

**Case 200603520: University of Glasgow**

**Summary of Investigation**

**Category**

Scottish Further and Higher Education: Higher Education; Teaching and Supervision

**Overview**

The complainant (Ms C) was a post-graduate student at the University of Glasgow (the University). After her status was upgraded from that of a masters to a doctoral candidate, she was transferred to a different department. A progress meeting in that department decided that Ms C's work to date was not of sufficient standard to allow her to continue as a doctoral candidate. She appealed this decision and complained about aspects of the University's administration and supervision during her period of study.

**Specific complaints and conclusions**

The complaints which have been investigated are that:

- (a) the University accepted a research topic that was not viable (*not upheld*);
- (b) the University incorrectly upgraded Ms C to status as a PhD student when she did not have the knowledge necessary to complete it (*not upheld*);
- (c) the supervision of Ms C's PhD was inadequate (upheld to the extent that the University did not apologise for shortcomings they identified);
- (d) review meetings were improperly conducted (*not upheld*); and
- (e) there were shortcomings in the University's handling of Ms C's complaint (*not upheld*).

**Redress and recommendation**

The Ombudsman recommends that the University make a formal apology to Ms C for a standard of supervision which fell short of that to which she was entitled.

## **Main Investigation Report**

### **Introduction**

1. In August 2003, the University of Glasgow (the University) accepted the complainant (Ms C) as a full-time candidate for an MPhil by research for a one year period of study, beginning at the end of September 2003. Towards the end of that year of study, the University accepted Ms C as a full-time candidate for a PhD. At her annual progress review meeting in May 2005, members of the University's Faculty of Arts (the Faculty) decided that Ms C should not be allowed to progress to complete her PhD. Ms C made a formal complaint to the University on 2 December 2005 and received their response on 17 January 2006. She escalated her complaint to the second stage of the University's procedure on 31 January 2006 and the University concluded that process on 26 April 2006. The University partly upheld Ms C's complaints and continued to correspond with her over the issues she had raised. They sought an external assessment of Ms C's work, which was received on 10 November 2006 and the process culminated in a final letter on 8 February 2007. Ms C remained dissatisfied and referred her complaint to the Ombudsman on 29 March 2007.

2. The complaints from Ms C which I have investigated are that:
- (a) the University accepted a research topic that was not viable;
  - (b) the University incorrectly upgraded Ms C to status as a PhD student when she did not have the knowledge necessary to complete it;
  - (c) the supervision of Ms C's PhD was inadequate;
  - (d) review meetings were improperly conducted; and
  - (e) there were shortcomings in the University's handling of Ms C's complaint.

### **Investigation**

3. In order to investigate this complaint, I reviewed all the relevant correspondence between the University and Ms C. I also considered the internal guidance published by the University for the supervision of research degrees. I made inquiry of the University on 13 August 2007 and received their reply on 7 September 2007. In order to explore issues around the supervision of research degrees in more detail, I met with members of the University staff on 12 March 2008.

4. In the course of her period of study as a doctoral candidate, Ms C was transferred from the department where she began her MPhil study

(Department 1) to another department within the Faculty (Department 2) without her knowledge. She had had a significant change in the area of her research and it was judged that her new topic would be more appropriately supervised in Department 2. This was the department in which her supervisor (the Supervisor) was primarily located, although the Supervisor also taught in Department 1. Although this possible move was discussed with Ms C at the time her new research area was being discussed, there was no formal confirmation of the move. In their investigation of Ms C's complaints, the University fully acknowledged the confusion this caused and this matter has not been included in the present investigation.

5. I have not included in this report every detail investigated but I am satisfied that no matter of significance has been overlooked. Ms C and the University were given an opportunity to comment on a draft of this report.

#### *Background*

6. Faculties within the University produce guidance for research degrees which sets out, among other things, the respective responsibilities of students and supervisors. The supervisor's responsibilities include giving feedback and guidance, and the student's include raising issues that arise and maintaining the progress of their work. Although a research degree is not formally examined until the final thesis is submitted, the guidance also sets out the framework for giving formal feedback on progress at annual review meetings. All research degrees require students to take the initiative in producing work that makes a significant contribution to knowledge. The introduction to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework states that, to attain the standard appropriate for a doctorate, a student should 'exercise a high level of autonomy' and 'take full responsibility for their own work'.

#### **(a) The University accepted a research topic that was not viable**

7. Ms C enrolled as an MPhil candidate in September 2003. She was given an additional supervisor for her research (the Supervisor). Ms C decided to change her area of research in December 2003 and this was formally accepted by the University on 13 August 2004. This was one week before Ms C's status was upgraded to that of a PhD candidate. The new topic was one which Ms C had explored in her Honours dissertation and had worked with the Supervisor on this.

