

SPSO decision report

Case: 201300623, Scottish Qualifications Authority
Sector: Scottish Government and devolved administration
Subject: communication staff attitude and confidentiality
Outcome: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Following an unsuccessful appeal into Mr C's son's Higher Grade result, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) wrote to his school with the reasons for the decision, which the school then shared with Mr C. The SQA later also wrote to Mr C explaining why the appeal could not be granted. A further letter to the school, however, then appeared to contradict what had previously been explained. Mr C was concerned about the stated grounds on which the appeal was refused and questioned the reasons provided and the truthfulness of their statement that, in line with national standards, bullet point answers would receive zero marks.

Our investigation found that, while it was clear that the instructions said that bullet point answers should be discouraged, there was no specific reference to using bullet points and the award of 'zero marks' in SQA materials. We saw no evidence to suggest a deliberate intention to mislead, and noted that the SQA had undertaken a thorough investigation into the matter, apologised for the error, taken action to address this and provided clear explanations in their later correspondence with Mr C. However, we upheld the complaint, noting that they had accepted that their initial explanations were insufficient and did appear to contradict what was later said to the school. This only compounded Mr C's confusion and frustrations about the decision on the appeal and could have been avoided if the SQA had ensured their correspondence was clearer and more precise in the first place.

Recommendations

We recommended that the SQA:

- remind staff, as part of their refresher training on handling complaints following the appeals process, of the importance of providing clear, accurate explanations in communications to prevent unnecessary confusion and inconsistency.
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