

Case 200700040: University of Edinburgh

Summary of Investigation

Category

Higher Education: Assessment and record-keeping

Overview

The complainant (Mr C) raised concerns about the way in which his resubmitted dissertation was assessed by the University of Edinburgh (the University). He also complained that the University had not updated their records with his up-to-date address.

Specific complaints and conclusions

The complaints which have been investigated are that:

- (a) the University failed to independently mark Mr C's resubmitted dissertation (*not upheld*);
- (b) Mr C had previously made a complaint against one of the examiners who marked his dissertation (*not upheld*); and
- (c) the University failed to timeously update their records of Mr C's address (*upheld*).

Redress and recommendations

The Ombudsman recommends that the University:

- (i) ensure that the Appeals Sub-Committee use clear language in their reports;
- (ii) consider whether it would be appropriate to clarify in the Code of Practice for Taught Postgraduate Programmes that dissertations resubmitted after minor changes will not be independently marked; and
- (iii) apologise to Mr C for their failure to timeously update all of their records of his address when he informed them of his change of address.

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

Main Investigation Report

Introduction

1. The complainant (Mr C) was studying for a masters at the University of Edinburgh (the University). When Mr C submitted his dissertation the Examination Board considered that it did not meet MSc standard. However, Mr C was given the opportunity to make revisions to his dissertation to bring it up to MSc standard. Mr C's resubmitted dissertation was marked by two internal examiners and one external examiner. Mr C raised concerns that his dissertation had not been independently marked because the external examiner had had sight of the internal examiners' comments when assessing the resubmitted dissertation. Mr C was also concerned that he had previously raised a complaint against one of the internal examiners who was also his dissertation supervisor (the Supervisor). He considered that she would, therefore, be biased against him and should not have examined his dissertation.

2. During the period when Mr C was redrafting the dissertation he moved house. He emailed the school in which he was studying (the School) to inform them of his change of address and asked the University to update their records. Despite having done this, he continued to receive post from the University at his old address.

3. Mr C pursued his complaint about the University's failure to update their records of his address through the University's complaints procedure. He pursued his concerns about the way his dissertation had been assessed through the academic appeals procedure.

4. Following receipt of his results, Mr C submitted an academic appeal on 14 November 2006. One of the grounds of his appeal was that his dissertation was not independently marked. He also raised concerns that he had previously made a complaint against one of the internal examiners. The Appeals Sub-Committee were instructed to reach a view on whether Mr C had established a prima facie case; on 2 February 2007 they decided that Mr C had not done so. This exhausted the academic appeals process.

5. On 30 November 2006, Mr C submitted a complaint to the University. One of his complaints was about the length of time it took for the University to send him his results. The University responded on 8 January 2007. They explained that one of the elements that had caused the delay was that the College

Postgraduate Office had sent a letter in August to the wrong address. They stated that Mr C's address had been changed in their database on 22 September 2006. The University accepted that record-keeping in that instance fell down and explained that they had reminded staff of the steps they should take to prevent this from recurring. They also stated that they had invested in a new student records system to replace their current paper-based system.

6. Mr C was dissatisfied with the response to his complaint about his delayed results. The grounds for proceeding to the subsequent and final stage of the complaints procedure are either that the complainant has new information about the complaint or evidence of a defect in the way the procedure was followed. The reason for Mr C's dissatisfaction did not satisfy either of these grounds. Therefore, with advice from his Student Union advisor, Mr C decided not to proceed to the final stage of the complaints procedure as he did not consider that he had grounds to do so.

7. I decided to investigate Mr C's complaints without requiring him to exhaust the University's internal complaints procedure. Mr C's concerns about the way his dissertation was assessed were not pursued through the University's complaints procedure. However, I considered that the University had had a fair and sufficient opportunity to investigate and respond to Mr C's concerns under the academic appeals process, and they did so fully. I considered that it would be unreasonable to require Mr C to raise his concerns a second time and to go through the complaints procedure in relation to these concerns. Mr C pursued his concerns about the University's record of his address to the second stage of the University's complaints procedure but decided not to proceed to the third stage as he considered he did not have grounds to do so; his reason being simply that he disagreed with the decision. I considered that it would not be reasonable to expect Mr C to proceed to the third stage of the complaints procedure when he would clearly be unable to satisfy either of the requirements for his complaint to be re-examined. For these reasons, I accepted Mr C's complaint before it had been through the whole of the University's complaints procedure.

