

SPSO decision report

Case: 201508330, Heriot-Watt University
Sector: further and higher education
Subject: policy/administration
Decision: some upheld, recommendations

Summary

Ms C was enrolled as a postgraduate student at the university. During and in the period following her course, Ms C had a number of concerns, including about supervision, the administration of the programme, assessment, communication and the cancellation of the postgraduate show.

Ms C submitted a complaint to the university regarding these matters. In their complaint response the university acknowledged a number of shortcomings and outlined steps that would be taken to improve administration. The university also apologised to Ms C for the distress and inconvenience she experienced throughout the programme.

In the course of our investigation, we did not find evidence that the university had failed to adequately meet Ms C's request for a new supervisor without delay. We were also satisfied that the university provided Ms C with feedback following assessment. Although Ms C felt that the university failed to address her concerns about group work on the course, we found that the university met with Ms C to discuss this issue and we were therefore satisfied that the university acted appropriately. We did not uphold these aspects of Ms C's complaint.

Ms C said that the university had failed to inform her that part of her work would not be assessed. We did not find evidence to support this, and we did not find that the university acted inappropriately. Ms C also said that an assignment posted online had changed after it had been made available to students. Similarly, we did not find evidence that this had happened.

Ms C also complained that the university did not provide adequate access to workshops during the course. We did not find evidence that the university failed to follow its procedures in relation to this matter.

Ms C complained that the university failed to provide her with a reasonable space in order for her to display her work for assessment. We did not find that the space given to Ms C was materially different to that afforded to other students. Ms C was concerned about the university's actions in relation to the postgraduate show. We did not find that the university had acted inappropriately in relation to this matter.

However, we upheld Ms C's complaint that the university failed to provide support to her to apply for a grant. We noted that the university had since created an office for scholarships and we were therefore satisfied that appropriate learning had been implemented.

The university acknowledged to us that there had been a delay in informing Ms C whether her extension request had been granted, and a delay in providing information to Ms C in relation to the assessment and return of her work. The university said that they would review the process of managing extensions. We upheld these aspects of Ms C's complaint.

Finally, we found that the university did not appropriately acknowledge Ms C's complaint and did not contact Ms C

in relation to a delay in responding to the complaint. We therefore concluded that the university did not handle Ms C's complaint in accordance with their procedure.

Recommendations

We recommended that the university:

- provide us with evidence that a review of the extension request process has taken place; and
- feed back our findings on complaints handling to the relevant staff so that complaints are handled in accordance with the university's procedure.