

SPSO decision report

Case: 201605875, University of the West of Scotland
Sector: universities
Subject: academic appeal/exam results/degree classification
Decision: some upheld, recommendations

Summary

Mrs C was studying for a PhD at the university. She was concerned about the conduct of her final oral examination. She complained that her supervisor was asked to leave the examination, contrary to university regulations. She also complained that she was not permitted to finish her answers during the examination and alleged that the external examiner had made comments to her supervisor that indicated he had a bias against students of her nationality.

Mrs C complained to us that there were administrative errors in the conduct of her oral exam, that some communication with her had been incorrectly headed and that the university did not respond reasonably to her complaints.

We found that it would have been reasonable for Mrs C to raise concerns about her supervisor being asked to leave the examination at the time, not after the fact, and we could not reach a finding in relation to her remaining concerns about the conduct of the examination. As such, we did not uphold her complaint of administrative errors in the conduct of the examination.

We found that there were two occasions where the university sent letters to Mrs C that contained incorrect headings, so we upheld the aspects of her complaint regarding this. However, we found that the university had already offered their apologies for these mistakes, and so we made no further recommendations in relation to this.

We found that the university's handling of Mrs C's complaints was unreasonable. We found that the university had not properly investigated the alleged statements of the external examiner which may have indicated that he had a bias against students of Mrs C's nationality. We also found that the university had not responded reasonably to Mrs C in relation to the other matters she raised. We upheld this part of her complaint.

Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Apologise to Mrs C that they did not respond reasonably to her complaints about the conduct of an oral examination. The apology should meet the standards set out in the SPSO guidelines on apology available at <https://www.spsso.org.uk/leaflets-and-guidance>.
- Properly investigate Mrs C's allegation that an external examiner made comments to her supervisor that indicated he had a bias against students of Mrs C's nationality, and advise her of this.
- Following the conclusion of the investigation of Mrs C's allegation that an external examiner made comments to her supervisor that indicated he had a bias against students of Mrs C's nationality, consider what impact, if any, this may have had on the outcome of Mrs C's oral examination. Take any reasonable steps as a result and advise Mrs C of this.

In relation to complaints handling, we recommended:

- Respond to all specific and relevant points raised in complaints.

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.