8. The complaints from Mr C which I have investigated are that:

- (a) the University failed to independently mark Mr C's resubmitted dissertation;

- (b) Mr C had previously made a complaint against one of the examiners who marked his dissertation; and
- (c) the University failed to timeously update their records of Mr C's address.

Investigation

9. During my investigation of this complaint, I considered representations from the University and from Mr C. I examined background documentation provided by Mr C as well as the University's file on Mr C's complaint and on his academic appeal. I also made specific enquiries of the University and reviewed the Code of Practice for Taught Postgraduate Programmes (the Code) and relevant Academic Regulations.

10. 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 independently mark Mr C's resubmitted dissertation

11. The University's rules for the assessment of dissertations are set out in their Academic Regulations as supplemented by the Code.

12. The Code states at section 8.4 that 'the dissertation must be independently marked by two internal examiners or by one internal examiner and the external examiner'.

13. The Academic Regulations say:

'A dissertation presented as a part of the assessment for a taught masters degree may be judged satisfactory, as presented and without alteration, for the award of the degree despite containing small deficiencies and editorial imperfections. If however, a dissertation with such deficiencies and imperfections is judged as marginally unsatisfactory for an award, and in the view of the Board may become satisfactory if the deficiencies and imperfections be corrected, then the Board of Examiners may, at its discretion, agree that the student satisfies the requirements for the award of degree provided that the student corrects the stated deficiencies and imperfections to the certified satisfaction of the internal and, if required, the External Examiner.'

14. Mr C's dissertation fell into this category. The nature of the 'deficiencies and imperfections' were noted by the markers in their assessment.

15. Mr C submitted a revised version of his dissertation on 21 December 2005. The internal examiners produced a report on the dissertation in which they stated that 'it [was] not possible to raise the mark above the mark awarded last year'. The external examiner emailed the internal examiners and stated that she 'agreed with the internal examiners' conclusion'. The minutes of the Examination Board dated 2 August 2006 note that 'all comments were passed to the external examiner who agreed with the internal markers' comments'. The Examination Board decided that Mr C's revised dissertation did not meet MSc standard.

16. On 14 November 2006, Mr C submitted an academic appeal to the University which alleged irregular procedure under section 8.4 of the Code.

17. Mr C stated that when he submitted his revised dissertation he was only required to submit one copy, rather than the usual two copies. He argued that it could, therefore, not have been independently marked as the external examiner would have seen the comments made by the internal examiners and been influenced by these.

18. The Academic Appeals process is the mechanism by which students can ask for the Board of Examiners' decision regarding their academic performance to be reviewed. The role of the Appeal Sub-Committee is to determine whether a prima facie case has been established for the appeal to be considered further. In his appeal, Mr C alleged irregular procedure and offered the fact that he had only provided one copy of his revised dissertation as evidence to question whether the revised dissertation had been appropriately marked.

19. The Appeal Sub-Committee noted that the report on the revised dissertation was signed by the two internal examiners and that the comments of the external examiner were also supplied. They concluded that the fact that there was only one copy of the dissertation did not mean that it could not have been double marked since one copy could easily have been circulated between examiners. The Appeal Sub-Committee concluded that Mr C had not established a prima facie case for his appeal to be heard further.

20. I asked the University to explain their understanding of 'independent marking' and whether a resubmitted masters dissertation would be independently marked. The University explained that 'independent marking' is understood to be the process whereby two markers each independently read and come to a judgment on the academic quality of a piece of work. Consultation between the examiners would then take place so that a final single recommended mark could be agreed and the dissertation report form completed.

21. The University stated that it would be reasonable not to have a further independent marker if the resubmitted work was a revised version of the original. In such cases it would be reasonable to ask an internal examiner to check that the required revisions had been carried out. This is merely to confirm that the required revisions have been carried out so that the work reaches masters level. This is the standard procedure where masters level dissertations or PhD theses are resubmitted after minor corrections have been indicated.

(a) Conclusion

22. The University requires a dissertation to be independently marked. This means that two examiners independently read the work and come to a view on its quality. The Code does not make any provision for the way resubmitted dissertations should be marked. The Academic Regulations require the corrections in the resubmitted dissertation to meet the satisfaction of the internal and, if required, the external examiner. It does not require the changes to be independently marked.

