

SPSO decision report

Case: 201508572, University of Aberdeen
Sector: further and higher education
Subject: academic appeal/exam results/degree classification
Outcome: some upheld, recommendations

Summary

Mr C complained on behalf of Mr A. Mr A had previously submitted an academic appeal to the University of Aberdeen in relation to the examination of his PhD thesis. The appeal was not upheld.

Mr A had concerns about the administration in relation to the oral examination of his thesis, as well as the conduct of the examination. We found that the university had double-booked the room in which Mr A's examination had been scheduled to take place. We were critical of this and upheld this part of Mr C's complaint.

We also found that Mr A's examination had lasted for three hours and that he had not been offered a break. We noted that the university's Code of Practice in relation to oral examinations stated that breaks must be agreed when examinations last longer than two hours. This had not happened and we considered that it was the responsibility of the university to ensure that a break was offered. Since the university's guidance on oral examinations did not explain the process of agreeing breaks, we considered that the university should consider reviewing this.

Mr C raised a number of concerns about the way the university handled Mr A's academic appeal. We found that the university had adequately explored Mr A's concern about the partiality of the internal examiner who examined his thesis and we did not uphold this complaint. Mr C also raised concerns about the appeal panel's consideration of Mr A's concerns about monitoring and feedback. We found that the university had been unable to provide copies of progress-monitoring records. We therefore upheld this complaint.

Mr C further complained that the university had unreasonably allowed the school to introduce a document into the appeal when Mr A had not been given prior notice of the document. We found that the procedure in relation to appeal hearings encouraged prior submission of documentary evidence. We were critical that Mr A was not provided with a copy of the document, and that the appeal panel allowed the evidence to be heard when Mr A had not received a copy. We upheld this complaint.

Finally, we considered whether the appeal panel unreasonably took inaccurate or incomplete information into account at the appeal hearing. We did not find this to have been the case and therefore we did not uphold this aspect of Mr C's complaint.

Recommendations

We recommended that the university:

- apologise to Mr A for the inconvenience and anxiety caused by their failure to make reasonable arrangements to book the room;
- take steps to investigate the university's room booking system so that steps can be taken to prevent double-booking from happening again;
- apologise to Mr A for failing to offer a break during his oral examination;

- review and consider amending paragraph 11.3 of the university Code of Practice to ensure that the process of agreeing breaks is clear and ensure that when a break is offered, this is recorded;
- provide this office with evidence that improved procedures regarding record-keeping have been adopted;
and
- apologise to Mr A for failing to ensure that he had an opportunity to consider the evidence prior to the appeal hearing.