

SPSO decision report

Case: 201703195, University of Aberdeen
Sector: universities
Subject: teaching and supervision
Decision: upheld, recommendations

Summary

Ms C complained that the university failed to provide reasonable supervision and monitoring during her full-time PhD course. Ms C withdrew from her course after she had been advised, during the thesis drafting stage, that she would not meet the standard required for a PhD. Ms C stated that the university school involved failed to adhere to a framework which had been produced by the university to ensure a student's progress was monitored. We found that the framework produced by the university could be altered by a school, however, it was intended to ensure a structure was in place for monitoring and documenting progress to ensure consistency. We found that the school did not appear to have a structured approach to supervision and there was a lack of information regarding supervision in the early years of Ms C's course. We upheld this aspect of Ms C's complaint.

Ms C also complained that the university failed to reasonably follow their complaints process. We found that there was not a clear distinction between the university's complaints procedure and their academic appeals procedure. The university also failed to clarify that a meeting to be held was a formal meeting where the complaint would be decided. Ms C's understanding was that this was not a formal meeting and that it was not the final stage for a decision. We also found that the university failed to send documentation with their decision including a minute of the meeting. We upheld this aspect of Ms C's complaint but noted that the university had apologised for this failing and had taken steps to address this.

Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Apologise to Ms C for failing to put in place a framework for assessment to monitor and document her progress which met the requirements set out in the Postgraduate Structured Management Framework for a 36 month full-time PhD programme. The apology should meet the standards set out in the SPSO guidelines on apology available at <https://www.spsso.org.uk/leaflets-and-guidance>.

What we said should change to put things right in future:

- A system of assessing and documenting the progress of students in accordance with the requirements set out in the Postgraduate Structured Management Framework for a 36 month full-time PhD programme should be in place.

In relation to complaints handling, we recommended:

- Information provided to students should make clear the distinction between the complaints procedure and the appeals procedure. Communication should indicate the formal process to be followed under the complaints procedure at the outset.