

The Sydney Morning

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ON THE TOWN
INSIDE SYDNEY'S HOT CLUBS



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NEW FICTION MAGGIE ALDERSON
SYDNEY FESTIVAL BEST COVERAGE

POLLY'S BIG DAY OUT
METRO LIFTOUT



Revealed: the secret paths to higher education

Aban Contractor
Higher Education Writer

New evidence of mark tampering at NSW universities has come to light, with allegations that marks for honours theses have been upgraded and exam results ignored after students complained.

The new information came as the Acting Minister for Education, Mr Reith, said yesterday that such claims would be investigated.

At the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), information technology exam results were discarded in the final course assessment after students who failed complained.

One external exam marker told the *Herald* two honours students at Wollongong University had grades increased by two levels after a meeting of senior academics overrode his mark and that of the students' supervisor.

At Sydney University, a visual arts student confirmed she was awarded a pass mark in a course which she had not attended or handed in any assignments for. When she questioned the result the tutor told her he had been instructed to pass all students.

On Monday the *Herald* revealed that a study conducted by the Australia Institute showed that cash-strapped universities were giving degrees to full-fee-paying students despite sub-standard results.

This prompted Dr Ted Steele, of Wollongong University, to allege he had been instructed to increase the grades of honours students, a claim rejected by the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Gerard Sutton.

But the external marker, a top

immunologist, has said two students' marks had been adjusted upwards after "internal people who were not experts prevailed". The marker, a professor at one of Australia's most prestigious universities, told Wollongong University the standard of presentation in the first student's honours paper was the worst he had seen, and he recommended the student be failed. Despite this, the full-fee-paying student received a second-class honours degree.

Writing to the course coordinator, the professor said the standard was unequivocally a fail. "How an Australian university can

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allow a student of this standard to get to the fourth year of a science degree is beyond my conception."

The head of Biological Sciences at Wollongong University, Professor Rob Whelan, said internal markers had concurred with the external markers' thesis findings, but no marks had been altered. The first student's thesis had counted for only 40 per cent of the final mark and the student's "course work was sufficient when calculated overall".

He said the second student's thesis counted for 70 per cent of the final mark: "Arguments were heard and the decision was made."

STUDENT A (Wollongong University full fee paying honours student)

In my opinion, this student does not meet appropriate standards for a degree from an Australian University. In fact her literacy standard is way below appropriate secondary school level and leads me to believe that she should never have been admitted to a Tertiary course. If this is an example of the work of an Australian University science graduate, then I shudder to think of what a future employer will think about the standards of Australian Universities. I note that the lowest grade available with respect to this thesis is a Pass grade of 50-64%. My perception of the real standard is that it is unequivocally a Fail. . . . this degradation of standards is beyond my worst nightmare . . . If Australia exports graduates of this standard, then it won't be long before our reputation stinks to high heaven. Maybe it already does.

- What the expert examiner said 21.11.97

THE RESULT: An honours degree

STUDENT B (Wollongong University HECS student)

Unfortunately his capacity to write a coherent report on this work . . . is seriously flawed. There are serious lapses in literacy throughout the thesis . . .

There are major mistakes in presentation of introductory material . . . There are major discrepancies between text and material in tables and figures.

In my opinion these problems meet your criterion of "many serious flaws, with poor writing style" which warrants a 3rd Class grade.

- What the expert examiner said 10.11.00

THE RESULT: A 2.1 pass allowing the student to pursue a doctorate



"These are the worse abuses of upgradings I've ever seen. Usually it's much more subtle."

- The supervisor Ted Steele

Dr Steele said the second student, who had almost failed, was awarded an upper second degree and became eligible to conduct scientific research at the highest levels.

A UTS student said he had received a letter from the university in October after a number of students who failed an IT exam, and consequently the course, complained. The letter said: "The Appeals Committee recommended that the final mark of all students should be calculated from the two quizzes and two assignments (out of 60) and that the examination mark should be ignored."

The Dean of Information Technology at UTS, Professor Michael Fry, said yesterday that about 120 students, overseas and Australian, were enrolled in the course. "The [Faculty Assessment Appeal] Committee concluded that there were irregularities in the exam for the subject that could have meant that the exam assessment was unfair."

The principal of the College of the Arts at Sydney University, Professor Richard Dunn, said the pass mark given to the student who had not taken the course was a clerical error.