

## SPSO decision report

**Case:** 201508184, University of Strathclyde  
**Sector:** further and higher education  
**Subject:** academic appeal/exam results/degree classification  
**Outcome:** some upheld, recommendations

### Summary

Mr C complained about the process and timing for appointing the examining committee for his PhD oral examination (viva). We found that the university did not follow the correct administrative process for appointing one of the examiners. Although there was no evidence this had affected the examination, we upheld this aspect of Mr C's complaint. We also found there was a delay in appointing the committee, which led to one of the examiners becoming unavailable. This meant that Mr C's viva took place six months after he submitted his thesis, rather than six weeks.

Mr C also complained about the conduct of the viva and that he did not have time to properly defend part of his thesis (study three). After considering the evidence available, we found it was likely there was at least some discussion of study three at the viva and that the viva was reasonably detailed overall. We found that there was not sufficient evidence to conclude that the conduct of the viva was unreasonable, therefore we did not uphold this aspect of Mr C's complaint. However, we suggested the university might wish to introduce a requirement for notes to be taken at the viva, to ensure there is a record of the timing and topics discussed at future examinations.

Finally, Mr C complained that the university did not consult his supervisors during his initial appeal, or take into account the written statements they provided. We did not uphold this complaint as we found there was no requirement for the supervisors to be consulted, and it was reasonable for staff to rely on the written statements rather than seeking further comments from them. We also found that the supervisors' statements were included in the evidence considered at the initial appeal stage, although the appeals committee did not agree with the supervisors' arguments. However, we found the response to Mr C's appeal at the next stage (the senate appeal) contained some factual inaccuracies. We therefore made a recommendation to address this.

### Recommendations

We recommended that the university:

- apologise to Mr C for failing to follow their procedures in approving the examining committee, and for the delay in identifying this error;
- put in place processes to ensure that the availability of a fully approved examining committee is checked promptly when a thesis is submitted, to avoid delays in identifying any problems; and
- review their response to Mr C's senate appeal in light of the inaccuracies identified, to ensure that the overall decision not to hear the appeal was appropriate.