

SPSO decision report

Case: 201102497, Glasgow Caledonian University
Sector: further and higher education
Subject: policy/administration
Outcome: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Miss C complained about the way in which the university handled her application for Recognised Prior Learning (RPL - a process in which skills and knowledge gained outside formal learning are assessed and granted formal recognition) when she was accepted onto a course. She said that their handling of her application was unnecessarily protracted and flawed. She also complained about the way her complaint about this was handled.

We upheld both Miss C's complaints. During our investigation we found that the university had failed to follow their RPL guidelines, as Miss C should have been provided with a named RPL adviser to support her in making the application. We found no evidence that she was told who her adviser was. Nor was there evidence that she had been provided with written support materials, which the guidance in place at that time identified as essential elements of the RPL support system. We also found that, while the assessor of any RPL claim should not normally be the RPL adviser, in this case the person the university identified as the RPL adviser had also assessed the claim, contrary to their guidance. Although we found that the identified assessor had not formally notified Miss C of the decision on her application, nor had it been considered by the assessment board as it should have been, we were satisfied that the university had written to her explaining why she did not meet the RPL criteria. Nevertheless we considered that, as correspondence became protracted, there was a failure to adequately explain the exemptions that the university were prepared to grant, and any right of appeal that Miss C might have had.

Miss C also complained that her complaint was not adequately considered. She said that the university's formal response diminished the substance of her complaint, and that they failed to offer mediation in line with their complaints procedure. We found that the university had acted in line with their complaints procedure in not offering Miss C mediation. Given the detailed email correspondence and meetings with staff that had already taken place to try to resolve the issues informally, we considered that by the time Miss C made her formal complaint, the opportunity to resolve the matter informally through mediation had passed. However, we found that the response to Miss C's formal complaint, although it largely upheld her concerns, did not adequately explain the university's decision and any remedial action taken to avoid this happening again. We were also critical at the way in which Miss C's formal appeal against the decision was handled, as it was considered by the same person who made the decision on the complaint. We noted that, under the complaints procedure, any appeal should have been considered by the complaints appeal panel. We made a number of recommendations to address the failings identified in our investigation.

Recommendations

We recommended that the university:

- ensure that all relevant staff are aware of the RPL process and, in particular, the need to ensure that students are adequately supported when making such an application;
- ensure that students are appropriately advised of all rights of appeal in relation to RPL within the revised policy and when advising them of the decision;

- ensure that, should Miss C decide to re-register for the doctoral course, any further RPL application from her is assessed in line with their revised policy and at no financial cost to Miss C;
- ensure that formal complaints are handled in line with their complaints procedure: in particular, that the investigation is thorough and the response adequately addresses the issues raised; and
- provide Miss C with a formal apology for the failings identified.