

Case 200502895: University of Paisley

Summary

Category

Higher Education: Teaching and supervision

Overview

Mr C raised a number of concerns about his experience as a student with the University of Paisley as part of their collaboration with a Greek institution. He complained that the facilities in Greece were inadequate; his supervision was affected when he was given a supervisor based in Paisley; there were problems with the finance office, which meant he was unable to access online support for six months; and there were delays in responding to his complaints.

Specific Complaints and Conclusions

The complaints which have been investigated are:

- (a) there was a lack of support services for students based in Greece (*not upheld*);
- (b) the problems with the finance office led to him being unable to access online services for six months (*not upheld*);
- (c) the replacement of his supervisor with a moderator based at Paisley affected the quality of supervision available to him (*not upheld*); and
- (d) there were delays in dealing with Mr C's academic appeal and subsequent complaints (*not upheld*).

Redress and Recommendations

The Ombudsman has no recommendations to make.

Main Investigation Report

Introduction

1. On 21 January 2006, the Ombudsman received a complaint from Mr C (a Greek national) about the University of Paisley (the University). Mr C was a student with the University from September 2001 to October 2004 under their collaborative agreement with ATEI Piraeus (ATEI), a further education establishment based in Greece.

2. Mr C had completed a postgraduate certificate in 2001 with ATEI with a view to subsequently enrolling on the University course. In 2001 he enrolled with the University of Paisley on the Postgraduate Diploma in IT with Web Technology and in June 2002 progressed on to the masters course. Mr C attended via the campus at ATEI apart from a short research methodology course held at Paisley in June 2002.

3. Mr C was scheduled to submit his masters project in September 2003. He was given a nine month extension after the project coordinator (the coordinator) met with him in Greece in August 2003. On 9 September 2003, his Greek-based supervisor informed him she was unable to continue supervising him. His moderator, based in Paisley, took on this role (when the moderator is referred to in this new role in this report, I refer to him as second supervisor). Although he had been given an extension, administration problems meant that a fees payment was not forwarded to the University and Mr C was not formally enrolled for session 2003/2004. The project was formally submitted on 31 July 2004.

4. On 4 October 2004, Mr C was informed that the project had failed and he would be awarded a postgraduate diploma. Mr C made an academic appeal on 12 October 2004. This was considered by a sub-group (see Annex 3 for details of the academic appeals procedure) and he was told on 22 December 2004 that there were no grounds for appeal. He then lodged a formal complaint on 20 January 2005 and a further complaint on 25 April 2005. A response from the University on 25 October 2005 acknowledged there had been problems with the administration of his fees but did not uphold his other complaints or find that this had led to any disadvantage. After a further appeal, the University upheld this

decision on 24 November 2005. On 21 January 2006, Mr C complained to the Ombudsman.

5. Mr C stated that if he had been given the correct support he would have been able to submit a project of the required standard. He also stated that the qualification he was awarded is not recognised in Greece and that the postgraduate certificate courses, which he undertook in 2000 with ATEI in order to enrol on the masters course, do not form part of his University record.

6. The complaints from Mr C which I have investigated are that:

- (a) there was a lack of support services for students based in Greece;
- (b) the problems with the finance office led to him being unable to access online services for six months;
- (c) the replacement of his supervisor with a moderator based at Paisley affected the quality of supervision available to him; and
- (d) there were delays in dealing with Mr C's academic appeal and subsequent complaints.

Investigation

7. The investigation of this complaint involved obtaining all the relevant documentation and complaint files. I have seen the student handbook for this course, relevant university procedures and guidance produced by the Quality Assurance Authority relating to both supervision and appeals and complaints. I have also seen the report of an internal review undertaken in 2004 of the Universities' provision at ATEI, the collaboration agreement of 2001 between the two institutions and all the information presented to the academic appeal sub-group in November 2005. I have set out my findings of fact and conclusion. 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 have been given an opportunity to comment on a draft of this report.

(a) There was a lack of support services for students based in Greece

8. Mr C stated that the facilities available in Greece were of a much lower quality than those available in Paisley. He specifically mentioned the library, the opening hours of facilities, lack of computer access and a computer server to host his

website, which formed part of his project. He said this affected the quality of the work he could produce.

9. An internal review panel held a series of meetings in Paisley on 26 October 2004 and in Greece on 11/13 November 2004 and produced a detailed 23 page report on the Universities' provision in Greece. In this report, it was noted that there was no weekend access to the library, although this had been originally planned; the computer suites were described as small; and concern was expressed about access to key textbooks, as most of the students were studying while working. It was concluded that the adequacy of the library arrangements should be reviewed. The panel also noted that students had asked for more support and training in accessing the online materials provided. Despite these concerns, the panel concluded that if there was:

'smooth and immediate access to learning resources available electronically
... the learning experience is equivalent'

10. Information before the sub-group, who considered his academic appeal on 12 October 2004, included a record of e-mail correspondence between Mr C and his moderator/second supervisor. Amongst this were comments by his moderator, dated 30 May 2004, that Mr C obviously had 'access to a considerable amount of information' although he was concerned about how this was being used and particularly about information being copied from others. It was also recorded that on 22 January 2004 he stated to Mr C that, although his thesis contained 14 pages of references, these were still mostly irrelevant.

