

## SPSO decision report



**Case:** 201802084, Queen Margaret University  
**Sector:** universities  
**Subject:** welfare  
**Decision:** upheld, recommendations

### Summary

Mrs C complained on behalf of her daughter (Miss A) about the support the university provided to Miss A. Miss A had lost two grandparents, following an extended period of illness. This affected her time at university and she did not pass one of the modules necessary to progress to fourth year. After having an academic appeal turned down, Miss A returned to university to retake the module. The module was due to take place in the first semester but was cancelled due to an unexpected staff absence and rescheduled to take place in the second semester. This meant that Miss A did not have any tutorials or classes during the first semester but still had financial outlays relating to her rented flat and living away from home.

Mrs C complained that, throughout this time, Miss A did not receive sufficient support from the university. She highlighted concerns about Miss A's experience of the university's personal academic tutor provision. She also complained that the university failed to provide appropriate support or guidance following the cancellation of the module.

The university had partially upheld Mrs C's original complaint and had acknowledged that they had not provided sufficient support and guidance following the cancellation of the module. In respect of the personal academic tutor provision, the university initially did not identify any failings; however, in a subsequent response, they outlined a number of improvements relating to the department's personal academic tutor provision.

We found that the personal academic tutor provision Miss A had received had not been delivered in line with the university's internal policies and guidance. In particular, we identified a lack of sufficient record-keeping and structure. We concluded that there was insufficient evidence that the delivery of the personal academic tutor provision was adequate or in line with the university's own policies and procedures.

Overall, we concluded that the university did not provide Miss A with an appropriate and reasonable level of support. The university had acknowledged some failings in response to Mrs C's complaint but had not identified failings in other areas. Furthermore, where the university had identified failings, it was not clear that a reasonable level of reflection, learning or service improvement had taken place as a result. For these reasons, we upheld this complaint.

### Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Apologise to Miss A for failing to provide a sufficient personal academic tutor service and for failing to provide an appropriate level of support and guidance to her following the cancellation of the module. The apology should meet the standards set out in the SPSO guidelines on apology available at [www.spsso.org.uk/information-leaflets](http://www.spsso.org.uk/information-leaflets).
- Address Mrs C's point about the accommodation/living costs incurred while Miss A did not have any classes to attend or academic work to undertake. This response should go directly to Mrs C.

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

- Department staff members who act as personal academic tutors should be aware of their duties and responsibilities, in line with the university's policy and guidance.
- The university should learn from Miss A's experience. When a module is cancelled, the university should make every attempt to meet the terms and conditions contained in 'essential information for students'. This includes taking steps to "mitigate any disruption arising from the change and to identify appropriate alternative arrangements."