

SPSO decision report

Case: 201609166, City Of Glasgow College
Sector: further and higher education
Subject: policy/administration
Decision: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Ms C applied for, and accepted, a place on a course at the college. The price of the course was advertised on the college's website and in the course brochure as being £650. During the first unit of the course, Ms C received an invoice for £1,950 in course fees. Ms C queried this with the college but did not receive a response. When she received a further invoice, which she received after starting the second unit, she contacted the college again. The college explained that the fee was actually £650 per unit and that the course consisted of three units. They offered to reduce the fee by ten percent in light of the poor customer service, but would not reduce the fee to £650. Ms C highlighted to the college that the fee of £650 was as advertised on their website and in the course brochure. The college offered to further reduce the invoice, and stated that Ms C had five working days to accept the offer or she would be immediately withdrawn from the course. Ms C complained to us that the college acted unreasonably by charging her more than the cost of the course as advertised on their website and in the brochure. She further complained that the college acted in an unreasonable manner when they emailed her asking her to pay the amount they considered she was due the college.

We examined information from the college's brochure, which indicated that the fee for Ms C's one year course was £650. We also examined the college's website, which noted the start date, the length of the course and the cost as £650. There was no indication that the cost was £650 per unit. In their responses to Ms C, the college had accepted that the information on their website was misleading. We concluded that it was reasonable for Ms C to have interpreted the information on the college's website and brochure as meaning that the course fee was for the whole course, rather than for each individual unit. We upheld Ms C's first complaint because we considered that the college had not provided her with clear and accurate information about the course fees before the course began.

Having considered the contents of the college's email to Ms C when they asked for the outstanding amount, our view was that the college did not appropriately recognise the particular circumstances of her complaint and that the wording could be perceived to have been threatening. Therefore, we upheld Ms C's second complaint. We made a number of recommendations to the college as a result of Ms C's complaints.

Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Reimburse Ms C for the amount she paid over the advertised £650 fee, taking into account that she was entitled to some Student Awards Agency for Scotland funding towards this. The payment should be made by the date we have indicated. If payment is not made by that date, interest should be paid at the standard interest rate applied by the courts from that date to the date of payment.
- Apologise to Ms C for the content of their email to her. The apology should meet the standards set out in the SPSO guidelines on apology available at www.spsso.org.uk/leaflets-and-guidance.

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

- The college should have clear and accurate information about course fees on their website and in their course brochure.

In relation to complaints handling, we recommended:

- The particular circumstances of a complaint should be recognised when staff are responding to the complaint. Staff should be mindful of how the wording of their complaints responses could be perceived.

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.