciences and the second half was granted by the Faculty of Education and Social Work. Furthermore, Dr. Villiers joined the Personnel Department. However he kept me on as my sole supervisor and I had no other supervision.

From September 2002, I became part-time student. Despite some efforts on my part (particularly in 2003 and 2004), I had no contact with the Department of Education. I was not asked to go in front of a Thesis Monitoring Committee or given an opportunity to present my work at seminars. During this time, apart from a chapter handed in to Dr. Villiers, I was not asked by Dr. Villiers to give him any large-scale piece of work for the purposes of upgrading from MPhil to PhD. This meant that I was not assessed on my work or told whether it was inadequate or not. I was actually informed that I **had** been upgraded to PhD by Dr. Villiers but it turned out that this was not true in the later stage. It follows that, in the time that I was supervised by Dr. Villiers, I had

no feedback which would have given me the opportunity to improve my work if there was a deficiency.

In October 2004 I was called in front of the Departmental Thesis Monitoring Committee which was the first time since 2000. At this meeting there was substantial disagreement as to whether I was a PhD student or not. Dr. Villiers assured me that I was. In addition, Dr. Villiers did not seem to appreciate in his report to the committee exactly what I was doing and as a result our submissions clashed. I had no official feedback from the TMC, but only a briefing from Dr. Villiers.

My attempts to get a second supervisor worked when, in June 2005, Dr. Allen Timms took over as my first supervisor and Professor Elizabeth Lee took over as my second supervisor. Dr. Villiers seems to have been summarily “sacked”. There was no changeover period. I should point out that most of the supervisory sessions have been held with Dr. Timms. Professor Lee has only turned up to about 5 sessions in a year’s time and has not had a substantial role in my supervision.

From the start there seems to have been problems between me and my supervisors. I do not know the origin of these problems. It seems that my supervisors decided from the outset that I should study for an MPhil and took no notice of my desire to do a PhD. The October 2004 TMC meeting had decided that a meeting in March 2005 should decide whether I should be upgraded or not. This meeting never took place. My supervisors never made it clear to me, until much later on, why they did not believe I could make PhD standard. I asked frequently but did not receive a clear answer until much later on. Even then it came through a third party and seemed to me to be inadequate and unfair.

I admit that, when I started with Professor Lee and Dr. Timms, I did not have substantial amounts of written work. However, I did have large amounts of different types of data. My thesis was an empirical thesis so this data contains the core of my thesis and any judgement must, surely, be based around the quality of the data. Dr. Timms did not ask to see my data or to discuss it for many months. It was only when I almost forced it upon him in December 2005 that he took some notice. By this time, I had also done some written work.

At this point I was still confused about my status and so I got in contact with Dr Light in November 2005 to clarify my situation and to ask for his advice. He told me that when I first registered in 2000 a non-existing department – continuing education was created to accommodate me because Dr. Villiers was not a formal member of any academic department. I was told that I had never been upgraded. He recommended that if I wanted to make a complaint I should go through the internal complaints procedure. This, I started doing in November 2005. I met Professor Lee, the Postgraduate Advisor in the department and the result was not helpful. She told me to follow Dr. Timms's recommendation. Then, I went to meet Mr. Wakefield, the head of the department. I was told there were possibilities to solve it out in the meeting, but none of them became available after I considered them.

In December 2005, Dr Timms wrote a report on my work for the TMC meeting on February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2006. This report was highly critical of my work and stated that it would be difficult for me to even reach MPhil standard. This report was a shock to me as I did not believe that my work, for all its faults, justified such harsh criticism. In response I was allowed to write a reply to the report. This I did, in detail, pointing out what I believe to be the errors all his claims. I should say that I think that Dr. Timms's report is unfair to my work and shows a basic ignorance of what I am trying to do. For this thesis monitoring committee I was not allowed to appear before it to argue my case. I should also point out that Professor Lee was one of the three members of this committee.

I should point out that, if Dr. Timms is correct (which I do not believe) then this puts me in an impossible situation. At that time, and now, I have not been given chance to improve my work since I have not been given any such feedback before. This would mean that I have been badly supervised by Dr Villiers (breaching the University Code of Practice for Supervised Practice items 2.6(f); 3.1; 5.1; 5.2; 5.3; 5.7; 5.8; 5.9; 5.10 (a); 5.10 (e); 5.10 (f); 5.10 (g); 5.10 (h); 5.10 (i); 5.10 (j); 5.14; 5.15 (h); 5.16; 5.19; 5.16 (c); 5.25 (all items except g & j). I should also point out that Dr. Timms, by not giving me the feedback on my data early enough, has prevented me completing my thesis according to his recommendations.

