

## SPSO decision report

**Case:** 201608319, Heriot-Watt University  
**Sector:** universities  
**Subject:** complaints handling  
**Decision:** upheld, recommendations

### Summary

Mrs C complained that the university had not responded reasonably to her complaints about the quality of teaching on her course, and that the university had not responded appropriately to allegations she had made that her tutor had bullied and harassed her.

We found that the university had not responded to all of the issues that Mrs C raised with them about the quality of the teaching on her course. We upheld this aspect of the complaint.

On the topic of bullying and harassment, we found that the university had not correctly followed their Harassment and Bullying Policy and Procedures when they dealt with Mrs C's complaint about this. We also found that in their response to Mrs C on this issue, the apologies they included were insufficient as they were qualified apologies which said that the university was sorry if Mrs C had taken offence, rather than saying they were sorry for the failings. We therefore upheld this aspect of Mrs C's complaint.

### Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Apologise to Mrs C that they:
- did not respond to her allegations of harassment and bullying in line with their Harassment and Bullying Policy and Procedures
- did not respond reasonably to her complaints about the quality of teaching.
- The apology should meet the standards set out in the SPSO guidelines on apology available at [www.spsso.org.uk/leaflets-and-guidance](http://www.spsso.org.uk/leaflets-and-guidance).
- The elements of Mrs C's complaint about the quality of teaching which were not responded to should be properly investigated.

In relation to complaints handling, we recommended:

- When responding to complaints the university should:
- respond to all specific and relevant points raised in the complaint
- not include qualified apologies in their response
- refer to policies or procedures relevant to the subject when considering the complaint.
- Both formal and informal complaints of harassment and bullying should be responded to in line with the Harassment and Bullying Policy and Procedures.

We have asked the organisation to provide us with evidence that they have implemented the recommendations we have made on this case by the deadline we set.