

Alison's Story

I was put on Capability proceedings and subsequently dismissed by University of Bristol who claims that I have failed to meet the criteria for progression from Lecturer to Senior Lecturer: The key criteria they have used to dismiss me is that I have failed to secure an adequate level of research funding. The following is a summary of my experience.

Background

I started my research career with a PhD at Queen Mary College, London and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. From there I undertook Post Doctoral Research Assistant posts at St George's Hospital Medical School, London and at the ETH in Zürich, Switzerland. I joined the Department of Medicine at Cambridge University in 1990, first as a Post Doc and later became a Senior Research Associate. Whilst at Cambridge I was awarded a Fellowship from the Arthritis Research Campaign lasting 8 years in total.

I arrived in Bristol in September 2000 to take up the position of Lecturer in Connective Tissue Biology in the Department of Clinical Veterinary Science. The final 2 years of my ARC Fellowship were converted into a project grant which I took with me to Bristol and was used to employ a Post Doc.

My job was a pathway 1 lecturer meaning I was required to contribute to both teaching and research as well as some administrative duties. My teaching duties have focussed around the BSc degree in Veterinary Pathogenesis (later renamed Veterinary Cellular and Molecular Science), of which I became Programme Director of in 2008. In 2009 I created and taught a biochemistry course for the new degree programme in Veterinary Nursing and Bioveterinary Science. I have supervised undergraduate research projects. I have had various administrative duties including that of pastoral mentor for postgraduate students which I took on in 2009.

When I was appointed the process of moving from Lecturer to Senior Lecturer was by promotion, which had to be applied for. It was not an essential requirement to become Senior Lecturer, a member of staff could stay at the level of Lecturer until they retired if they so wished. During my early years at Bristol I submitted a number of grant applications and successfully secured research funding in the form of a project grant from The Wellcome Trust and some running costs from the Bristol Cancer Research Fund. At one time my research team consisted of 2 postdocs and a research technician. I also managed to juggle my job with having a family, my 2 sons arriving in 2002 and 2004. I was happy remaining at the level of Lecturer and chose not to apply for promotion to Senior Lecturer.

In 2007 a new system was adopted by the University and it became a requirement for staff to progress from Lecturer to Senior Lecturer when they reached the top of the lecturer pay scale. In order to progress, certain criteria had to be fulfilled, some of these criteria were applied across the University others were Faculty specific. If the criteria to progress were not achieved then the member of staff had to enter into capability, the idea being was that the member of staff would be given support by the University to help them progress. If by the end of the capability process the member of staff had still not achieved

the criteria to progress several options could be adopted including dismissal from the University.

In 2007 my case for progression was supported at the Departmental level, however it was turned down by the Faculty. This was also the case in 2008 and in 2009. The reason given was that I had not met the criteria to progress, i.e. insufficient external grant funding. In 2010 my progression was turned down again by which time Professor Jo Price (JP) had been appointed Head of Department. JP decided I had to be performance managed which involved having regular meetings with her at approximate intervals of 2 months. A member of Personnel was normally present and took the minutes.

Over the next four years I continued to have regular meetings and went through the University's capability process which involves several stages, including hearings and appeals. At the meetings I was given a number of targets largely based around trying to obtain grant funding and I had to report on my progress. The overall target I was given was to obtain significant external grant funding. I was also set several other targets which were targets designed to help me succeed with the overall targets of obtaining grant funding, being focussed around the submission of grant applications. I was really trying hard to get grant funding and many of the applications I initiated myself became targets set by JP. I didn't just wait to be set targets, I got on with things myself. The Department helped financially to maintain certain items that were necessary for my research and also offered support for attending conferences.

Between 2010 and 2014 I have submitted approximately 19 grant applications ranging in size from £3000 to £500,000. Many have included co-applicants and collaborators. I made a point of contacting other researchers both within the university and at other establishments to try and build up collaborations in Europe, USA other regions of the UK as well as in Bristol. I found that most people were helpful in giving advice on my applications, many were happy to be a collaborator, but not everyone wanted to be a co-applicant in case this had a detrimental effect on their own chances of getting funding as a principal investigator. Although I acknowledge that my research area on the role of type 5 acid phosphatase in biological systems is rather specialised I am recognised to be an expert in my field.