The TMC rejected my wish to be promoted to PhD level. I then went to the then Dean Dr. Liz Gray, listing my complaints. I also contacted the then chair of the TMC, (Professor Alison Littlejohn) asking for the reasons for the rejection. We agreed to meet together to discuss my problems. In February we met and Professor Littlejohn pointed out that the TMC could not come out with a definitive independent judgement since its members were from different background. Because of this, the decision made was solely based on Dr. Timms's report. One of the outcomes of the meeting was that Dr. Gray decided that I should send three chapters of my work to an External Assessor. This was Professor Dai Henman of Edinburgh University. He is an expert in the field of Higher Education and has also done substantial work in the area of Qualitative Analysis. These two areas are crucial to my area of research. As such he is ideally qualified to comment on my research area. The three chapters requested were sent to Professor Henman.

When Professor Henman's report was received, I went to see the Dean (on June 2<sup>nd</sup>) and it was agreed that a special session of the thesis monitoring committee would be convened on 27th June. This committee had a different membership from the previous one and included Professor Jennifer Hirst (chairing) and Professor James Hill. The committee asked for all the documents which had been received to date namely Dr. Timms's report and my response together with Professor Henman's report and responses to it by Dr. Timms, Professor Lee and myself. It also called my supervisors and me to appear before it respectively.

I should state here (as I did in my response) that I largely agreed with the content of Professor Henman's report. The report was critical but he seemed to believe that I could make a PhD out of the material I had sent him. In general, I think that his criticism was useful to my PhD and I aim to take his comments on board when I revise my first three chapters. The one hole in the report was that he felt that he did not have enough information on the quality or quantity of my data to make a judgement about whether it was of PhD standard. I should point out that the part about Piaget and Vygotsky, which was highly recommended by Dr. Timms, was regarded by Professor Henman as irrelevant in his report.

When the Thesis Monitoring Committee met, it refused my application to upgrade because of this uncertainty about my data. However, it decided that Professor Hill should examine my data to see whether it was of sufficient standard for a PhD. Over the summer I met with Professor Hill several times to discuss my data, during which time he thoroughly examined it. I have to say at this point that Professor Hill was immensely helpful in his comments on my work and this has clarified my thinking considerably. Professor Hill submitted his report in July. I am wholly in agreement with Professor Hill's report and I believe that, while it makes some significant criticisms of my work it is largely favourable.

Since July I have heard nothing from the Department/ School apart from an e-mail from Dr. Liz Gray informing me that the TMC had not met and that she was stepping down as Dean in favour of Professor Lee. She also recommended that I seek advice from you. On 22<sup>nd</sup> November Professor Hirst sent me a letter stating that, given the reports from Professor Henman and Professor Hill, I would not be upgraded. It seems that this decision was taken on her own authority and that the TMC had not met to consider the reports.

In my view, this letter does not reflect the clear intent of Professor Henman and Professor Hill in their reports. It seems to me that she has simply ignored what they have said to come to her own decision. If this is the case then this is grossly unfair and has wasted my time over the past year.

I should point out that I am now in an impossible situation. I have effectively had no supervisor since this June and I have found it difficult to make progress with my thesis in the face of so much uncertainty. I should point out that it would be virtually impossible to do an MPhil on Dr. Timms's terms (even if I thought this was a just or fair solution.). I would have to tear up most of my data and produce something based on data which, as Professor Hill has pointed out, is not fit for that purpose.

I should also point out that I am in an appalling position with my school. My ex-second supervisor is now Dean of the school and has consistently opposed my upgrade. Professor Hirst is Research Coordinator within the School. I can honestly say, indeed already pointed out to the TMC in June, that there has been a breakdown in

relationships with both of my supervisors and I will no longer be able to work with them again.

In summary, I do not believe that I have been fairly treated at any point in my supervision. I believe that Dr. Timms's report is unfair and is based on a lack of knowledge of my research. (I should point out that he has not even seen the bulk of my data). I would endorse the reports by Professor Henman and Professor Hill. I believe that these reports justify me having an upgrade. If I do get an upgrade then I believe that I would need a strong, independent, new supervisor to complete my PhD. I also believe that, in my current condition, I would need independent submission of my thesis.

If none of the above is possible then I believe that I have a reasonable case to ask for my money back. I have been unjustly treated by the University from both administrative and academic viewpoints. I have been messed around by people who have had no regard for my welfare or my abilities. I should point out that, given the current situation in the School and the long period of time that has been taken in trying to sort this out, this may be my preferred option. Currently, I cannot see a better way out.

## **Part 2**

### **Reply from John Wakeford:**

Oh what a tangled web we weave. You have an incredible and awful story to tell, and I am glad to give a view if that might help. I just feel ashamed of the UK Higher Education system sometimes...

