

Case 200501345: University of Glasgow

Introduction

1. The Ombudsman received a complaint from a woman (referred to in this report as Ms C) – a research assistant formerly employed by the University of Glasgow (the University) at which she was studying for a post graduate degree. Ms C made a formal complaint against the University about the quality of the supervision she received during her PhD studies and exhausted the authority's internal complaints procedure. The complaint was dismissed formally by the University on 5 April 2005. Ms C subsequently made a request for an external review to the Ombudsman, alleging that there was administrative fault or service failure by the University which caused her injustice and hardship¹.

2. The complaint which I have investigated (*and my conclusion*) concerned the University's alleged failure to provide Ms C with proper supervision during the study period and delay in providing necessary equipment for research purposes. She claimed that, as a consequence of the lack of support and advice, she was disadvantaged and this affected the outcome of her PhD. *I have not upheld the complaint (paragraphs 29 to 32).*

Investigation and Findings of Fact

3. My investigation included examination of documentary evidence provided by Ms C and a written enquiry was made of the University whose Senate Office submitted a background report and supporting documentation.

4. I examined:

- the papers relating to the research grant which funded Ms C's appointment as a research assistant
- the terms and conditions of the appointment
- the University's PhD guidelines
- Ms C's annual reports on progress
- the papers relating to Ms C's formal complaint to the University

¹ The Ombudsman's remit was extended to cover complaints about further and higher education in October 2005

- papers relating to a complaint against Ms C made by a colleague (also studying for a PhD) working on equipment in the Department of Electronics and Electrical Engineering
- records of meetings between Ms C and her supervisors
- information on the role of supervisors
- the University's procedure for reviewing PhD theses.

5. Ms C and the University have had the opportunity to comment on a draft of this report.

6. I established that Ms C was appointed as a research assistant in September 1999 – with the opportunity to study for a postgraduate degree. Appropriate references were provided. She was in receipt of a salary and was appointed to carry out the terms of a grant provided by a charity funding the research. The primary responsibility of the University was to manage the research project; the supervision of Ms C as a research student was an additional, separate responsibility.

7. Notwithstanding this, the University confirmed that, normally, the supervision of research for the funding body and the supervision of the preparation of a thesis are compatible. They made some general comments about the position of a research assistant who was permitted to register for the degree of PhD, indicating that this arrangement is very common in universities throughout the United Kingdom and provides an effective method of funding the training of researchers.

8. A research assistant is, however, first and foremost an employee and the work undertaken is dictated by the terms of the research grant and the terms of the appointment. This means that the post holder does not have the same academic freedom available to a postgraduate research student funded by a scholarship, who may alter the focus of the work as an interest develops or who adopts an alternative approach. A research assistant is confined to the agreed area of research, however unproductive it turns out to be. The fact that a research assistant undertakes a PhD during the period of employment is a privilege. It is not granted to all research assistants as the thesis may interfere with the funded project.

9. A research assistant who is permitted to register for a higher degree does so on the strict understanding that priority will be given to fulfilling the terms of the grant. Any writing which relates exclusively to the thesis must be done outside working hours. The University stated that the supervision received by Ms C was provided within this context.

10. In addition to an Honours degree, classified as an upper second from King's College, London, Ms C obtained a Masters degree from University College, London in 1998. On this basis the University contended that it was reasonable to assume that Ms C was capable of carrying out independent work and acquiring, over the period of the research, expertise in the required techniques and research methodology.

11. The aim of the research project was to establish whether equipment could be refined to enable the separation of trophoblast cells from maternal blood. This work was carried out in Department B. Ms C was required to contribute to this process, learning how to use the equipment and comparing this technique with other methods of cell separation on which she was working at Yorkhill and subsequently at the Royal Infirmary, Glasgow.

12. Academic 1 was appointed as the first supervisor in September 1999, and Academic 2 as second supervisor with Academic 3 (Head of Division A) as adviser. In the first annual report for 1999-2000 Academic 3 appeared as second supervisor and Academic 2 as the adviser; but, in practice, these roles were reversed. The role of adviser was new in 1999 and members of staff often did not distinguish between supervision and advice. In terms of pastoral support, this was provided by Academic 3 throughout, while 'hands-on' supervision and expertise was provided by Academic 2. The provision of two supervisors and an adviser complied with the University guidelines for supervision. The fact that, in this case, there was an 'overlapping' of roles did not detract from the availability of three members of staff to Ms C.