8. The supervisor who was assigned to Ms C for her original topic did not have the relevant expertise in the new area and, after the change of topic, ceased to have an active involvement in supervising Ms C. The Supervisor continued as sole supervisor for Ms C's work and reported good progress in her reviews.

9. The University decided not to allow Ms C to continue her doctoral research on 24 May 2005. This decision was made at Ms C's second annual progress review meeting within the Faculty. At that meeting, the three members of academic staff who had reviewed Ms C's work considered that it was not of a high enough standard for her to progress towards completion of a PhD.

10. Ms C's notes of this progress review meeting record that there were concerns about the scope of the subject she had undertaken and that it was too broadly formulated. Therefore, she considered that her initial research proposal and the research questions she had set out in that proposal should not have been accepted at the outset of her period of study. In addition, Ms C considered that the University should not have accepted a proposal for a subject area in which there was only limited expertise among the academic staff.

11. In response, the University stated that it was not unusual to accept a research topic in an area with a limited pool of expertise. In the case of Ms C's research area, there was limited expertise at a national as well as a local level. They consider that the proposal as formulated by Ms C was viable.

12. As noted in paragraph 1, the University sought an external assessment of Ms C's work at the end of the complaints process. Ms C considered that the opinion of the external reviewer confirmed her view that her initial proposal should not have been accepted by the University. The reviewer said that Ms C's work lacked 'clearly formulated research questions'.

*(a) Conclusion*

13. It was Ms C's view that the University should have known at the outset of her research that her topic and the approach she had outlined in her research proposal were not viable. She considered that, although this only became clear to her with hindsight, the University had a duty to ensure that they only accepted proposals that were sustainable and that they could support with the relevant academic expertise.

14. The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002 does not permit the Ombudsman to investigate action taken by or on behalf of a university in the exercise of academic judgement relating to an educational or training matter. It is not, therefore, for me to question the merits of the University's opinion that they could support Ms C's research proposal or their assessment of its viability as an area for doctoral research insofar as the opinion and assessment were rooted in the exercise of academic judgement. However, it is appropriate for the Ombudsman to consider whether the University addressed relevant matters in coming to its decisions about Ms C's research proposal. The evidence shows that the University did follow a reasonable process in making a decision about Ms C's proposed change of topic.

15. In their written submission to the Ombudsman, the University said that the Supervisor did have sufficient specialist knowledge in the area of Ms C's research. With this in mind, and having reviewed the internal documentation from the time of Ms C's change of topic, I conclude that the University took the necessary steps to be satisfied that Ms C's research topic could be supported. I do not, therefore, uphold this complaint.

**(b) The University incorrectly upgraded Ms C to status as a PhD student when she did not have the knowledge necessary to complete it**

16. When Ms C's work was assessed by the external reviewer, he expressed his concern that Ms C had insufficient knowledge of primary sources relevant to her area of study and was not able to access critical literature in the area due to inadequate knowledge of relevant modern languages. Some of these concerns had also been raised at the progress review meeting of 24 May 2005.

17. Although Ms C did not raise this matter as part of her initial complaint to the University, in their response to the Ombudsman the University said that opinions were divided over the necessity of access to the sources identified in the external review. However, they also reported that the Supervisor had frequently recommended bibliographic material in other modern languages and had underlined the desirability of drawing on such sources.

18. In their response to the Ombudsman's inquiries, the University also said that any gaps in Ms C's wider knowledge of her chosen subject area were not known at the time of her upgrade to status as a PhD candidate and only became apparent as the assessment process continued.

*(b) Conclusion*

19. Ms C believes that the University had a duty not to accept her as a PhD candidate in the light of the later assessments of her work, which showed that it was not of sufficient quality for her to continue as a PhD student.

20. As with the previous complaint (see paragraph 14), it is not for the Ombudsman to question the University's judgement of Ms C's academic ability when they accepted her as a PhD student. However, it is, again, appropriate to ask whether an adequate assessment was made of relevant factors so as to ascertain whether the University made their judgement on the basis of a reasonable assessment process. The review panel at Ms C's first progress meeting on 9 June 2004 felt that they did not have the specialist knowledge to make a recommendation on whether Ms C should progress from an MPhil to a PhD and deferred the decision to the Supervisor. The assessment of Ms C's level of knowledge and ability was, therefore, undertaken almost entirely by the Supervisor. As Ms C was studying in a field with few specialists, I do not consider that it was unreasonable for the University to make an assessment on this basis. I do not, therefore, uphold this complaint.

**(c) The supervision of Ms C's PhD was inadequate**

21. Given the final outcome of her period of study, Ms C complained that the level and quality of supervision she received had been inadequate. She felt that the Supervisor should have known that her work was not likely to be accepted as being of sufficient quality and should have guided her in such a way as to help her address the issues.

