

Case 200600124: University of Glasgow

Summary of Investigation

Category

Scottish Further and Higher Education: Academic Appeal

Overview

The complainant (Mr C) raised a number of concerns about the way the University of Glasgow (the University) dealt with his appeal, regarding their decision to award him an honours degree in a class lower than he felt he should have received.

Specific complaints and conclusions

The complaints which have been investigated are that:

- (a) the University failed to fully consider his appeal against the degree they awarded him (*not upheld*); and
- (b) it took the University too long to consider Mr C's appeal (*upheld*).

Redress and recommendations

The Ombudsman recommends that the University:

- (i) apologise to Mr C for the delay in reaching a decision regarding his appeal; and
- (ii) advise her on the steps they have taken to ensure that delays in conducting and concluding appeals do not recur.

The University has accepted the recommendations and will act on them accordingly.

Main Investigation Report

Introduction

1. The Ombudsman received a complaint from Mr C about the way that Glasgow University (the University) made their decision, following Mr C's appeal against the class of degree the University awarded him. The University did not uphold his appeal. Mr C also complained about the length of time it took the University to consider his appeal against an honours degree (the Degree) he was awarded. Mr C's appeal had resulted from his view that the Degree had not fairly reflected his overall academic performance (his aggregate mean score), in his final fourth year of study, but instead reflected the inadequate mark he was awarded for an individual fourth year engineering project (the Project) which he stated was unfairly marked, due to circumstances outwith his control. Mr C complained that, in his view, the University Senate¹ Appeals Committee (the Committee) had not taken appropriate account of his allegation that he had not been adequately supervised on the Project. Mr C stated that he had suffered greatly because of this, as the Project counted for 25 percent of his overall degree and, furthermore, his low Project mark was discrepant with his other academic results.

2. The complaints from Mr C which I have investigated are that:
- (a) the University failed to fully consider his appeal against the degree they awarded him; and
 - (b) it took the University too long to consider Mr C's appeal.

3. Mr C understands that we cannot consider complaints about the merits of the decision taken by the University in awarding him the Degree, as this concerned the University's academic judgement. We also cannot alter or make the University change the degree classification it awarded Mr C. This is defined within the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002 Section 7(1) and Schedule 4 10(a).

Investigation

4. The investigation of this complaint involved obtaining and reading all the relevant documentation, including correspondence between Mr C and the

¹ Senate is the senior academic body of the University. Legally and constitutionally Senate is responsible for the academic activity of the University – that is, its teaching and research. Senate is also thus responsible for the maintenance of the University's academic standards

University. I also reviewed correspondence between the Student's Representative Council of the University (the SRC) and the University, minutes of the Preliminary Disposal Meeting and minutes of the Full Hearing of the Committee, University internal memorandum, meeting notes, emails and extracts from the log book and diary of Mr C's supervisor (the Supervisor). On 14 August 2007 I made a written enquiry to the University and received their response dated 11 September 2007. I also conducted a telephone interview with, and received an emailed reply from, the Assistant Director of the University Senate Office (the Assistant Director). I examined the University guidelines for students on the conduct of projects (see Annex 2).

5. 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 were given an opportunity to comment on a draft of this report.

(a) The University failed to fully consider his appeal against the degree they awarded him

6. According to Mr C, he stated that the grounds of the decision of his appeal were unfair as the procedure was defective, due to a lack of investigation and full consideration of his appeal.

7. According to Mr C the Supervisor failed to ensure that adequate time was allocated to him for his supervision and feedback on the Project. He stated that 'at the end of [the Project], the meetings between me and [the Supervisor] had reduced, due to him not being available'. Furthermore, Mr C alleged that he had not received a level of academic support equal to other students. In Mr C's view, had he done so, he would have completed the Project to an academic standard which would have ensured he was awarded a degree commensurate with his academic efforts and abilities.

8. Mr C also told me that, in his view, he had been further disadvantaged, as other students had had access to previous years' engineering reports and samples but he was unable to do so, as this was the first time the project he had undertaken had been carried out at the University.

9. Mr C also alleged that the Supervisor had not met deadlines set by the University, regarding the submission of interim reports about Mr C's academic progress. In Mr C's view, this curtailed the opportunity for him to receive qualitative feedback about his academic progress in relation to the Project.

