

Scottish Parliament Region: Lothian

Case 200502324: Queen Margaret University College

Summary of Investigation

Category

Scottish Further and Higher Education: Higher education; Teaching and supervision.

Overview

The complainant was concerned about the level of supervision provided for his masters dissertation; he felt this was inadequate and said he was only supervised for part of his dissertation.

Specific complaint and conclusion

Supervision arrangements for his MSc dissertation were inadequate (*not upheld*).

Redress and recommendation

The Ombudsman recommends that the University College reinforce to staff the importance of following their policy that, on completion of supervision, copies of the completed forms relating to the supervision are kept in the student's central file.

The University College have accepted the recommendation and will act accordingly.

Main Investigation Report

Introduction

1. On 22 January 2006 the Ombudsman received a complaint from a man (Mr C) about supervision arrangements for his MSc dissertation while he was a student at Queen Margaret University College (the University College). Mr C said that he had been told by his supervisor that he could only have supervision on two parts of his dissertation. He later discovered that other students were supervised on all aspects of their dissertation.

2. The complaint from Mr C which I have investigated is that supervision arrangements for his MSc dissertation were inadequate.

Investigation

3. The investigation of this complaint involved obtaining all the relevant documentation and complaint files. I have seen the student handbook for this course, relevant University College procedures and QAA guidance. I have also read a draft of a section of Mr C's dissertation with annotated comments by the supervisor. I have set out my findings of fact and conclusion. I have not included in this report every detail investigated but I am satisfied that no matter of significance has been overlooked. Mr C and the University College have been given an opportunity to comment on a draft of this report.

Supervision arrangements for his MSc dissertation were inadequate

4. Mr C's dissertation was failed at its first submission in May 2005 and then again at resubmission in September 2005. He appealed under the University College's academic appeal procedure for a review of this decision, complaining in part about the lack of supervision and said he had only had supervision for the introduction and literature review part of his dissertation. On 15 November 2005, he received a letter informing him that his request for a review was being refused. He asked for a further consideration of this and, on 15 December 2005, he was informed that the University College considered there were no grounds for holding an academic appeal hearing, as his complaints had not been upheld.

5. In response to his complaint to the Ombudsman, I wrote to the University College asking for information on the supervision process, guidance given to

supervisors and for details of the supervision given to Mr C.

6. In their reply, the University College stated that each student was given a dissertation handbook. This sets out in great detail the responsibilities of students and what they can expect from supervisors and the process of supervision. In addition, supervisors are given additional guidance from the dissertation module coordinator.

7. According to the handbook, all students are entitled to seven hours of supervision. All aspects of the dissertation are allotted segments of this time with the exception of the discussion and conclusions. The handbook states that:

'The discussion and conclusions will be entirely the student's own, independent, work and no aspect of these chapters should be discussed with supervisors prior to thesis submission.'

8. The University College explained that this had been added to the handbook, following recommendations from external examiners that written feedback should not be given on these sections to ensure that they represented the student's interpretation of the study undertaken.

9. The University College also said they had a recommended system of monitoring the contact between supervisor and student. At the end of each session, a form was normally completed by the student highlighting points of discussion and action to be taken. This would be signed by both parties and a copy kept on file. With reference to Mr C's supervision, the University College said that there were no written records of his sessions as Mr C's supervisor had left the University College and their records had not been kept.

10. At my request, the supervisor provided comments on the supervision given. He also provided a copy of a draft of the results section of Mr C's dissertation. This included annotated written comments which he had made and given to Mr C. The supervisor said the supervision given to Mr C had been no different from that given to other students, that he had raised concerns with Mr C about the depth of his understanding and the limitations in his use of English. As a result, the supervisor had provided Mr C with more detailed written comments than usual and discussed

the feedback he had received following the failure of his dissertation at its first submission. He also said that Mr C had not used all of his allotted seven hours but that this was due to Mr C's failure to request meetings and not his (the supervisor's) refusal to grant them.

11. Correspondence between Mr C and the supervisor in January 2006 dealt with the substantive reasons for failure but Mr C did not raise the issue of the supervisor only supervising part of the thesis directly with him.

12. The University College confirmed that Mr C had met the standards of English required for entry to this course, grade 6 on the IELTS, and that masters students were offered support with English language with additional courses. They confirmed that take-up of these courses was optional.

Conclusion

13. Students at this level are required to take a large part of the responsibility for their own work and for driving the supervision process. I found the dissertation handbook to be very clear about the standards expected of dissertations and the respective responsibilities of students and supervisors. It was unfortunate that no written records had been stored by the University College relating to Mr C's own supervision, given that the core of his complaint related to what he believed he had been told by his supervisor. In response to a draft report, the University College confirmed their policy stated this should have been done. However, the copy of the section of Mr C's dissertation with comments provided by the supervisor related to a section in which he maintained he had not been supervised. These comments were clear and provided Mr C with direction on the improvements needed. In these circumstances, and having taken into account all the evidence, I do not uphold this complaint.

Recommendation

14. Although there were adequate records to confirm Mr C had been supervised in line with the procedure, the records of this were not kept by the University College. They have confirmed that this should have happened. The Ombudsman is therefore recommending the University College reinforce to staff the importance of following their policy that following completion of supervision, copies of the completed forms relating to the supervision are kept in the student's central file.

15. The University College have accepted the recommendation and will act accordingly.

29 August 2006

Annex 1

Explanation of abbreviations used

Mr C	The complainant
The University College	Queen Margaret University University College
The supervisor	Member of the University College's academic and teaching staff responsible for supervising Mr C's dissertation
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

List of legislation and policies considered

Queen Margaret University College	Modular Masters Programme Full-Time Route: MSc Dissertation Handbook 2004/2005
	Student Complaints Procedure 2005
	Academic Appeals Procedure 2005
	Assessment Regulations
	Taught Postgraduate Framework
QAA Code of Practice	Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes – September 2004