

SPSO decision report



Case: 201708677, University of Edinburgh
Sector: universities
Subject: complaints handling
Decision: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Mr C complained that the university's communication regarding his complaint was unreasonable and that they failed to conduct their investigation of his complaint to a reasonable standard.

We found that there had been delays in the university's communication and that inappropriate and unprofessional language had been used by a key staff member in internal communication about Mr C. We saw evidence of Mr C's concerns having been minimised or dismissed, rather than being taken seriously with efforts being made to address them. We considered that the poor communication in respect of Mr C's complaints had a significant impact on his learning experience. Therefore, we upheld this aspect of Mr C's complaint.

In relation to the complaint investigation, we noted that the investigator had not consulted the supporting evidence Mr C submitted with his complaint. We considered that these documents should have been read and understood before investigative interviews were carried out, so that there was a full understanding of the matters Mr C complained about. We also found that the investigator had been overly reliant on subjective statements. We considered that the investigation fell below a reasonable standard and failed adequately to address Mr C's concerns. Therefore we upheld this aspect of Mr C's complaint.

Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Apologise to Mr C for the standard of communication (with a recognition of the impact this had on him), for failing to consult the evidence he had submitted in support of his complaint and for being overly reliant on subjective statements. The apology should meet the standards set out in the SPSO guidelines on apology available at <https://www.spsso.org.uk/leaflets-and-guidance>.

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

- Staff involved with complaints should communicate in a professional manner at all times.
- Staff investigating complaints should ensure that their conclusions can be supported by evidence.

In relation to complaints handling, we recommended:

- Staff involved in complaints should refer to the SPSO's Report: Making Complaints Work for Everyone. Additional support in dealing with complaints, if required, can be requested from the Complaints Standards Authority: <http://www.valuingcomplaints.org.uk>.