23. The University explained that they considered it reasonable not to have the resubmitted dissertation independently marked as it was only a revised version of the original and that the purpose of reviewing it was to determine whether the necessary revisions had been made. They stated that this was standard procedure for resubmitted dissertations.

24. Mr C's original dissertation fell into the category where minor amendments were permitted to be carried out by the student to bring the dissertation up to MSc standard. Mr C's resubmitted dissertation was reviewed by both internal markers and by the external examiner in order to determine whether the corrections made by Mr C were satisfactory. This complies with the procedure set out in the Academic Regulations.

25. Mr C was given a list of specific amendments which the examiners considered were necessary to bring his dissertation to MSc standard. All of the examiners reviewed the dissertation to determine whether the amendments were adequate. Having considered the circumstances and the arguments from Mr C and the University, I accept the University's position that it was reasonable not to independently mark Mr C's revised dissertation. I, therefore, do not uphold this complaint.

26. The Appeal Sub-Committee's role was to consider whether Mr C had established a prima facie case that his revised dissertation was not independently marked. The Appeals Sub-Committee did not consider that Mr C had established a prima facie case. The wording used by the Appeals Sub-Committee is somewhat confusing as they refer to 'double marking'. I have established that 'double marking' and 'independent marking' are used interchangeably. However, I consider that the Appeals Sub-Committee should ensure that the language used in their reports is clear.

(a) Recommendations

27. The Ombudsman recommends that the University remind Appeal Sub-Committees to ensure that they use clear language in their reports on appeals in order to avoid possible confusion. She also recommends that the University consider whether it would be appropriate to clarify in the Code that dissertations resubmitted after minor changes will not be independently marked.

(b) Mr C had previously made a complaint against one of the examiners who marked his dissertation

28. One of the internal examiners of Mr C's dissertation was the Supervisor. Mr C stated that he had raised a complaint about the Supervisor with the Programme Director of his programme of study (the Programme Director) but the Programme Director stated that no such complaint had been made. Mr C stated that emails between himself and the Programme Director indicated that he had made a complaint about the Supervisor. I reviewed the emails in question.

29. On the 9 August 2005 the Supervisor emailed the Programme Director and expressed concern about Mr C's progress. Thereafter, the Programme Director emailed Mr C to ensure that he was aware of the Supervisor's concern. The Programme Director offered Mr C additional support but went on to state

that if Mr C and the Supervisor were happy to continue with things as they were there was no need for this. Mr C considers that the final sentence indicates that the Programme Director knew that Mr C had complaints about the Supervisor.

30. Mr C emailed the programme director on 11 August 2006 to request a meeting. Mr C told me that he had a meeting with the Programme Director on 15 August 2005 to complain about the Supervisor. Mr C told me that he was concerned that her remarks about his work during the supervision process were condescending. Mr C stated that he had told the Programme Director that he could not get along with the Supervisor. Mr C recalls that the Programme Director undertook to speak to the Supervisor about this.

31. Mr C emailed the Supervisor that evening as follows:

'I understand that I am very much behind schedule and I went to see [the Programme Director] today to talk about my progress. He also thinks that I should finish the whole dissertation first before doing any amendments. So, I am unable to give you the next chapter on Wednesday [17 August 2005]. Instead I will try my best to finish the whole thing and submit it before the due date [26 August 2005]. I apologise for not being able to submit work to you on time and thank you very much for your help.'

32. Mr C considers that this email shows that he did not wish to submit any further work to the Supervisor.

33. During their consideration of Mr C's academic appeal, the Programme Director stated that 'as the Programme Director at the relevant time, [he could] confirm that no complaint was lodged, whether of an informal or formal nature'. The Programme Director confirmed this again during my consideration of this matter.

34. The University have no record of any complaint being made by Mr C about the Supervisor and consider that there was, therefore, no apparent reason for considering a deviation from normal procedure which is that the supervisor is one of the internal markers.

(b) Conclusion

35. Mr C's position is that he made a complaint about the Supervisor during his meeting with the Programme Director on 15 August 2005. However, the Programme Director stated that no complaint was lodged by Mr C. It is clear

that Mr C had concerns about meeting the deadlines set by the Supervisor and about being asked to re-work sections of the dissertation.

