

Tessa's appeal

Background letter

Attached is the letter of appeal. It outlines a few things, but I guess that there is always more to the situation than can be put into a letter.

As a molecular project, the main thing you have to have is DNA in order to do something. My supervisor did not supply more than a few months DNA, and therefore I was left without anything to work on for months at a time. The supply coming into the lab was supposed to be split between myself and the postdoc, but in reality the postdoc was given all fresh samples, where I was left with degraded 3 year old samples. Other published papers proved that these worms couldn't yield any DNA after being stored for 6 months, and I also found this. I had to pinch an aliquot of the postdocs fresh DNA in order to prove this.

The postdoc was also hired to do the same project as me, and at our meetings every month or so, she was constantly allowed to pursue the more productive avenue whereas I was given the routes which were less likely to yield results. The argument for this by my supervisor was that the postdoc needed hard, fast results to ensure her continued funding, whereas my funding was guaranteed for the three years regardless. This went on for about a year until I persuaded my other supervisor at the university (and not at the Government labs) to come and speak to my supervisor. This was done and she convinced him that things would now change. However, with better samples and better techniques, the postdoc was able to produce a publication first, with my name only in brackets in the last few paragraphs.

I am the first PhD student of my supervisor and she has a lot to learn. When I arrived she took on her first honours student, which went terribly, and since then she has delegated honours students out to her staff. She does her job incredibly well, but she is categorically no good as a supervisor of a student. People take her on her reputation, and me as a student gets a back seat with any complaints. I can understand the remarks that she should want me to do well as it will look bad for her, however she does everything to the contrary.

At the University of Christminster, we get evaluated every six months. After only three months in the lab, I was given a sheet that said that she had severe doubts that the thesis would be submitted on time!!!! The first three months is still a time of finding your feet as a PhD student and so this was, I think, harshly unfair. This comment was always on the sheet until I submitted. She also remarked that my understanding of the English language was poor, my time keeping average (10am till 10pm seven days a week, with no lunch/coffee breaks), and that my lab book was sloppy (even though she had never once opened it, and please note that it went from 'sloppy' to 'better' without her ever consulting them). So by this point you may get the impression that she had high standards, which I agree with, however nothing was ever good enough. She even told

me to leave out my best results of the thesis (I assume because the postdoc is due to publish similar findings). She also said that there was nothing of interest in any of my results, therefore not to do any papers. Even though a recent paper stated that my organism was the last to be sequenced in this particular class, therefore I would argue that a paper stating where it slots in would be feasible. Also there is the fact that the new postdoc is now continuing this work with a view to publishing. I even asked if it could be a joint publication, but to no avail. Her comments during the writing up were not helpful until the final few months, when it is too late to do rectify very much. She also told me categorically that she was going to choose someone who would give me a hard viva – which I got. He was very dismissive of the project, the work involved and the scope of the work. He stated that it was two chapters short (although 290 pages long) of a PhD thesis. He also said that I had successfully argued that nothing further could be done on the project. My supervisor also agreed that nothing further could be done.

Also during this time, she gossiped about me with her staff. I know this did get back to me. I was accused of dumping files from the communal computer. I objected strongly to this, and went about proving my innocence – which I did, however she still wouldn't take anything back. She didn't talk much to me, other than a chat about the project every few weeks (for about ten minutes) and a "Tessa" when she passed me on the stairs/corridor. I thought she objected to my leaving the lab for my second year. My other supervisor recognised that all was not well and so let me work in his lab for this year. My primary supervisor was not happy with this. I was not getting much in the way of results, and so I added a few things to complement what little results I did have. She told me not to do them, but then when they worked, she said that was okay.

Both heads of department called me in for a meeting with them after they received the six monthly reports. Both said that I should make a formal complaint, however my esteem was so low that I believed that this would not be a good move. I thought this because the funding was tied to this particular supervisor and so I couldn't change supervisors at all. My second supervisor did try to do something during my year with him but find out that I could only change Him. I was told to see the postgraduate liaison officer at the Marine Lab, and went to see him. I thought it would only be about ten minutes, however I was in his office for three hours as the whole situation poured out. He was outraged that this had been going on, and that it had gotten to this state. He assured me that he would do something. I told my supervisor, and she immediately went to see him. She was in his office for about 20 mins, and the whole matter was dropped. He just said that we had to try to get on, and that was it. When I spoke to him a year later, he just said that he thought things were doing okay as I had not been to see him again. So basically that part of the system also failed me. I know my supervisor has a reputation as a smooth operator (she does come across very well) with the higher staff, but also as a bit of a bitch with those who cannot do much for her. Five minutes after the verdict of the viva, she told me I had no sparkle and that I was in the wrong field (even though I had worked in molecular genetics for 8 years prior to making the decision to pursue a PhD). My current boss is very happy with my work as a post-doc, and is encouraging me to take action by appealing. Due to the university being able to

have post-docs and PhD students at the marine labs, basically free of charge, they will not want to rock the boat.