22. I have seen copies of the Supervisor's reports on Ms C's progress and they do confirm that she did not have serious concerns about the direction or quality of Ms C's work.

23. Ms C was concerned that the number and duration of her sessions with the Supervisor were insufficient. There is no evidence that she raised this as a concern while her supervision was ongoing. The University considered that the amount of supervision time given to Ms C was reasonable and noted that the work of a supervisor includes preparation time. The evidence shows that Ms C did meet with the Supervisor, who provided written comments on her work.

24. The University's relevant Handbook on PhD study within the Faculty states that first year students should have fortnightly one-hour meetings with their supervisor and that second and third year students 'should be given the opportunity to arrange in advance at least six one-hour meetings per Session'. There is no documentary evidence to show that Ms C met with the Supervisor as frequently as the handbook suggests.

25. Ms C was further concerned that her second supervisor did not provide any significant input to her research. Indeed, as that supervisor did not have any knowledge of the subject area, she considers that it would have been appropriate for the University to appoint an external second supervisor with the relevant knowledge. The handbook allows for this possibility and also recommends that every student has 'at least two points of contact with relevant academic staff'.

*(c) Conclusion*

26. In their response to Ms C's complaint, and in their submission to the Ombudsman, the University acknowledged that the conclusions of the review panel and of the external reviewer suggest that there may have been shortcomings in the supervision of Ms C's work in that concerns which later came to light were not identified earlier. However, they also said that it cannot necessarily be concluded from this that a different approach to Ms C's supervision would have led to her successful completion of her PhD.

27. From the evidence I have seen, it does appear that other measures could have been put in place to allow an earlier identification of shortcomings in Ms C's work. In particular the absence of a qualified second supervisor may have allowed for different perspectives on that work. However, the University accepted this shortcoming and, in a letter to Ms C's representative on 14 May 2007, confirmed measures to ensure that this would not happen in future. It also appears that the Supervisor did not meet with Ms C as frequently as recommended. However, given that the Supervisor did not have significant concerns about Ms C's work, it is not clear that more frequent meetings would have made any substantial difference to the outcome of her research. Furthermore, the University also introduced measures to ensure that meetings with supervisors were more fully documented. Although the University identified these shortcomings and largely addressed them before the Ombudsman began an investigation into these matters, they did not offer Ms C a formal apology.

Therefore, I uphold this complaint to the extent that the University did not apologise for shortcomings they identified.

*(c) Recommendation*

28. From detailed discussion of these matters, I am satisfied that the University have addressed a significant range of issues relating to the quality of supervision offered to research students in the Faculty and the Ombudsman does not make any further recommendations to address underlying issues in this area. However, the Ombudsman does recommend that the University make a formal apology to Ms C for a standard of supervision which fell short of that to which she was entitled.

**(d) Review meetings were improperly conducted**

29. Ms C had the usual annual meetings to review the progress of her research on 9 June 2004 and 23 May 2005. Ms C's principal complaints in relation to these meetings relate to the second meeting, conducted in Department 2, at which it was decided that her work was of insufficient standard for her to continue as a PhD student. Her complaints were that the meeting was aggressive in tone, that unsubstantiated allegations of plagiarism were made, that no constructive feedback was offered, and that the decision to terminate her status as a PhD candidate was made improperly because no concerns had hitherto been raised and she did not, therefore, have a chance to remedy the problems. In addition, Ms C noted that the Supervisor was not present at that meeting.

30. The University investigated Ms C's complaints about the conduct of the second review meeting at the second stage of their complaints process. The investigator interviewed all of the participants in that meeting as well as the Supervisor. Notes of these interviews show that participants in the meeting had different perceptions of its tone. There are indications that the three academic staff who made up the panel had, independently, come to the conclusion that Ms C's work was not of sufficient standard for her to continue and that this news would have to be conveyed clearly to Ms C.

31. Ms C recalled that one of the panel members had asked her if the work she had submitted was her own or that of her supervisor. She considered this to be an inappropriate allegation of plagiarism. Although this matter was not investigated by the University, there is no record of any suspicion that Ms C may be submitting plagiarised work.



32. The panel's recommendation was confirmed by the Higher Degrees Committee and Ms C was informed of this, and of her right to appeal the decision, in a letter dated 12 September 2005. Prior to this, a meeting had been convened with Ms C on 17 August 2005 to explore the possibility of progressing with research at a Masters level.

*(d) Conclusion*

33. From the evidence available, it seems likely that the review panel told Ms C of their decision that she could not continue as a PhD student in an unequivocal way. While Ms C experienced this approach as being aggressive, it is not possible to come to an independent view of whether or not the conduct of the panel members was inappropriate.