13. The annual report for session 1999-2000 confirmed that in July 2000 Ms C was satisfied with the level of supervision she received; she confirmed that she met her supervisors regularly; feedback was provided on a regular basis and, although the change of location from Yorkhill to the Royal Infirmary had taken some time, Ms C considered that it was worthwhile.

14. Academic 2 reported in August 2000 that progress was good, and that the equipment required for the research experiments was in place.

15. Academic 1 reported that she met with Ms C twice every week. This was more frequent than normal in the first year of research, when much of the work was preparatory reading to ensure that the student was fully aware of the current literature in the area of research.

16. In session 2000-2001 problems were expressed in the annual report. The adviser's report signed by Academic 2 stated that Ms C was failing to make satisfactory progress and expressed concern over her attitude to the work. A note, dated 29 July 2001 referred to an earlier meeting with Ms C at which concern had been raised about the level of progress. The University explained that Academic 1 and Academic 2 were, in fact, Ms C's line managers in addition to being her supervisors. As such, they were required to balance their responsibility as the grant holders with their responsibility as supervisors. The report concluded with an assurance that every effort was being made to support Ms C towards achieving the required standard.

17. The supervisor's report in 2001 was at variance with Ms C's report with regard to the frequency of supervisory meetings. According to Academic 1 she continued to see Ms C each week; Ms C contended that contact with her supervisors was limited. However, it is clear from the available documentation that Ms C had declined to transfer to Department B where there would have been contact with Academic 2. After April 2001 Ms C had little contact with Academic 2 because she believed that he was biased against her. The University contended that this put Academic 2 in a very difficult position, given his responsibility as one of the grant holders.

18. Academic 2 was on sabbatical leave for session 2001-2002. However, his absence did not prevent Ms C from consulting him by e-mail or from consulting other colleagues in his Department. Academic 2 recorded that Ms C seldom visited the laboratory in Department B, although the project required her to work jointly with a research student (as distinct from a research assistant) who was refining the equipment required to separate foetal cells. The research student subsequently made a formal complaint to Academic 1 and Academic 2 about Ms C's frequent interruption to his work and her reluctance to learn how to operate the equipment. Academic 2 also referred to the fact that Ms C had failed to contribute to the final report to the charity funding the research.

19. The Graduate School Board report in 2001 referred to Academic 3's meeting with Ms C to discuss the problems which had arisen. Academic 3 recommended that Ms C transfer to a Masters degree. However, she was reluctant to accept his advice, and it was agreed that a decision would be made on the basis of a second year report. If the standard showed substantial improvement, Ms C would be allowed to continue her PhD.

20. Academic 1 took up another appointment in June 2002 but, at that time, the period of grant was almost complete. Academic 1 continued to contact Ms C but received little response, and was not given relevant sections of the thesis to read, despite previous offers of assistance. Ms C contended that she had e-mailed Academic 1 regularly, but had not received proper responses.

21. Academic 3 offered to provide support with the writing-up of the thesis, but the work which was submitted was not sufficient for him to provide specific advice. The documentary evidence showed that Academic 3 took appropriate steps to consult his colleagues and held meetings to discuss Ms C's progress. The advice given to Ms C in 2001 (and again in 2003 and 2004) was that her work was not up to the standard for a PhD. This was attributed to Ms C's attitude, and reference was made to poor attendance and several missed meetings. Ms C contended that she had not been informed of the meetings in advance.

22. In May 2003, Academic 4, Post Graduate Convener for Division A, wrote to Ms C (who was living in London) asking whether she intended to submit a thesis. He indicated that she should make contact with Academic 2.

23. Ms C responded to this by submitting sections of her thesis (July 2003). Further sections were requested by Academic 4 in early October 2003, at which point he explained that her case had been considered by the Director of the Graduate School, the Chairman of the Higher Degrees Committee, and the Graduate School Administrator.

24. Academic 4 invited Ms C to a meeting in Glasgow, to determine whether her work was adequate for presentation for a PhD. He advised Ms C to contact her supervisor in advance of the meeting to ensure that it was productive. He noted that:

'In view of the academic expertise of your present supervisor, there appears to be no other way to proceed that would allow us to make an informed recommendation to the Committee or provide you with a considered judgement on your likelihood of success.

You are, of course, at liberty to write and submit a thesis on your own, however, my present judgement is that such a strategy would give you little prospect of even obtaining an MSc. I would also remind you that you are probably exceeding the one year normally allowed for writing a thesis and this will also need to be taken into consideration'.

