

SPSO decision report

Case: 201606182, Heriot-Watt University
Sector: universities
Subject: teaching and supervision
Decision: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Mr C was removed from his PhD studies following his annual review on the basis of his academic knowledge and performance not being of the required standard to complete his studies. Mr C appealed the decision through the academic appeals process and in supporting his appeal, he complained that the university had not responded appropriately to his requests to change his academic supervisor. He considered that the university's failure to support him in this matter had had an adverse impact on his studies. The university considered this matter, together with a consideration of his academic performance, as part of the academic appeals process. The university considered that Mr C had access to supervisory support during his studies and that his academic performance was not impacted by the relationship with his supervisor. They upheld their original decision to remove him from the course. Mr C was not satisfied with this response and brought his complaint to us. Mr C complained to us that the university had failed to respond reasonably to his requests for a change of supervisor.

We requested relevant documentation from the university relating to their consideration of Mr C's concerns about his supervision. The university delayed in providing information to us, and were unresponsive to several communications requesting information. The university's response explained that they had failed to appropriately consider Mr C's concerns about his relationship with his supervisor and that the university's policy was to encourage the relationship to develop over the first year and review matters at the annual review. The university acknowledged that this was not appropriate in the circumstances and that they missed signs that Mr C's relationship with his supervisor had broken down. The university accepted that the concerns about Mr C's supervisor should have been addressed through their complaints procedure rather than at an annual review and through the academic appeals process. Given the issues highlighted, and the delays caused by their failure to respond to our requests for information, the university wished to offer Mr C a sum of money in compensation. We accepted the university's acknowledgement of their failures in this case and we upheld the complaint.

Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Provide an apology to Mr C for failing to properly consider and respond to his requests for a change in supervisor. This apology should comply with the SPSO guidelines on making an apology available at <https://www.spsso.org.uk/leaflets-and-guidance>.
- Offer Mr C the agreed sum of money in recognition of the failings in responding to his concerns and the delays in assisting us with our investigations.

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

- Requests for a change in PhD supervisor should be properly considered and managed regardless of when they were raised. The university should adopt a more appropriate policy for considering requests for changing supervisors and this should be available to students.

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.