I am sure there is much more that I am not remembering at this present time, however I am at work, and this wasn't meant to be a full account, it just poured out a bit.

Any help you could recommend before the appeal hearing on the 13/11/2 would be most welcome, as I only have the student rep who can appear with me (against the internal examiner, both supervisors and head of department). Also, Christminster University states in the appeal rules that you cannot appeal against any academic decision, so this hinders much of what I would like to appeal against. Such as during the viva they talked at me for 3.5 hours, and I only got to comment for about 30 minutes in total. They did not discuss 90% of what I did, just the 10% they did not agree on. The first question was, "what is your experience prior to the PhD?" They did not think that a geneticist should have done this (molecular genetics) project, and that someone with additional ecology should have been appointed. I knew then that things were not going to go well.

I shall stop now, but there are more points along similar lines.

Please help,
Sincerely,
Tessa

Tessa's letter of appeal

Institute of Biosciences,
Barchester University

Ms Margaret Smith,
Assistant Academic Registrar,
University of Christminster,

Dear Ms Smith,

Further to our recent conversation, I give notice of my intention to appeal the decision of my examiners for the award of Master of Philosophy. The following is a summary of the basis of my appeal.

- **Project parameters.**

The aims and objectives as originally conceived by my supervisors have been satisfied. At the time of my viva the examiners agreed that I successfully argued the case that no more could have been done to further the investigation of the project, but also that the project was two chapters short of a PhD thesis. Bob Martin agreed with my own concerns about this during my second year and tried to intervene, but the funding for the project did not allow additional topics to be explored.

- **No intervention from University.**

Although the University intimated at the end of the year I they had reservations about the scope of the project, nothing was done throughout the running of the investigation. I believe that action should have been taken to either stop the project or to ensure that additional avenues were recommended. In the absence of either action I was left to pursue and continue research as prescribed.

I submit also that my appeal requires an investigation into the facts upon which the examiners based their conclusions and into the quality of supervision and assessment procedures over the 4 years. This does not question their academic conclusion on its own, however the way in which their decision was made does warrant consideration.

- **Unfair Viva.**

- The choice of examiners was not best suited to examination of this project.
- The emphasis of their questioning was limited to negative points. They failed to allow a general discussion of the research and simply focused on points they disagreed with.
- Initial criticism of my not being best suited to the project because of my genetic background, and lack of ecology. This should not have been an issue, particularly since the project was about genetic differentiation and not ecology per se.

- Examiners disagreed with some of my points but did not allow any reasoning.
- The questioning that did occur was confined, for the most part, to the latter parts of each chapter, where a computer tool was used to produce an additional method of analysing the bulk of the data. Discussion here was limited to the tool itself and not about the more important aspects of what the tool produced, and the implications.
- Some of the better results were minimised since they were not currently accepted as a diagnostic test on their own. This particular point should not be an issue as my aim was not to develop an accredited test, but to find out the basic biology on which one might be based.
- The external examiner stated that I had obviously not enjoyed the project and had not derived any pleasure from pursuing it. This false information could only have come from my uncooperative supervisor who was obstructive at every opportunity. This was noted to the department of Molecular and Cell at regular intervals over the 4 years.
- I was further subjected to an opinion that my research had taken too long and should have had 3 to 4 papers from it. This is entirely subjective and unrealistic for every PhD project.

- **Unfair conclusion.**

While I agree with some of the points of correction, the conclusion is unfair. In addition, the overall attitude of the external examiner created an atmosphere which was not conducive to a fair interview. I believe have fulfilled the requirements of the project which was for the attainment of a PhD.

Thank you for your attention.

Yours Sincerely,

Tessa Norman

Cc: Student Union Vice President.