

SPSO decision report

Case: 201601175, University of Edinburgh
Sector: further and higher education
Subject: teaching and supervision
Decision: some upheld, recommendations

Summary

Ms C complained that during her time as a PhD student at the university, the university unreasonably failed to follow the code of practice for supervisors and research students. She specifically complained that the university failed to appoint a second supervisor for her, and that her main supervisor had not organised a first year review to assess her progress. Ms C also said the university unreasonably failed to follow the postgraduate assessment regulations, as her principal supervisor did not tell her about all of the assessment practice and requirements, or the code of practice. Ms C said that the delays and the non-performance of services, together with her loss of trust and confidence in the university, resulted in her withdrawing from the course. In addition, Ms C complained about the university's investigation of and response to her complaint.

We found that there was a considerable delay in the university appointing a second supervisor for Ms C and that they failed to act in accordance with the code of practice. While we were critical of this, we noted that there were frequent supervisory meetings with Ms C's main supervisor in line with the code of practice. The evidence also showed that the university unreasonably failed to carry out a review of Ms C's work within nine to twelve months of her enrolment, as set out in the code of practice. We therefore concluded that the university unreasonably failed to follow the code. We upheld this part of Ms C's complaint and made recommendations to address this.

In terms of the postgraduate assessment regulations, the evidence suggested that for Ms C's first academic year of study, it was her responsibility to be aware of the assessment practices and requirements. We also noted that the university may have provided Ms C with information on the code and regulations, including assessment practice and requirements, in a joining instruction mailing sent before Ms C started her course. We therefore considered that the university did not unreasonably fail to adhere to the regulations and we did not uphold this aspect of Ms C's complaint.

On the issue of complaints handling, whilst we did not see any evidence that the university's investigation of Ms C's complaint was inadequate, we considered that the university unreasonably failed to uphold Ms C's final stage complaint, and in this regard we considered that their response to Ms C's complaint was inadequate. We upheld this part of Ms C's complaint.

Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Apologise to Ms C for failing to adhere to the code of practice for supervisors and research students, for failing to appoint an assistant supervisor within a reasonable timescale and for unreasonably failing to uphold her final stage complaint.

What we said should change to put things right in future:

- Assistant supervisors for students should be appointed in accordance with the requirements of the code of

practice. One year reviews for part-time students should be carried out within nine to twelve months of their enrolment.

We have asked the organisation to provide us with evidence that they have implemented the recommendations we have made on this case by the deadline we set.