11. It was also recorded that the coordinator met with Mr C over three consecutive days in August 2003. In his statement to the sub-group the coordinator said that, when Mr C complained that he had difficulty with accessing information, he gave him a personal tutorial on accessing electronic journals. Arrangements were made to give Mr C an additional nine months in which to submit his dissertation. The coordinator also said that, in March 2004, Mr C produced a list of software he required to complete his project and this was all provided.

(a) Conclusion

12. It is clear that the facilities at ATEI are not the same as that at the University. However, I am satisfied that the University provided access to online resources that were sufficient to allow students to complete the course. Indeed, from the comments on his work, it is evident that Mr C, while matriculated, had no trouble accessing material. His dissertation was failed, in part, because he had included material which he had accessed but which was unattributed. When he did express concerns about accessing material, he was given additional training and an extension of time within which to submit his dissertation. On the basis of the evidence provided, I do not uphold this complaint.

(b) The problems with the finance office led to him being unable to access online services for six months

13. Given the importance of the online services, it is notable that Mr C complained that, for six months from December 2003 to June 2004, he did not have access, as he had not been matriculated. It is not disputed that he paid his fees to ATEI but these had not been forwarded as the system for payment had changed. Mr C stated that he raised this several times by telephone and in person in Greece and raised this personally with the Head of the Greek Office at the University on 15 May 2004. After investigating the financial records, it was established that Mr C had paid and, on 29 July 2004, the Head of the Greek Office contacted the University's finance office to this effect.

14. In their consideration of his appeal, the sub-group apologised to Mr C for the distress and inconvenience caused to him. Also, in considering his complaint, the University accepted the issues with the fees would have caused problems with Mr C's engagement with his studies. However, they concluded the 'difficulties encountered ... were responded to in an appropriate way once they were made known to the relevant members of staff'.

(b) Conclusion

15. In paragraph 12, I have already found that Mr C's dissertation was not failed because of an inability to access resources. In the circumstances, I am satisfied that, while inconvenient, the inability to access Paisley's online resources during this six months did not materially contribute to the failure of the dissertation.

Appropriate action was taken by the University in the form of an apology for the delay and the distress caused. I do not uphold this complaint.

(c) The replacement of his supervisor with a moderator based at Paisley affected the quality of supervision available to him

16. Mr C stated that he wrote to the coordinator on 9 September 2003, informing him that his supervisor was no longer able to supervise him. He noted his understanding that the coordinator would be contacted to appoint a new supervisor and he wished to say to him now that, as he was living far from Athens, he had found only contacting the supervisor electronically and occasionally face-to-face had been difficult. In response, the coordinator told him his moderator based in Paisley would take on this role and, in turn, a new moderator would be appointed.

17. In December 2003, Mr C wrote again to the coordinator and asked if he could come to the University, as he felt this would help him complete the project. On 5 December 2003, the coordinator advised him to contact the Head of the Greek Office at the University if he wished to do so and as a matter of urgency. There is no record that Mr C did this.

18. In his comments to the sub-group, the Head of the Greek Office said that Mr C had a much higher level of contact with his supervisor than most students. He had been present on two occasions when Mr C met with his second supervisor and also with the coordinator. His submission to the sub-group also contained the e-mail correspondence mentioned in paragraph 11, which showed that Mr C had had detailed contact with his second supervisor when he was still his moderator.

19. In response to my questions, the University said that most students based at Piraeus were supervised from Paisley and that Mr C was unusual in having the opportunity to speak to his second supervisor in person.

20. Mr C has also stated that he only received feedback from an external examiner that his initial specification was too broad on 25 May 2003 and this did not give him enough time to alter the project before its final submission. In his evidence to the sub-group (referred to in paragraph 11) the coordinator said that when he met Mr C in August 2003 he felt at that date the specification Mr C was

using was still too broad. As previously stated, Mr C was given additional time to submit his thesis and it was submitted on 31 July 2004.

(c) Conclusion

21. I am satisfied that Mr C received adequate supervision. Although this was largely delivered electronically, this is not unusual and in itself does not make the supervision inadequate. Indeed, Mr C did also have face to face contact with his second supervisor and he was given detailed advice about how to solve problems with his dissertation. Although there may have been a delay in providing him with the comments from the external examiner, he was, as stated in paragraph 11, given additional time to prepare his thesis and correct this. Mr C had fourteen months to do this. I do not uphold this complaint.

