

SPSO decision report



Case: 201807591, Heriot-Watt University
Sector: Universities
Subject: academic appeal / exam results / degree classification
Decision: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Miss C, a student adviser, complained on behalf of a student (Miss A) regarding the university's stage 2 appeal outcome letter. She complained that the outcome letter took 20 weeks to be completed as opposed to the published timescale of four weeks; that the university did not apologise for failings they had identified through the appeal consideration; that no further reasons were given for the stage 1 appeal being turned down; and that it was not clear whether the additional evidence provided at stage 2 was taken into account.

We considered that the delay in the stage 2 outcome letter being issued was unreasonable, although we noted that the university had apologised for this and had made changes to prevent this occurring in the future. We accepted that it will not always be appropriate to put information about lessons learned in the academic appeal outcome letter; however, we considered that any failings identified in appeal should be formally apologised for, either in the outcome letter or in a separate letter. We also considered that the stage 2 appeal outcome letter could have stated more clearly that all additional evidence had been considered. We upheld Miss C's complaint.

Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Apologise to Miss A for the failings identified in their consideration of her stage 2 appeal (ie missing opportunities to support her during her studies and not providing a full response at stage 1 of the appeals process), failing to apologise for the failings identified in consideration of her stage 2 appeal, failing to state more clearly that all additional evidence provided at stage 2 of the appeals process was considered. 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:

- Ensure that, regardless of the outcome of an appeal, any failings identified are apologised for.
- The stage 2 appeal outcome letter should clearly communicate the evidence that has been considered.

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.