

# Unis can't dismiss demand for quality

DO not think for one minute that the sacking of Wollongong University renegade Ted Steele lessens the need for debate about higher education standards. Here was a man who mistakenly, naively or mischievously made general and then specific allegations against his employer that he could not substantiate. No doubt Dr Steele has been wrong in his approach to raising concerns about soft marking. But the underlying spirit of questioning the prevailing wisdom with a view to improving standards — a process that universities are taking seriously enough to begin investigating — cannot be so easily dismissed.

Dr Steele was removed for making "knowingly false allegations undermining the essential fabric of the employment relationship" that "puts at serious risk the good name of the university". Yet the specific allegation that led to his downfall — that he was instructed to upgrade marks — never appears in his own words in media reports on the case. Only indirect speech and summary was provided. His only quoted criticism was general, alleging the system was "devaluing the degree and if someone rang me I was going to tell them the truth".

After Dr Steele was quoted generally about systemic problems in articles that relied on specific examples and supported his basic argument, he faced a difficult decision. He could have risked undermining his own credibility and that of his cause by denying he had made the specific allegation or correcting it. The alternative was to push on and take the consequences. When the university said Dr Steele had denied making the claim, he stuck to his guns.

In correspondence with the university and then the NSW Ombudsman, Dr Steele repeated the allegations. "(I) certainly felt that I had been instructed to elevate marks from FAIL/borderline pass or PhD entry at the honours assessment meetings of Nov 1997 and 2000," he wrote. The Deputy Ombudsman found marks had not been increased and that Dr Steele could not have upgraded them as he was not the marker. The Ombudsman's office declined to investigate further. That of course does not weaken Dr Steele's key complaint — that the university's culture put pressure on academics to be overly generous, and that the system gave too much weight to non-expert internal markers.

Nevertheless, the Deputy Ombudsman's conclusion gave the university an excuse to dismiss Dr Steele. Had Dr Steele followed legal guidelines, then whistleblower protection laws would have applied. He would probably still have his job. The onus would have then been on the university to prove he should be sacked. Dr Steele had every right to participate in a debate about degree standards. Unfortunately his wording was awry — and when given an inch, universities will take a mile to protect their interests. You just have to look at Sydney University's failure to discipline academics who had been criticised for their approach to sexual harassment and plagiarism complaints. Wollongong grabbed the chance to sack a serial complainer. How disappointing that Dr Steele's poor management of his complaints has given universities a free kick at his worthy cause: to improve the quality of higher education.

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