

SPSO decision report

Case: 201607825, West College Scotland
Sector: further and higher education
Subject: policy/administration
Decision: some upheld, recommendations

Summary

Ms C, who works for an advocacy and support agency, complained on behalf of her client (Miss A). Miss A was enrolled in a part-time course at the college. She became ill and submitted sick notes to her lecturer. Miss A said that her lecturer did not process the sick notes on time which led to her not receiving her bursary. Miss A said that she was undergoing medical treatment and tests and was intending on returning to her course. She said that the college agreed to pay her bursary, however, this did not materialise and she was withdrawn from the course. Miss A also said that her lecturer acted in an unprofessional manner by sharing information about her dismissal in a Facebook group message with other students. The college told Miss A that they had tried to contact her by phone. Miss A said that the college did not send her a letter advising of her dismissal, and that she found this to be unreasonable. Miss A said that she has suffered financial hardship and worry as a result of not receiving her bursary.

During the course of our investigation we found that the college did not consider writing a letter to Miss A to discuss her dismissal. We also found that the college did not follow the correct procedure when dismissing Miss A from her course as they did not formally invite her to a guidance interview. We upheld these complaints and made recommendations regarding their communications policy and the dismissal procedure. We also asked the college to write a formal apology to Miss A. We did not find any evidence that the lecturer discussed Miss A's dismissal in a group conversation with other students on Facebook therefore we did not uphold this aspect of Ms C's complaint.

Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Write a formal apology to Miss A for failing to contact her by appropriate means to discuss her dismissal, and to follow correct procedure when dismissing her. The apology should comply with SPSO's guidance on apology, available at www.spsso.org.uk/leaflets-and-guidance.

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

- Review their communication policy for staff, particularly in relation to the use of social media. Guidance should also be included regarding the importance of keeping accurate records of communication with students.
- Review the Student Attendance and Progress Procedure for their staff, providing clearer guidance on the steps that should be followed.

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.