10. In their reply to my enquiries, the University stated that the report of the Full Committee Hearing held on 22 March 2006 (Report 1), had included a commentary which addressed Mr C's allegations that he had received inadequate project supervision. It was recorded that the Committee had considered the relevant documentation presented to it; this included statements provided by both Mr C and Mr C's Head of Department² (the Head). It was also recorded that the Committee had found and considered evidence of meetings that had taken place between Mr C and the Supervisor. Furthermore, the Committee had considered comments made by the Head that, in his view, the Supervisor's use of a personal log book to record meetings with Mr C, was over and above standard requirements (see paragraph 4). I have been provided with a copy of Report 1 and noted the commentary.

11. The University told me that, within Report 1, the Committee had observed that the number of meetings between Mr C and his Supervisor had reduced during February and March 2005 and also that Mr C had been required to resolve some of the issues he raised on his own through independent study. The Committee stated 'they had accepted the Department's view that this was part of the ethos of honours projects, where students were required to use their initiative and work independently with guidance from their supervisors'.

12. Thereafter, the Committee concluded that Mr C had received a level of support that was 'on a par with other students in the Department' and commensurate with the ethos of an honours degree, particularly in a department which was a research intensive environment.

13. Furthermore, I have seen in Report 1 that the Committee stated it was considered to be a question of judgement as to how much guidance should be provided to students. In my discussion with the Assistant Director on this aspect, she told me that during the period Mr C was working on the Project, the Faculty of Engineering (the Faculty) guidelines on individual projects did not include specific reference to how much time students should expect to see their supervisors (see Annex 2).

14. Within their reply to my enquiries, the University addressed the issue that, as Mr C's project was new, he felt he was disadvantaged, as he was unable to

² the Department of Electronics and Electrical Engineering (the Department)

access examples of reports produced by students in previous years as other students in his peer group could do (see paragraph 8). This issue had been considered and recorded within the report from the Committee at the Preliminary Disposal Meeting on 19 January 2006 (Report 2) and the Committee concluded that this situation would not have disadvantaged any student as long as they received adequate project supervision. However, the appeal was referred to the Full Hearing, as the Committee concluded that further evidence was required concerning supervisory arrangements and progress reports. Thereafter, the University told me that the Committee had decided at the subsequent Full Hearing on 22 March 2006 (Report 1) that a decision was reached that Mr C's supervision had been adequate (see paragraph 12). I have been provided with a copy of Report 1 and Report 2 and noted the commentaries (see paragraph 10).

15. Within their reply to my enquiries, the University told me that the Committee had acknowledged that the Department's interim assessment about the Project had been late. However, they stated that 'the Head had reported that procedures were such that students did not receive any feedback from this assessment, and therefore [Mr C] had not been denied any feedback due to its lateness. The Committee accepted that [Mr C] had not been disadvantaged against other students in his year; although they suggested that the Department should review its procedures to consider whether there would be benefits in providing students with feedback in the interim assessment'.

16. In my review of Report 1, I noted that Mr C had attended the Appeal Hearing and it was recorded that 'the appellant confirmed that the agreed areas of the appeal had been discussed and that the hearing had been fair'. Thereafter, the Committee unanimously resolved to dismiss Mr C's appeal.

(a) Conclusion

17. Mr C was dissatisfied about the way the Committee reached its decision following his appeal hearing on 22 March 2006 against the class of degree he was awarded. Within my review of all the submitted paperwork including Reports 1 and Report 2, I have seen evidence within Report 1 and Report 2 that the Committee recorded and considered all Mr C's concerns (see paragraphs 13, 14 and 16). Furthermore, I have also noted that, within Report 1, it was recorded that Mr C had agreed that the areas of his appeal had been discussed and that the appeal hearing he had attended on 22 March 2006 had been fair (see paragraph 16). While I acknowledge that Mr C remained

dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeal, the evidence from the documentation I have seen supports my view that the decisions made by the Committee were taken after the Committee had considered the relevant facts associated with each of the areas of Mr C's concerns. I also consider that the information recorded in Report 1 is verification that the Committee examined and discussed in detail, and in Mr C's presence, the reasons why they reached the decisions they made (see paragraphs 10 to 16). I have seen no evidence that the appeal was defective or unfair. Having taken all these circumstances into account, I do not uphold this complaint.

(a) *Recommendation*

18. The Ombudsman has no recommendations to make.

(b) It took the University too long to consider Mr C's appeal

19. Mr C stated that he submitted his appeal to the University on 12 August 2005 but that he did not receive the final result until 31 March 2006. In Mr C's view, the length of time taken to conclude his appeal was much longer than it should have been.