36. I have reviewed emails between Mr C and the Programme Director and between Mr C and the Supervisor and I do not consider that any of these emails give any indication that Mr C had made a complaint about the Supervisor or was dissatisfied with his supervision. As I could find no evidence of any complaint by Mr C, I do not consider that it was inappropriate for the Supervisor to act as one of the internal examiners for Mr C's dissertation and I do not uphold this complaint.

(c) The University failed to timeously update their records of Mr C's address

37. One of the complaints originally made by Mr C to the University was about the delay in notifying him of his results. The University's investigation of the complaint revealed that Mr C's results had originally been sent to the wrong address in August 2006.

38. Mr C emailed the School on 19 April 2006 to ask when he would receive his results. He told them that he had moved house and provided his new address. He wrote again on 30 May 2006 and 22 September 2006 and re-iterated his new address. On 24 September an administrator from the School wrote to Mr C asking him to confirm his address so that his results could be sent. Mr C confirmed his new address.

39. In their response dated 8 January 2007 to Mr C's complaint, the University confirmed that their postgraduate database, in which all address information is held, was updated on 22 September 2006. They accepted in their response that record-keeping in this instance fell down and stated that all staff had been reminded of the importance of photocopying all relevant documents. They stated that they had invested in a new student system in order to improve services and replace the paper based system. The University apologised about delays caused due to incorrect address information being held.

40. On 22 February 2008, Mr C informed me that the University could not have updated their records as his last landlord continued to receive mail from them at his old address. He stated that his European Diploma Supplement was sent to his previous address. This document describes the details of his qualification and includes a full academic transcript. Following receipt on

16 April 2008 of my enquiries, the first time the University had been aware that there was a continuing problem with its record of Mr C's address, the University updated their record of Mr C's address on 18 April 2008. The University confirmed that Mr C's European Diploma Supplement had been sent to his previous address on 3 December 2006. The University explained to me that the information held by the School had been updated in September 2006 with his correct address. They stated that there seemed to have been an issue with updating the University's overarching student record system, which the Registry use for formal communications with students.

41. The University stated that standard practice would be for any address updates to be formally communicated to the Registry at the time they are received. However, that no record could be found of such a communication in this case. They stated that Mr C had notified the University of his change of address when they were moving from a paper-based system of communicating changes of address to an e-based system. They explained that it was, therefore, likely that due to oversight or mishap Mr C's change of address had not been communicated to the Registry.

(c) Conclusion

42. The University have three separate systems where Mr C's address was held: the School, the College and the Registry. The School and College records were updated in September 2006 when Mr C informed the School of his new address for the fourth time. I accepted the University's explanations about how this had arisen and that there are now processes in place to prevent the recurrence of this type of error. The University also apologised to Mr C on 8 January 2007 for the delay in his receiving his results which arose due to the wrong address being held.

43. I was, therefore, surprised when Mr C informed me that further correspondence from the University had been sent to his previous address. It turned out that the Registry system had not been updated with Mr C's current address. The University updated their Registry system with the correct address as soon as I brought to their attention that there was an ongoing problem. The University explained that this was probably an oversight due to the fact that they were changing the way changes of address were communicated to the Registry from a paper based system to an electronic system. I accept that this is the probable cause of the failure. However, given that Mr C had been pursuing his complaint against the University for some time and that they had accepted there

were issues with their records of Mr C's address, it would have been reasonable for them to check that all of their records of Mr C's address were up-to-date. Their failure to do this resulted in confidential information about Mr C's results being sent to the wrong address. I, therefore, uphold this complaint.

(c) Recommendation

44. I accept that the problems with Mr C's address probably arose because of the administrative changes which were taking place within the University at the time. The University are currently implementing a new student records system and an electronic rather than paper-based method of communicating changes of address. I consider that these developments will help prevent similar problems in the future. The University have apologised to Mr C for the delay caused by their holding the wrong address. I recommend that the University apologise to Mr C for failing to timeously update all of their records of his address when he informed them of his new address on 19 April 2006.

45. The University have 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; an MSc student at the University
The University	The University of Edinburgh
The Supervisor	Mr C's supervisor for his dissertation who was also one of the internal markers
The School	The school in which Mr C was studying
The Code	The University's Code of Practice for Taught Postgraduate Programmes
The Programme Director	The Programme Director of Mr C's programme of study