

Scottish Parliament Region: Glasgow

Case 200601521: University of Glasgow

Summary of Investigation

Category

Scottish Higher Education; Academic Appeals

Overview

The complainant (Mr C) raised concerns about the conduct of his academic appeal.

Specific complaint and conclusion

The complaint which has been investigated is that the University of Glasgow (the University) did not properly process Mr C's academic appeal (*not upheld*).

Redress and recommendations

The Ombudsman recommends that the University ensure that proper records are kept of important decisions or exceptional arrangements made in relation to students.

The University have accepted the recommendations and will act on them accordingly.

Main Investigation Report

Introduction

1. The complainant (Mr C) was matriculated as a student on a master's course (the Course) at the University of Glasgow (the University) in the 1998/1999 academic year. He submitted his dissertation for the degree on 3 May 2004. The University decided not to award a degree.

2. Mr C appealed this decision on 8 June 2005. The appeal was dismissed by the University's Appeals Committee as they deemed that Mr C had not provided any acceptable grounds of appeal. Mr C appealed to the Senate Appeals Committee on the grounds that the decision on his first appeal was unreasonable. The appeal to the Senate Appeals Committee was considered on 17 August 2005 and dismissed. On 25 August 2006, Mr C complained to the Ombudsman that the University had failed to process his appeal properly.

3. The complaint from Mr C which I have investigated is that the University did not properly process Mr C's academic appeal.

Investigation

4. My investigation of this complaint is based on the documentation provided by Mr C which includes the University's file on Mr C's academic appeal, correspondence between the University and Mr C, and minutes of the appeal hearings held to consider Mr C's appeal. I have also considered the University's 'Code of Procedure for Appeals by Students against Academic Decisions' and have made specific enquiries of the University.

5. I have not included in this report every detail investigated but I am satisfied that no matter of significance has been overlooked. Mr C and the University were given an opportunity to comment on a draft of this report.

6. In this investigation I am only considering the way the University handled Mr C's appeal. Schedule 4 of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act (2002) prohibits me from investigating matters of Academic judgement.

7. There is a long and somewhat confused background to the appeal and it will be helpful if I summarise events.

8. Mr C matriculated as a student on the Course at the University in the 1998/1999 academic year. He intended to proceed to the PhD programme following completion of the master's.

9. The dissertation for the Course was due to be submitted in October 1999. Mr C submitted a draft report in January 2000. On 31 January 2000 Mr C received an email from his supervisor (the Supervisor) which provided specific feedback and criticism on his report. The email stated:

'In my opinion, you stand no chance of getting a review committee to agree to put you on a PhD programme on the basis of that report ... You might eventually write something which would be good enough but I would have to coach you well beyond the proprieties between student and supervisor before you got there. ... I am quite willing to help you to improve the report within the proprieties and such improvement would still be necessary for you to reach even an MSc standard.'

The Supervisor asked Mr C to let him know what he intended to do in light of the feedback. The Supervisor also asked whether Mr C would like another academic to look over his work. I have seen no evidence that Mr C responded to this email.

10. In June 2001, Mr C submitted a complaint to the University about the quality of supervision.

11. On 23 November 2003, a meeting was held between Mr C, the head of the department in which he was studying (the Head of Department), the former head of that department and Mr C's Member of the Scottish Parliament (the MSP). The purpose of the meeting was to discuss how Mr C should proceed with a view to submitting his dissertation. No official minutes were kept of this meeting but the Head of Department kept informal minutes. Mr C disagrees with the content of the minutes and has alleged that the minutes are false. The disputed minutes record that it was agreed that Mr C would submit his dissertation for an MSc qualification by 31 March 2004. This deadline was later extended to 3 May 2004.

12. Following the meeting on 23 November 2003, The Head of Department arranged for the dissertation to be marked by two external examiners (the External Examiners).

13. On 30 January 2004 Mr C wrote to the University. In this letter he said 'I am ... prepared to proceed to submission on the strict understanding that I will be permitted full access to the University facilities short of actual supervision'. In a further letter of 25 February 2004 he wrote 'I am NOT looking for guidance on substantive content (of the dissertation)'.

14. Mr C submitted his dissertation on 3 May 2004. One of the External Examiners (Examiner 1) said that it did not meet master's standards. The other (Examiner 2) also said that it did not meet master's standards. Examiner 2 went on to recommend the award of an intermediate degree, if possible, and if that were not possible, 'a complete rewrite of the technical sections'.

15. By the time Mr C submitted his dissertation, the University no longer offered the Course and there was no Examination Board available. A Special Committee (the Special Committee) was arranged to fulfil the role of the Examination Board for Mr C's assessment. The Special Committee decided not to award a master's to Mr C.

Complaint: The University did not properly process Mr C's academic appeal

16. Mr C appealed his master's result on 16 February 2005 on the following grounds:

- that Examiner 2 had recommended that he be allowed to re-present the paper having addressed the specific defects which had been identified;
- that the defects identified were directly attributable to the lack of supervision and lack of access to laboratory facilities;
- that other students on the Course had been given the opportunity of re-presenting in light of detailed constructive criticism; and
- that his work was comparable to other work submitted of a marginal standard and, in the interests of consistency, that he should be awarded a pass.

17. Mr C requested that he be awarded a pass or that he be permitted to re-present within a reasonable timescale with appropriate access to the standard support mechanisms.