My grant applications were read by many scientists before submission, including research directors. They were approved by the Departmental grant submission process and they were all signed off by the Head of Department as of being a suitable standard for submission.

I completed all of the targets associated with preparing grant proposals and submitting them that I was instructed to do. The feedback from many of these applications has been good, many of the have been regarded as internationally competitive.

Stage 1 capability hearing 2012

The case against me was that I had failed to progress to Senior Lecturer because I had failed to achieve the following objectives that relate to the progression criteria set by the faculty:

1. To obtain significant grant funding (sufficient to support a research assistant or associate for 2-3 years).
2. To obtain funding for a PhD student (probably with collaboration), and/or a Masters student.

These objectives were linked to the progression criteria

- R1 Proven ability to lead a research team
- R2 Evidence of ability to design, secure funding for, plan and implement research programmes
- R4 Evidence of participation in networks and collaborative working on research
- R5 Evidence of developing research skills in research students

I provided evidence that two of these criteria, R4 and R1, for which I had been placed on capability had been achieved several years before the commencement of capability. I was able to provide evidence that I had collaborated with many scientists on both a national and international level that had resulting in many publications. I was also able to provide evidence that I was capable of leading a research team, since in 2005 my team consisted of 2 post docs, a technician and an undergraduate student. As a result JP agreed to remove the criteria R1 and R4. Looking back I should have challenged these criteria 2 years earlier, but at the time the whole experience of being on capability was demoralising and paralysing. All my self-belief was gradually sucked out of me. I lost much confidence, however I didn't give up.

Stage two hearing 2013

I had submitted 4 grant applications in the last 12 months and had been awarded £5000 by the Langford Trust in 2012, however it was not considered to be a significant amount of grant funding. I was therefore issued with a stage 2 warning for 6 months. I questioned the fact that 6 months on stage 1 was not a realistic amount of time in which to write a grant application ready to submit by a fixed deadline and to receive details of the outcome of the review process. I was informed that since I had already been on the capability process for a long time already 6 months was enough. This was effectively backdating the stage 1 warning.

I appealed against the stage 2 capability and was given an extra 3 months on stage 2 to enable enough time to hear back from a grant application submitted to the BBSRC. It was also suggested that the regular meetings should no longer be held with JP as I had made it clear that the meetings with JP were, unpleasant, stressful and not helpful. It was recommended that I would have regular meetings with the Departmental Head of Research in future and only meet with JP on limited occasions. These new meetings were very helpful and I started to regain confidence in myself.

Unfortunately the application to BBSRC was not funded, (although I was later informed that the grant reviewing committee had considered it to be of international quality). I was required to attend a stage 3 hearing.

All staff can access Google Calendar to look at other people's timetables. I noticed that on JP's calendar details of my stage 3 capability hearing were visible for everyone to see. I

made a complaint to HR and they did get it removed. This is clearly against the university policy on confidentiality.

Stage 3 Hearing July 2014

This took place in Senate House. The panel consisted of a Lay Member of Council (chair), two Heads of School. The Deputy HR Director was the adviser to the panel. The management case was presented by Professor Jo Price and the Departmental HR manager. I was accompanied by my UCU representative.

My UCU representative asserted the fact that **the target of obtaining funding was not a “SMART” target since I could not control whether a submitted grant application would get funded.**

SMART targets are defined in the university guidance for managers. “At all stages throughout this procedure, the targets set must be “SMART” – *specific, measurable, achievable, reasonable and time-bound*. An example of a "SMART" target would be: By the end of the current academic year (*time-bound*), you will have produced and submitted for publication a minimum of one paper (*reasonable and achievable*) that is of a standard that would have reasonable expectation of being accepted in a journal of a specified quality (specify the journal(s) if possible) (*specific and measurable*).”

This is equivalent to the targets of writing a grant proposal of a certain standard and submitting it by a certain date. The target of being awarded funding after an application has been submitted to a grant funding body is beyond the control of myself and the University, it is not “SMART”.

During the hearing JP announced that she had taken one of my duties away from me without having told me, that of pastoral mentor for postgraduate students. This conversation was not included in the draft minutes of the meeting and when I tried to amend them I was told they had already been agreed by the panel.

The outcome of the hearing was that I was being dismissed from the university with three months notice. I was placed on immediate garden leave until the final day of my employment in October.