Before I comment further, a few questions:

1. ideally, could you afford to take up any realistic opportunity to continue with your postgraduate research degree, ideally towards a doctorate? or do I gather that you think that this would not be realistic for you even if the university found suitable supervision within or outside it? there seems to be grounds on the evidence of two people that you could press on for a PhD, if proper supervision could be found. So would you want to press to continue/restart your studies?

2. since you are in the last stage of complaint, what do want the the University to do at this stage?

3. if you are not successful in your complaint, are you wanting to pursue the matter further? one possibility would be to go to the Scottish Ombudsman asking for a full enquiry, or you might go via a lawyer an sue the University for compensation, which would be costly but might get you considerable compensation, I imagine.

4. are you tied to the Wessex area? one possibility would be to move or start again at another university

Whatever you decide, I think your case could be more strongly argued, if necessary with professional help. I could help with free advice on how to organise your material but am totally ignorant of Scottish law if you choose that route.

The only immediate issue: if you want to pursue your complaint, you might like to withdraw your current document and we could work on a more persuasive one...?

Let me know.  
Best wishes

John



Dear Professor Wakeford,

Many thanks for your quick reply. I was advised that it would be helpful to refer my case to the School Research Degree Convenor and the Head of College. They were not listed on the complaint code of conduct.

I am still trying to work out their roles. It would be extremely useful if you can help me to reform my current document. Here are my answers to your questions:

1. Ideally, I would like to study for a PhD. However, in reality, now it is impossible to do it with the University of Wessex, to be precise, the Education Department. Even if I'd like to continue my study, the university cannot provide the help I need to finish my study. Within my department, no one was interested in Higher Education which my research is based. The department was originated from a teachers' training college. It was not research active to start with. Although things improved over years, people are only focussing on pre-school till high school education. It might sound ridiculous, but it is true that no one was interested in higher education even everyone was based in a higher education institution. I was told by the Head of the Faculty during the complaint that I need to find my own fund in order to get an external supervisor. That means, on top of all the tuition fees I have paid for a PhD study, I will need to pay extra from my own pocket, AGAIN. You mentioned the two possible supervisors. Professor Henman is from the University of Barchester. Money issue: would be too dear to afford. Professor Hill is from the Social Work Department. I do admire Professor Hill's research ability, especially his knowledge about methodology. However, apart from the fact he's busy and he is in another department, he is under my ex-second supervisor, who I disagreed with and is now the head of the School of Education and Social Work. What's the implication of that to Professor Hill?

2. I guess if the University does not want to lose money, it will grant me a sort of upgrade and followed by an independent submission. Whether I'd like to continue with them is another issue. Well, strickly speaking, NO. Why should I insist to stay with someone who's not intersted in my work, doesn't appreciate it and has no intension of trying to understand it.

3. I will not let the university walk away with a pocket full of my money without doing anything. I will definitely pursue the matter even if that means I need to seek for extra fund to get a solicitor. It sounds weird that I do not want to fund an external supervisor, but I am willing to pay for a solicitor which would be costly. But I am fed up by being messed around. I will NOT let it happen.

4. Again, it is still the financial issue. If I'd like to study elsewhere, I need to fund it by myself.

Many thanks for your help. Please feel free to let me know what you think about how to improve my document.

With regards,

## **Epilogue**

### **Email 1**

Dear Professor Wakeford,

First of all, I'd like to thank you for your quick reply for my email.

Only when I started this email in order to inform you the new progress of my complaint, I found that the last email I sent to you re. questions you asked, was not delivered successfully. To cut it short, all the problems were about the money. I was told that I would have to manage my own fund for any external supervision.

I got the letter from the Academic Secretary two days ago. Based on the current circumstance, he suggested a refund of the tuition fees I have paid as a final resolution. So, if I'd like to continue my studies elsewhere, there will be no financial worries at least.

The whole situation is disappointing, but it would be the least worst option, I assume. Therefore, I will accept the complete refund of my tuition fee. I'd like to thank you for all your support.

All the best.  
With regards,

### **Email 2**

Dear Professor Wakeford,

Many thanks for your email. The whole complaint procedures in any organisation were designed to 'break' the people who went through it, especially in mental terms. By the time it reached the end, the only wish would be to get an easy solution and run miles away from it. I've spent too long on the complaint (since Nov 2005) and both me and my husband suffered too much. We already reached the point that we both would like to call it an end, somehow.

.....I hope my case, along with others, would be helpful to improve the system, so no one will suffer in the near future.

Many thanks again.  
With regards,

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**Team task**

**From your discussion of this and similar cases, on the second acetate suggest the main lessons for**

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