

SPSO decision report

Case: 201407310, Glasgow Caledonian University
Sector: further and higher education
Subject: academic appeal/exam results/degree classification
Outcome: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Mr C failed a piece of course work on his postgraduate certificate course. His appeal against the result was not upheld. He submitted a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act and received evidence that suggested the university had not followed the assessment regulations when they held assessment boards that confirmed his fail. Specifically he received an email that the external examiner had sent stating that Mr C's resubmitted work should not be a fail. Mr C complained to the university that they had not followed assessment regulations and had not followed the advice of the external examiner. He also complained that the assessment board meetings were not quorate (having the necessary number of people present for decisions to be allowed to be made) nor properly attended by relevant board members. The university investigated and did not uphold his complaints.

Our investigation found that the university had not followed its regulations, although following Mr C's complaint, advice had been sought retrospectively from the examinations office, which suggested that the external examiner's views could be presented in writing. This had not been done at Mr C's assessment boards either.

We found that the inability to provide evidence that the external examiner's views were presented to the assessment board constituted an act of maladministration and that Mr C was entitled to an assessment board attended by the external examiner. We also found that the only available evidence of the external examiner's view showed they disagreed with the decision to fail Mr C. We did not find evidence that the assessment boards were not quorate or that the appropriate staff members did not attend.

It is not our role to consider questions of academic judgement and accordingly, it was not possible for our investigation to consider whether the correct mark was awarded, or whether the course as a whole should have been passed or not. Nor was it possible for us to order that a certain mark or qualification be awarded. It is our role to look at whether procedure was followed and in this case, mistakes were made. Where we find mistakes, our aim is to address them in such a manner as to place the complainant (if possible) in the situation they would have been in, had the error not occurred. We therefore recommended that the assessment board be re-held, while making it clear that this did not prejudice the outcome of the board, or require them to reach a specific decision on the work.

Recommendations

We recommended that the university:

- provide evidence in the form of a formal minute to show the assessment board for Mr C has been re-held with the external examiner in attendance;
- provide evidence that the university regulations regarding the attendance of external examiners are being reviewed at the earliest opportunity; and
- apologise to Mr C for the failings we identified.