34. Ms C considered that the panel had acted improperly in making a decision not to allow her to continue as a doctoral candidate without giving her a chance to address any shortcomings in her work to date. It is clear, however, that the panel were entitled to make the judgement they made and I am satisfied that their decision was confirmed in accordance with the appropriate procedure and with an appropriate right of appeal.

35. Ms C complained that the absence of her supervisor from the review meeting had put her in an unfair position. She raised this matter at the meeting of 17 August 2005 where it was confirmed that this was not contrary to current guidance. However, the staff at that meeting agreed to pursue this issue further. In the University's letter to Ms C's representative of 14 May 2007, they confirmed the steps they were taking to ensure the presence of a supervisor at progress review meetings in the future. In their submission to the Ombudsman, they also acknowledged that it was 'wholly unacceptable' for Ms C to have learned of the panel's decision without the involvement or prior knowledge of the Supervisor.

36. The University have accepted that their guidance at the time of Ms C's progress review meeting led to her being put in a situation they later regarded as unacceptable. They also took steps to address this issue before Ms C's complaint was referred to the Ombudsman. For these reasons, I do not uphold this complaint.

**(e) There were shortcomings in the University's handling of Ms C's complaint**

37. Ms C made her initial complaint to the University on 2 December 2005. The University investigated her complaint and responded on 17 January 2006. Ms C's complaints were upheld in part, principally because of the failure to inform her of the change of department. By way of remedy, the University offered to register Ms C as a Masters candidate, keeping the possibility of progression to a PhD open. They also offered to refund some of her fees. They did not accept Ms C's proposal of an external review of her work at that stage.

38. Ms C was not satisfied with the outcome or conduct of the University's investigation and asked for her complaint to be considered at the second stage of its procedure. In particular, she felt that the investigator has a conflict of interest as he had chaired the Higher Degrees Committee which confirmed the progress review panel's decision. She also considered that the investigation was insufficiently thorough, that it had not addressed the quality of supervision adequately and that her complaint should have been investigated under the procedure which was in place at the time of the matters she was complaining about.

39. Ms C made her 'stage two' complaint on 31 January 2006 and the University concluded its investigation on 26 April 2006. The University again acknowledged their error in failing to inform Ms C of her change of department and reiterated their willingness to reregister Ms C as a Masters candidate. They acknowledged that the Supervisor was the only member of staff with expertise in Ms C's area of study. They also offered to refund Ms C's fees in full if she chose not to continue her research as a Masters candidate.

40. Ms C's representative wrote to the University on 19 June 2006 in response to their investigation of her complaint and requested an independent assessment of Ms C's work by an external expert in the field. Ms C met with senior University staff on 21 July 2006 and it was agreed that an external assessment would be sought. This was done and the assessment was submitted on 10 November 2006. The external assessor concurred with the progress review panel's assessment of Ms C's work.

41. Ms C wrote to the University in response to the external assessment on 14 December 2006 saying that the assessment showed that her supervision

had been inadequate. The University's response on 8 February 2007 repeated the offer of a fee refund and further study. A further exchange of correspondence concluded with a letter from the University on 14 May 2007 which summarised the changes to procedures they intended to make in the light of their investigations into her complaints. Ms C had referred her complaint to the Ombudsman on 29 March 2007.

*(e) Conclusion*

42. The handling of Ms C's complaint was a lengthy process. There is evidence that the University could have avoided some of the delays in this process. However, I consider that the factors which contributed to the time taken to complete the complaints process included the reasonable attempts made to find a resolution and the delay in identifying an appropriate external assessor.

43. In relation to the appropriateness of the investigator chosen for the first stage of Ms C's complaint, I accept the University's argument that he was appointed with careful consideration of which member of staff would be best placed to investigate a complaint involving the Supervisor, who held significant positions within the Faculty. I do not consider that his formal role in the Higher Degrees Committee was such as to compromise a fair investigation. Furthermore, a second review stage within a complaints procedure allows for further independent scrutiny of a complaint.

44. I consider that the remedy offered by the University to Ms C in response to the errors they identified was reasonable. In addition, I commend the University for their candour and diligence in identifying areas for improvement in the supervision of research degrees highlighted by their investigation of Ms C's complaints. In these circumstances, I do not uphold this complaint.

45. The Ombudsman asks that the University notify her when the recommendation has been implemented.

**Explanation of abbreviations used**

The University	The University of Glasgow
Ms C	The complainant
The Faculty	The University's Faculty of Arts
Department 1	The department within which Ms C completed her undergraduate degree and began her MPhil research
Department 2	The department to which Ms C was transferred following her change of subject
The Supervisor	Ms C's primary supervisor for her new area of research