20. In my review of the documentation, I observed that Mr C's appeal was submitted to the Faculty Appeals Committee via the SRC on 12 August 2005 and acknowledged by the Faculty Secretary on 15 August 2005. Thereafter, the Department considered the appeal, and on 24 November 2005, advised the Faculty that there were no grounds to uphold Mr C's appeal. A Faculty meeting held on 25 November 2005 for Preliminary Disposal of Appeal dismissed Mr C's appeal. Thereafter, the SRC appealed to the Senate on 15 December 2005 and, in addition, complained that the delays to the appeal had become unacceptable and quoted from the University Calendar, 'When a hearing is required, the Committee shall meet within 20 working days of receipt of the letter of appeal, or as soon thereafter as is practicable'. The Preliminary Disposal Meeting of the Committee was subsequently held on 19 January 2006 and the Full Committee Hearing sat on 22 March 2006 (see paragraphs 10 and 14).

21. Within their response to me, the University expressed their regret about the length of time Mr C's appeal had taken before it reached a conclusion. In my review of Report 2, I have seen on record that the Committee had noted their serious concerns at the length of time the Faculty had taken to consider Mr C's appeal under preliminary disposal. In particular, the Committee had

expressed concern about the length of time taken by the Department in providing a response to the Faculty. The Senior Senate Assessor of Student Appeals had written to the Clerk of the Senate on this issue. This was followed by correspondence with the Dean of the Faculty (the Dean). According to the University, the Hearing for the Appeal to Senate was convened as quickly as Committee members' availability would allow and this should have been on 24 February 2006. However, this date had had to be postponed due to staff illness until the next available opportunity arose on the 22 March 2006, when the Full Hearing was held.

22. In addition, within Report 2, the Committee noted that Mr C had submitted a revised appeal to the Faculty on 15 August 2005 but that no outcome was forthcoming until 25 November 2005. Furthermore, the fact that the Faculty had considered the appeal, including the Department's response, only on 24 November 2005 (this being the date when the SRC representative had advised the Faculty that the Clerk of Senate had been informed of the delay), had caused particular concern to the Senate Appeals Panel. Thereafter, the Panel took the view 'that the matter called into question the thoroughness of attention the Faculty had given to [Mr C]'s appeal. It was agreed and recorded within [Report 2] that the Senior Senate Assessor should write to the Clerk of Senate and Territorial Vice Principal for Engineering expressing the Committee's concern in this matter.'

23. Within the Assistant Director's emailed response, she confirmed that 'following the concerns expressed by the Committee' (see paragraphs 21 and 22), the Senior Senate Assessor for Appeals wrote to the Clerk of Senate on 25 January 2006 'expressing concern at the delay in the handling of [Mr C]'s appeal by the Faculty. This was copied to the Territorial Vice Principal.' Thereafter, the Clerk of Senate wrote to the Dean on 27 January 2006 to raise the Senate Assessor's concern about the Faculty delay with the Appeal.

(b) Conclusion

24. According to Mr C, the University had taken too long to consider and reach a decision on his appeal. The University have acknowledged this to me and expressed regret at the length of time taken for Mr C's appeal to reach a conclusion. Within Report 2 it is clearly recorded that the Committee had serious concerns about the length of time the Faculty had taken over the appeal. It is clear from the documentation I have seen that this concern was communicated to senior levels within the University. Nevertheless, it is not

clear what steps the University have taken in an effort to ensure a similar situation does not recur. Accordingly, having taken these circumstances into account, I uphold this complaint.

(b) Recommendation

25. In light of this complaint the Ombudsman recommends that the University:
- (i) apologise to Mr C for their delay in reaching a decision regarding his appeal; and
 - (ii) advise her on the steps they have taken to ensure such delays in conducting and concluding appeals do not recur.
26. The University has accepted the recommendations and will act on them accordingly. The Ombudsman asks that the University notify her when the recommendations have been implemented.

Explanation of abbreviations used

Mr C	The complainant
The University	The University of Glasgow
The Degree	2.2 Bachelor of Engineering honours degree in Electronic and Electrical Engineering awarded to Mr C
The Project	Mr C's individual fourth year engineering project
The Committee	The University Senate Appeals Committee which heard Mr C's appeal
The SRC	The Student Representative Council
The Supervisor	Mr C's Supervisor
The Assistant Director	The Assistant Director of the University Senate Office
Report 1	The report of the full Committee Hearing held on 22 March 2006
The Head	Mr C's Head of Department
The Department	the Department of Electronics and Electrical Engineering
Report 2	The report of the Committee at the Preliminary Disposal Meeting on 19 January 2006
The Faculty	The Faculty of Engineering

List of legislation and policies considered

Individual Projects 2004-2005:

Guidelines for students on the conduct of projects; Department of Electronics and Electrical Engineering, University of Glasgow. September 2004