

SPSO decision report

Case: 201200580, University of St Andrews
Sector: further and higher education
Subject: plagiarism and intellectual property
Outcome: not upheld, no recommendations

Summary

Mr C was a PhD student at the university. Following submission of his thesis, he was accused of academic misconduct (plagiarism - passing off someone else's work as one's own) and his case was considered at a hearing by the university board of adjudication. Mr C was found guilty and the board decided that his studies should be terminated, with no right to complete his doctoral programme. Mr C appealed against the decision, but his appeal was not upheld.

Mr C raised a number of complaints about the procedure that the university followed when considering his case and about the validity of the sanction applied. He also complained that he was required to submit an electronic version of his thesis prior to his viva (oral examination) potentially making it vulnerable to copyright infringements.

We were satisfied that the university were able to demonstrate that they had followed the procedures set out in their academic misconduct policy and that the correct staff were involved at each stage. We were also satisfied that exceptional personal circumstances, disclosed by Mr C in his appeal, were adequately taken into account. Although we found that the sanction applied in Mr C's case was worded incorrectly, its intention was clearly stated and Mr C was not disadvantaged by the error.

With regard to the requirement to submit an electronic version of his thesis, we found that Mr C was asked to do this but when he declined, the university noted his position and proceeded with their review of his case. Although electronic copies are not normally required at this stage, we found the reasons for the university's request to be legitimate and their subsequent action to be reasonable.