

SPSO decision report

Case: 201401413, University of Dundee
Sector: further and higher education
Subject: policy/administration
Outcome: not upheld, recommendations

Summary

Mr C, who is a solicitor, complained on behalf of his client (Miss A). Miss A was studying at the university to become a teacher. Part of her course involved a practical placement in a school. During the first two days of the placement, the teacher who was mentoring Miss A made notes about her performance to discuss with her. Miss A read these notes and became upset as she found them very negative. She went to the university to explain her concerns to the course leader. As Miss A had not spoken with the teacher, she was advised to return to the school to discuss the notes. The following day Miss A met with the course leader and her tutor at the university. Her tutor planned a placement visit for the following week. Later that day, Miss A met with the head teacher at the school who subsequently decided to withdraw the placement. The university advised that there was no opportunity to switch to a different placement within the academic year and that Miss A would have to wait until the new semester to do this. Miss A was unhappy that she was unable to complete her course as planned and complained to the university. She also raised concerns about the level of support she received from the university when she told them about her problems at the school. The university advised Miss A that it was not possible to arrange an alternative placement within the academic year as these are arranged annually in advance and once students have started at a school, there is no opportunity to change unless there are extraordinary circumstances. They considered the head teacher's decision to withdraw the placement to be reasonable and based on his professional judgement.

During our investigation, we found that the relevant university handbook states that resits for failed or incomplete placements will take place in the following semester. Therefore, although we did not uphold Mr C's complaint about the arrangements for the placement, we did consider that the handbooks could provide clearer information to students on the withdrawal of placements by schools.

We also found that the university had provided Miss A with adequate support during her placement. Although we also did not uphold this aspect of Mr C's complaint, we were critical that the university did not address Miss A's concerns about support when responding to her complaints, so we made a recommendation about this too.

Recommendations

We recommended that the university:

- ensure that complaints under investigation are defined at the start of the process and that each of these receives an appropriate response; and
- ensure that future handbooks clearly explain the position on rearranging placements that have been withdrawn by the school.