

SPSO decision report

Case: 201201968, University of St Andrews
Sector: further and higher education
Subject: complaints handling
Outcome: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Miss C owed the university money because she had withdrawn from her course. She complained to the university about the way that a debt agency working on their behalf handled the recovery of her debt. She also complained that the university had not dealt adequately with her complaints and that communication from them was inappropriate.

We upheld Miss C's complaints. Our investigation found that she had raised several concerns with the university about the agency's handling of the debt recovery, but the university declined to respond to these and told her to continue dealing directly with the agency. We also found that the university's handling of Miss C's complaint was poor. We found that they failed to confirm receipt of her communications, missed agreed deadlines and provided inconsistent information. In addition, they sent communications to Miss C at an incorrect address and email account, even though she had provided the correct information.

Recommendations

We recommended that the university:

- apologise to Miss C for instructing her to continue to deal with the debt recovery agency;
- take appropriate action to reach an agreement with Miss C about repayment of the outstanding fees;
- apologise to Miss C for their unreasonable handling of her complaint;
- share our decision letter with relevant staff to remind them of the importance of timely responses to complaints, and of the need to explain and apologise to complainants if exceptional circumstances create delays in response; and
- review their procedures for assuring that external agencies acting on the university's behalf meet the relevant service standards, including putting in place monitoring arrangements.