

SPSO decision report

Case: 201002995, University of Dundee
Sector: further & higher education
Subject: academic appeal/exam results/degree classification
Outcome: some upheld, recommendations

Summary

Ms C completed work on a PhD (a postgraduate academic degree). The university examiners, however, decided that her thesis did not meet the requirements for a PhD, but did meet the requirements for a Masters degree. Ms C complained that the supervision and PhD support provided to her by the university was inadequate and did not give her a realistic expectation of the result of her thesis submission. She also complained about the academic appeal process and about the university's complaints handling.

We found, from the evidence, that Ms C's supervisors had concerns about her thesis. However, we could not say what the university staff said to her about this, prior to submission of the thesis. When the matter was discussed with the supervisors as part of the university's investigation into the complaint, they said they believed that their concerns were flagged to Ms C. There was insufficient evidence for us to say that they failed to communicate these concerns to Ms C and we did not uphold this complaint.

We upheld Ms C's complaint about the academic appeal process. When Ms C appealed the decision on her thesis, the university said the matter would be referred to an external person with the relevant expertise for a second opinion. However, the thesis was referred to an employee of the university for review. We considered that the university should have honoured the commitment they made in writing to Ms C, when they said they would refer the thesis to an external person for review.

Ms C also complained that the complaints process took too long and was inadequate in relying on verbal rather than written evidence. We found that the university had taken some time to investigate the complaints. However, it was clear that they carried out a detailed examination into the issues raised in her complaint. We did not consider that their investigation was unnecessarily prolonged, and were satisfied that the university did appropriately consider written evidence rather than relying on verbal evidence.

Recommendations

We recommended that the university:

- appoint someone external to the university with the appropriate expertise to review her thesis; and
- write to Ms C to apologise for their failure to get an external person to review her thesis, as stated in their letter.