

SPSO decision report

Case: 201705961, West College Scotland
Sector: colleges
Subject: quality (including complaint handling)
Decision: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Miss C complained about the college's handling of her complaints about being abused on a college-created social media page by another student, and about plagiarism of her work by other students. Miss C also raised concerns about the way the college handled her complaint about their complaints handling.

In relation to Miss C's complaints about online abuse and plagiarism, we found that the college failed to provide her with clear explanations at the outset about exactly what policies were being used to deal with her complaints; how long they might take to investigate; and what information, if any, she would be able to receive about the outcomes, given the need to protect other students' personal data. The college did not proactively keep Miss C updated about the progress of their investigations, and did not tell her the outcomes. Miss C was only told the outcomes by the college after we became involved. In responding to our investigation, the college failed to provide us with a copy of evidence, even heavily redacted, to show that investigations into online abuse and plagiarism took place.

Regarding Miss C's complaint about the college's complaints handling, we found that the college failed to follow their complaints handling procedure, for example in relation to contacting Miss C after she submitted her formal complaint to ensure everyone involved was clear from the start about exactly what was being investigated. The college said they did not provide the social media service and had no control over its operation; we concluded this statement was unreasonable, as the social media page was created by a member of college staff for a college course, it was self-moderated by students, also moderated by staff, and staff were able to remove the abusive posts Miss C complained about.

We upheld Miss C's complaints and made a number of recommendations, including asking them for evidence of actions they said they had taken already.

Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Apologise to Miss C for the college's communication with Miss C at the outset not being clearer; the unreasonable delay in the college providing Miss C with information about the outcome of their investigations into her complaints of online abuse and plagiarism; and the college's handling of her complaint, under the complaints handling procedure, being unreasonable.

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

- The college should consider adding sections on the use by students and staff of such college-created social media pages to their existing policies.

In relation to complaints handling, we recommended:

- College staff need to know what information can be given to students, who have complained about other students, for example with regards to other students' behaviour or plagiarism of work.
- College staff should explain to students when they first submit their complaint: what procedure is being used to deal with their complaint (in particular if it is not a CHP complaint); the mandatory, guideline or likely timescales for their complaint being dealt with; and what information, if any, the student will receive about the outcome.

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.