

SPSO decision report

Case: 201407589, University of Edinburgh
Sector: further and higher education
Subject: policy/administration
Outcome: some upheld, recommendations

Summary

Mr C complained that he had been unfairly prevented from completing a university masters degree. Mr C said he had never been informed of the course-marking criteria. He had been invoiced for the third year of his studies, and paid the fees in full. The university had accepted the fees and had not offered a refund until he had complained. Mr C felt his academic appeal had been poorly handled and had taken an excessive amount of time.

The university said Mr C had been informed at the end of his first year that his marks were not high enough to proceed to year three of his studies: he had met the criteria to proceed to year two (successful completion of year which would result in a postgraduate diploma level qualification) but not to proceed to the third year (masters level). They acknowledged he had been invoiced in error, and apologised for this. They noted his refund had been processed as quickly as possible and that at busy times, such as the start of the academic year, refunds could be subject to delay. The university said that Mr C's academic appeal had been delayed due to the level of workload the academic appeals section had at that time.

We found that Mr C had been told at the end of the first year his marks were insufficient to proceed to year three of his studies. There was no evidence that Mr C had questioned this decision at the time. We did not uphold the complaint that the university unreasonably failed to make clear the criteria for progression.

The university had accepted the invoice was issued in error, but had not provided evidence the error had been addressed. We therefore upheld the complaint that the university unreasonably invoiced Mr C and accepted payment for tuition fees for the third year of the course. However, we did not consider the time taken for the university to refund the payment to be unreasonable in the circumstances, so we did not uphold this aspect of the complaint.

We also found that the academic appeal process had taken too long and the university had not been pro-active in informing Mr C of the delays, and so we upheld the complaint that the university unreasonably failed to meet their stated timescales in relation to the academic appeal.

Recommendations

We recommended that the university:

- provide evidence of the action they have taken to prevent a recurrence of the administrative error which led to a course invoice being issued before the final examination board meeting;
- review the handling of the academic appeal in order to prevent a recurrence of the delays that affected it; and
- apologise for the delays in determining the academic appeal and for failing to provide updates on its progress.