I submitted an appeal against the decision to dismiss me on August 7th 2014. The appeal hearing didn't take place until 1st December 2014. The outcome was that the decision to dismiss me was upheld.

A large proportion of non-clinical pathway 1 staff have no grant funding

UCU submitted a **Freedom of information request** to find out the value of grants as a Principal Investigator (PI) non clinical pathway 1 staff held across the University during the period January 2010 to July 2014 (table 1). I submitted this as additional documentation for my final appeal. Soon afterwards the UCU were sent a revised version (table 2). The explanation for the second version was that there was an error in the

calculation of the original data, however we were not told what this error was or how it was corrected.

While the revised version makes the University look slightly better, it still shows that **the majority of Lecturers do not have funding**. Significantly, there are **173 Senior Lecturers without grants** against 243 who have them. **Even at the level of Professor, 100 do not have funding**.

The FOI data suggests that the grant funding criteria are being applied unfairly to me. How is it fair that following progression the criteria no longer apply?

Conclusion

Throughout my career my capability was never questioned until Jo Price became Head of Department. Her actions have ruined my career and put enormous pressure on me and my family. I was the sole breadwinner of my family and I am currently registered as unemployed with the label of dismissed hanging over me.

The last 5 years have been an ordeal. I have found the capability process to be an extremely stressful and harassing process. The performance management meetings were not pleasant and not helpful and the decision to dismiss me has been influenced by financial issues. JP had a business plan in which she wanted to recruit more clinical staff at the expense of existing staff. I was even **described as being a former employee** on the University of Bristol website, back in August 2014 long **before my final date of employment** in October 2014.

I have managed to stay research active from the small amounts of funding that I received and by doing collaborative research involving undergraduate project students. I acknowledge that the Department has given me some financial support as well. Through collaborations with other national and international researchers I published papers whilst on capability. **I was included in REF 2014 and had one of the highest scores in my Department.**

I know that I have worked hard, I have been dedicated to my work and helped out whenever I have been asked to do so. I believe that I have been treated unfairly and I am determined to fight on.

Freedom of Information Request – Tables 1 & 2

UCU requested the following information from the University of Bristol.

The point below refers to non-clinical pathway 1 staff during the period January 2010 to July 2014 broken down into the following groups: a) professor b) reader/senior lecturer and c) lecturer. Also each group divided into males and females.

1. The number of staff who have been a principal investigator (PI) on a grant above £70,000. The number of staff who have been a PI on a grant below £70,000. The number of staff who have **NOT** been a PI on a grant.

Table 1 – version 1

		August 2010 - July 2014		
		Total (number)		
Position	Sex	Grants	Grants	Grants
		Not Secured	Secured <£70K	Secured >£70K
Lecturer	M	69	41	6
	F	45	27	2
	Total	114	68	8
Professor	M	76	133	118
	F	24	33	12
	Total	100	166	130
Reader/Senior Lecturer	M	105	112	36
	F	68	76	19
	Total	173	188	55
Grand Total		387	422	193

Notes

1. The data is taken from a download of ORCA at 20th September
2. The figures in the grant not secured column is calculated by counting staff who don't appear on the ORCA reports and those that do but the value of awards secured equals 0, of which there were 12 members of staff. For these 12 staff it is possibly that the ORCA record has not been updated with the value of the award.

Table 2 – revised version

REVISED (24/11/2014)		August 2010 - July 2014		
		Total number of staff		
		Grants	Grants	Grants
		Not	Secured	Secured
Position	Sex	Secured	<£70K	>£70K
Lecturer	M	69	15	32
	F	45	18	11
	Total	114	33	43
Professor	M	76	39	212
	F	24	10	35
	Total	100	49	247
Reader/Senior Lecturer	M	104	47	102
	F	69	35	59
	Total	173	82	161
Grand Total		387	164	451

Notes

1. The data is taken from a download of ORCA at 20th September
2. The figures in the grant not secured column is calculated by counting staff who don't appear on the ORCA reports and those that do but the value of awards secured equals 0, of which there were 12 members of staff. For these 12 staff it is possibly that the ORCA record has not been updated with the value of the award.
3. Based on staff at the above levels on 31st July 2014 across UoB
4. Data revised as error noted in v1. The revision does not affect the total but does affect the split - more staff in the over £70k column, fewer in the under £70k column.