

Dear John,

I hope you don't mind me contacting you regarding the article 'What Goalposts?' at <http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/postgraduate/story/0,12848,890233,00.html>

It's quite a long time after the event, since your article was published in 2002, but it's still incredibly relevant and I'm glad I found it. Some of the quotes from students about their experiences in the viva could have almost been spoken by me; a slightly eerie feeling!

The paragraph that particularly resonated with me was "The majority attributed the failure to inadequacies in supervision - only to discover that this was specifically excluded as grounds for appeal. They should, they were told, have submitted a complaint about that at the time." In my case, a very dedicated supervisor, but what she considered to be of PhD standard was clearly very different from my examiners - a huge discrepancy which, of course, only became evident during the viva, so there was no way I could have complained about it previously.

Perhaps I shouldn't have found your article reassuring, since nothing in the system has apparently changed since 2002, but it shows me that at least other students have been in similar situations to me - it's not only me that has failed to achieve a PhD. There's a tendency to feel very isolated after the event; the way I can best describe it is that the university's "shutters come down".

Your article concludes that "the next generation of PhD candidates may be more prepared to take this risk". Unfortunately, in my case, I won't be taking

I would definitely be willing to write an account of my experiences; in fact I've attached a (long!) account which was written mainly for my own sanity, so please feel free to edit as you will. I'm aware that it does ramble, but felt it necessary to include as much 'evidence' as possible: it was written when I

Anyway, thanks once again for responding so quickly. I'm so glad someone out there is addressing this problem.

Best wishes,

Jennifer





could be narrowed and focused'.

Off the record, my supervisor is very much on my side, saying 'I think they were very harsh, broader theses than yours have passed', and has admitted 'it just depends on the examiners and what kind of work they prefer'. But on the record (i.e. email), she has been a lot more guarded, and understandably so, as she chose the examiners and obviously knows them as colleagues.

As to my reasons for not appealing, although an appeal makes sense in terms of achieving a sense of justice, there are (sadly) far more reasons against:

- a) The appeal itself is designed to be hugely intimidating: the examiners are invited into the appeal room with me and give their point of view.

I'm familiar with the guidelines for the award of PhD, but these do not refer anywhere to how broad/narrow/focused a PhD should be, so I could not be expected to know from these guidelines exactly whether my thesis was correct in this matter; instead, for this I had to rely on my supervisor. Obviously in the course of my research I've looked at other theses, but theses can differ immensely within the PhD structure, and it is often difficult to relate your own work to others.

I've given a number of well-received papers at conferences, so have had positive feedback from other students and academics (including a comment from one of the organisers of a conference I attended in 2005: 'If your paper is any indication of what your thesis is like, you'll have no trouble passing'. Oh, the irony!) But of course it's only the thesis in its entirety which is examined, and since late 2002, only my supervisor has read it. In hindsight, this seems an incredible risk to take: however respected an academic, her opinion about the scope of a thesis might well be that of a minority. When, after the viva, I suggested the risk inherent in having a single supervisor, she replied, 'Well, you could have approached another academic and asked them to look over it'. Even if I had found an academic who was willing, as a favour (or more likely a payment), to read a 94,000 word thesis that wasn't the work of one of their own PhD students, the chances are they would not be a specialist in my field. And why should I pay extra, on top of my fees, to receive advice that should be provided by my own college?

I notice that in the Judas College Research Student Handbook 2005-6 the Appointment of Supervisors section states that 'each postgraduate research student should have a main supervisor, who will normally be the first point of contact; and a second supervisor' (either academic co-supervisor, associate supervisor or reserve supervisor). When I began my studies in 2000, this rule was not in place, so my supervisor worked alone. I would be interested to find out why this ruling has been introduced – could it be because of the risks