

The high price of academic freedom

TALK about creating a rod for your own back. Wollongong University's attempts to silence one renegade academic by sacking him has exposed some dubious management practice and turned a reasonable debate about falling standards into a test case for free speech.

After nine months of tit-for-tat over Ted Steele's claims of soft marking, the university is still being unreasonable. It won't accept the academic union's demands that whoever decides Dr Steele's fate — he may still be sacked — should come from outside the university.

The university's stance is a bit rich, given the Federal Court found it had unlawfully dismissed Dr Steele in February. Moreover, vice-chancellor Gerard Sutton made bias an issue by criticising Dr Steele to the court. Clearly, the university has no reason to deny Dr Steele an independent arbiter.

It has even less excuse for its costly appeal against the court ruling. This delaying tactic looks like an attempt to avoid scrutiny of the university's actions and Dr Steele's claims. Under the uni-academic enterprise bargaining agreement, any inquiry into Dr Steele's case would "report on the facts of the alleged misconduct or serious misconduct" that form the grounds for dismissal. The university would rather it assess Dr Steele's total record, and focus less on Professor Sutton's recent actions. Crucially, the inquiry would also take into account "whether any mitigating circumstances are evident". Remember the problem arose only when Dr Steele was indirectly reported as having "been told to increase the grades of honours students". The only direct quote from Dr Steele concerned a general drop in standards. Dr Steele clarified this through an email,

but later foolishly shifted to specific, heightened criticism.

Stubbornness and bungling on both sides has shifted focus from the key issue, which is not some corrupt hand forcing marks to be changed but rather the need to assess academic standards.

No evidence has been supplied during this year's soft-marking debate to prove any claims of direct corruption at Wollongong or anywhere else. But many academics are concerned about falling standards flowing from pressure to push through more HECS or fee-paying students. They should be free to raise these fears.

Wollongong would like to silence Dr Steele on this wider issue. But when the university resumes talks with the union today, it must recognise that any payout to Dr Steele going beyond basic legal entitlements would raise questions of fiduciary duty — especially as the university got itself into this bind. It must also realise taxpayers don't want their money spent on face-saving.

Any settlement that left Dr Steele's claims untested and Professor Sutton's behaviour unchallenged would set a dangerous precedent. It would say that universities could ignore due process, be caught out and still evade scrutiny.

The issue has become much more than just one renegade academic's crusade. Universities must embrace the free exchange of ideas. Wollongong has tried, hamfistedly, to put a price on this freedom. Its pig-headedness has been matched only by that of Dr Steele. Still, he should be reinstated and paid his legal dues until the case against him is independently judged. Wollongong's management should stop the stalling, follow due process, respect free speech and start focusing on better standards, in academia and management.

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