18. On 20 May 2005, the University wrote to Mr C informing him that the Appeals Committee had considered his appeal on 12 May 2005. The letter stated that an appeal could either be based on failure to take into account

personal circumstances, or on the grounds that the decision was reached on the basis of an unfair or defective procedure. The letter stated that none of the points of appeal fell within these categories and that it was not open to him to question the academic judgment of the Special Committee; Mr C's appeal was, therefore, dismissed. Mr C was informed that he had the right to have the decision reviewed by the Senate Appeals Committee if he had new evidence, believed there was defective procedure or considered that the decision was not reasonable.

19. On 8 June 2005, Mr C appealed to the Senate Appeals Committee on the grounds that the decision was unreasonable and that the decision to refuse him an opportunity to resubmit his dissertation was perverse. He said that other students on the Course were given the right to resubmit their work if it was not of a satisfactory standard and that it was unreasonable and inconsistent with previous decisions to deny him a similar opportunity. He said that this was especially due to the fact that he had been denied appropriate supervision; that Examiner 2 had recommended that he should have the right to resubmit; and that the External Examiners identified areas of weakness which he could build upon.

20. In preparation for the appeal hearing the University sought information from Mr C and from the Head of Department about various matters. These include Mr C's academic status, the standard of Mr C's work during his time at the University, and whether students were permitted to resubmit dissertations.

21. The Senate Appeals Committee met on 17 August 2005 to consider Mr C's appeal on the grounds of 'unreasonable decision - that it is normal practice for resubmission to be allowed'.

22. The report of the meeting on 17 August 2005 states that the Senate Appeals Committee considered three matters: Mr C's matriculation status, the quality of supervision he received and the right to resubmit a dissertation.

23. In regard to the quality of supervision, the Senate Appeals Committee noted the minute of the meeting on 23 November 2003, Mr C's letters of 30 January and 25 February 2004, that guidance had been given on the format of a dissertation, and that deadline for submission had been extended.

24. In regard to a possible right to resubmit, the Senate Appeals Committee noted that the Head of Department explained that the regulations for the Course stated that students were not permitted to resubmit, although the Board of Examiners could recommend revisions to a dissertation to ensure a high standard. They considered that the 'many significant defects identified by the External Examiners of Mr C's (dissertation) would not fall within the above category'. They also considered the reports of the External Examiners. The Senate Appeals Committee noted further that the minute of the meeting of 23 November 2003 implied that no further submission would be permitted, but also that Mr C had not been informed in writing that a resubmission would not be permitted.

25. In a letter of 23 August 2005 Mr C was informed that his appeal had been dismissed. The report of the Senate Appeals Committee stated that they considered that the evidence before them supported the view that the decision of the initial Appeals Committee was reasonable.

Conclusion

26. This investigation considers whether it was reasonable for the Senate Appeals Committee to dismiss Mr C's appeal. It is not the aim of this investigation to reach a decision on whether Mr C should have passed or whether the supervision provided in the years prior to his submission was adequate.

27. The history of Mr C's time at the University is long and is not fully documented. In particular, it is unfortunate that the outcomes of the meeting on 23 November 2003 were not confirmed in writing at the time because this meeting was the basis for subsequent events.

28. Having said that, I am satisfied that the Senate Appeals Committee's consideration of the supervision given to Mr C was reasonable. They had confirmation in writing from him that he had agreed, if reluctantly, to submit his dissertation on the basis that he would receive no further supervision regarding its substantive content.

29. Mr C has repeatedly asserted that other students have been given the right to resubmit. The Head of Department denied this, but the regulations stated that there were circumstances in which revisions were permitted. I have seen no evidence supplied by Mr C to support his claim and, therefore, I see no

evidence to suggest that the Senate Appeals Committee took an unreasonable view of this.

30. Mr C also disputes the Senate Appeals Committee's interpretation of the views of the External Examiners. However, it is clear that they both agreed that the dissertation submitted was not of a suitable standard for a master's degree. Examiner 2 did recommend that extensive revision be undertaken. However, this was a recommendation; it was not supported by Examiner 1; and this option was rejected by the Special Committee. The Senate Appeals Committee did consider all these points and I can see no grounds for believing their conclusions to be unreasonable.

31. I do not uphold the complaint.

General recommendation

32. The University placed a degree of reliance upon the informal minutes taken by the Head of Department at the meeting held in November 2003 about the arrangements for the submission of the dissertation. These minutes had not been agreed by either the MSP or Mr C.

33. As early as 27 June 2001, the previous head of department, in his internal comments on Mr C's complaint, stated that Mr C was being 'handled exceptionally'. No record seems to have been kept of the exact nature of the exceptional arrangement or the reason for it.

34. The Ombudsman recommends that the University ensure that proper records are kept of important decisions or exceptional arrangements made in relation to students.

35. The University have accepted the recommendations and will act on them accordingly. The Ombudsman asks that the University notify her when the recommendations have been implemented.

Explanation of abbreviations used

Mr C	The complainant
The Course	The master's course for which Mr C was studying
The University	The University of Glasgow
The Supervisor	Mr C's supervisor
The Head of Department	The head of the department in which Mr C was studying
The MSP	Mr C's Member of Scottish Parliament
The External Examiners	The two external examiners appointed by the University to mark Mr C's dissertation
Examiner 1	The External Examiner who categorically stated that Mr C's dissertation did not meet master's standard
Examiner 2	The External Examiner who recommended that the dissertation could be resubmitted following a complete rewrite of the technical section
The Special Committee	The Special Committee arranged to fulfil the role of the Examination Board for Mr C's assessment