25. The University explained to me that the Graduate School had to make a determination on Ms C's case in what was 'a highly unusual situation', in that both supervisors had left Glasgow; Ms C was living in London; and the relationship between Ms C and the supervisors had broken down to such an extent that the customary arrangements for finalising work were not appropriate. Care had to be exercised not to prejudice the choice of future internal and external examiners if the work was submitted in the future. The Committee, therefore, had to obtain advice to decide whether the work could be examined as it stood, or whether further supervision would render it examinable. If there was insufficient reliable data to form the basis of a doctoral degree, it might nevertheless be written up for a Masters by research.

26. In these circumstances it was agreed that Academic 5, Director of the Graduate School, and Academic 6, another senior member of the Faculty, would advise the Higher Degrees Committee. Academic 5 was the most senior clinical professor in the Faculty (with over 35 years of experience in collaborative research at the interface between basic science and clinical practice). Academic 6 was also very senior with considerable experience of the methodologies concerned. The reports submitted to Academic 7, who had taken over from Academic 4 as Divisional Postgraduate Convener, indicated that the work fell well below the standard required for the award of PhD. The work was also reviewed by Academic 8, Deputy Dean of the Faculty, Academic 9, Convener of the Higher Degrees Committee and Academic 4, past Divisional Postgraduate Convener, who reported verbally.

27. The University concluded that the work finally produced by Ms C showed that she had not grasped some basic principles of research and that her expectations of her supervisors were unrealistic and inappropriate for a person

working at doctoral level. They contended that the evidence available confirmed that the level of supervision provided to Ms C was satisfactory and that any problems which arose were addressed in good time. The University argued that Ms C's refusal to discuss her research with Academic 2 during the second half of the research period contributed substantially to the difficulties she experienced in constructing her thesis. They also argued that Ms C did not recognise fully that her primary duty was as a research assistant employed to carry out the terms of a research grant. Ms C refused to meet with Academic 2 as her line manager and failed to provide the data required to complete the report to the charity funding the research project. She also moved to London before her appointment as a research assistant terminated, although she continued to receive her salary. Ms C contended that the re-location occurred after prior approval from Academic 3, and that she received a salary in London for the final month.

28. The University explained that the standard procedure for reviewing draft theses was that several versions of the thesis would pass between the supervisor and the student over the period of study (described as 'writing-up'); the expectation was that work would be returned to the student within a matter of a few weeks in order to meet the deadline set by the regulations for submission. In this context, there was no formal review of a thesis, although when it was nearing completion, it would be passed to the adviser who would be involved in a mock oral examination to assist the student to prepare for the discussion with the examiners. Ms C did not comply with this procedure.

Conclusions

29. I have investigated Ms C's complaint that the University failed to provide her with proper supervision during the study period, delayed in providing necessary equipment for research purposes, and that the outcome of her PhD was affected by lack of support and advice. I have examined all the relevant guidelines and procedures in order to assess whether the University acted reasonably in this case.

30. I am satisfied that the University put in place satisfactory arrangements for supervision and took appropriate steps to inform Ms C and support her when they had concerns that her work was not up to the standard required for a PhD. They did so in 2001 when problems first arose with Ms C's progress and again in 2003 and 2004. There is no evidence to suggest that the University delayed in providing the necessary equipment for research purposes.

31. There are different accounts given by Ms C and the University with regard to some of the facts of the case. However, my investigation has established that Ms C did leave the University before the work on the project was completed, and there was uncertainty about whether she intended to submit her thesis. She did not remain in contact with her supervisors but, instead, continued to work on her thesis without their guidance and, consequently, submitted work which fell below the required standard.

32. In the circumstances which have been described in this investigation report I consider there is no basis to uphold the complaint that the University failed to provide proper supervision or delayed in providing the necessary equipment for research purposes.

30 May 2006

Explanation of abbreviations used

Ms C	The complainant
Academic 1	First supervisor
Academic 2	Second supervisor
Academic 3	Head of Division A
Academic 4	Post Graduate Convener Division A
Academic 5	Director of Graduate School
Academic 6	Senior member of the Faculty
Academic 7	Divisional Postgraduate Convener
Academic 8	Deputy Dean of Faculty
Academic 9	Convener of Higher Degrees Committee
Research student	PhD student who made a formal complaint about Ms C
The University	The University of Glasgow