(d) There were delays in dealing with Mr C's academic appeal and subsequent complaints

22. Mr C made an academic appeal on 12 October 2004. On 30 November 2004, the University informed him by e-mail that the appeals sub-group had met on the Friday before and wished to make further investigations. He was told on 22 December 2004 that there were no grounds for appeal and that the appeals process was complete.

23. On 20 January 2005, Mr C submitted a completed complaint form, which referred to the delay in dealing with his appeal. This was acknowledged by both the Dean of the School (27 January 2005) and the Acting Principal (24 January 2005). On 25 February 2005, the Acting Principal responded to Mr C saying he regarded the complaint, in part, as an attempt to appeal against the decision of the sub-group. He quoted regulation 13.7.2, which explained that there is no such right of appeal. He did, though, conclude that the Dean would consider his complaints in line with the procedure.

24. On 25 April 2005, Mr C submitted a second complaint form with additional concerns. He then wrote to the Vice-Principal on 17 October 2005. Mr C received a response on 25 October 2005 from the Dean, who apologised for the delay in responding to his complaint of 27 January 2005. On 31 October 2005, Mr C wrote to the Principal saying he was unhappy with this response and detailed his concerns. The response of 24 November 2005 upheld the decision of the Dean.

25. In response to my questions, the University provided me with copies of their appeal and complaints procedures. I have set them out in summary form (see Annex 3). The full complaints and appeals procedure is available on the student intranet and from the registry and a summary form also appears on the student website. It should also be noted that, when Mr C appealed and complained initially, the Ombudsman did not have responsibility for the Further and Higher Education sectors and the final stage would have been to appeal to the Independent Reviewer.

(d) Conclusion

26. Mr C complained that the appeals sub-group did not make the decision within the time limits. Under the procedure, the time limit only applies to the next stage. In any event, Mr C was informed of the reason for the delay, which was to enable further investigation. I do not uphold this part of his complaint.

27. However, there was a substantial delay in dealing with Mr C's complaint. He was also not informed of his right to appeal to the Ombudsman in his final letter and the information set out in the Universities' website did not hold this information. However, the University have already apologised for the delay before the complaint was brought to this office and the correct information is now on their website. There is no evidence that Mr C's complaint was not dealt with appropriately as a result of the delay. In the absence of any further shortcoming, I do not uphold this complaint.

31 October 2006

Explanation of abbreviations used

Mr C	The complainant
The University	University of Paisley
ATEI	ATEI Piraeus
The coordinator	MSc Project Coordinator

List of legislation and policies considered

University of Paisley	Academic Appeals Regulations 2004/2005
University of Paisley	Student Complaints Procedure 2004
University of Paisley and ATEI Piraeus	Student Handbook 2001
University of Paisley and ATEI Piraeus	Report on an internal review of the University of Paisley provision at ATEI Piraeus
Quality Assurance Authority	Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: <i>Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes – September 2004</i> <i>Section 5: Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters - March 2000</i>

Summary of University of Paisley procedures¹

Academic Appeal Procedure

Step 1: The appeal is first dealt with by a sub-group, who consider whether there is a prima facie case for appeal. If not, the appellant is told forthwith. There is no right of appeal from this decision.

Step 2: If a prima facie case has been established, this is then forwarded to the programme panel. This decision shall be notified to the registrar within 15 days. The registrar will then notify the appellant.

Step 3: The appellant has a right of appeal against this decision to a Board of Appeal. The first meeting of the Board of Appeal must take place 35 days after the publication date or date of notification, whichever is later. The publication date is the date the examination result is published. The notification date refers to the date when the programme panel in step 2 make their decision. The Board can reject the appeal or call a hearing. If they reject the appeal, there is no further right of appeal.

Step 4: A hearing is held and the Board of Appeal will then make their decision. Again, there is no further right of appeal.

Complaints procedure

Relating to complaints concerning academic programmes

Step 1: Complaints should normally be raised with the academic leader of the programme concerned.

Step 2: Complaints should be raised with the Academic Director.

¹ Please note this summary was created by the Complaints Investigator for the purpose of this investigation

Step 3: If not satisfied, the complaint should then be raised with the Dean.

Step 4: The complaint can then be raised with the vice-principal. The vice-principal's decision will be final.

Generally, the procedure states that all complaints made at the level of academic director or above should be made using the formal complaint form. All complaints will be acknowledged within five days and responded to within four weeks. Where this is not possible, the student will be informed of progress.

Exceptionally, the Principal will have discretion to refer a complaint to the Court. The Chair and Vice-Chair of the Court can also decide if a case should be heard by the Court.