

Academic attacks falling entry standards

By LISA CARTY

Falling entry standards meant getting a university degree was far easier than it was 15 years ago, according to a Wollongong University academic.

Associate Professor David Edelman, from the commerce faculty, said student numbers had increased and the percentage of passes had stayed the same.

There were more less-competent students but the fact that the percentage of passes stayed the same meant it was easier to get through, he said.

Prof Edelman, who has been at Wollongong University for five years, said he had observed the same trend



PROF EDELMAN

during his preceding six years with Sydney University.

"There has been a steady degradation (in entry standards) and it's certainly easier to get a degree now."

All universities had an "unwritten

rule" which meant the percentage of passes had to stay fairly stable. Academics could expect a "please explain" if the percentage changed, Prof Edelman said.

He was commenting on claims that full fee-paying overseas students at Wollongong University received preferential treatment.

Prof Edelman said he had circulated his theory at the university and no-one had argued against it.

"Imagine 50 students are admitted to a program which traditionally has a 30 per cent failure rate - 15 would fail," he said.

"Suppose entry requirements are relaxed and 100 students are admitted.

Then the approximately 30 students who would fail would not include the 15 students mentioned above, hence the standard of the graduate would be inferior but the percentage of passes stayed the same."

Prof Edelman said he had had "experiences which most would probably regard as being far more disturbing than Ted's (Steele's) offerings".

But making them public might not be constructive, he said.

"Instead I choose to acknowledge the standards problem and see what I can do about it.

"While I have no direct knowledge of the circumstances Ted Steele discusses, my informed opinion is that

I believe what Ted describes could happen in the current environment.

"Further, given my experience with Ted's academic integrity, I see very little reason to doubt him here.

"All of this seems to be deflecting attention, though, from the more important issues which have been raised in the media recently, such as is the university system functioning properly nationwide?

"Are people getting educated adequately? Is basic research being supported?"

Prof Edelman said he was sure the issue of declining standards was systemic and not confined to Wollongong University.

Steele decides to say no more

But no backdown, he says

By GEOFF FAILES

Academic whistleblower Dr Ted Steele, who accused Wollongong University of doctoring grades, had little to say after a meeting with departmental colleagues yesterday.

The man who has been at the forefront of national debate about marking procedures for full fee-paying students said he would not take the matter further.

Dr Steele, an associate professor in the Biological Sciences Department, denied he had backed down and promised to speak out again if he saw further examples of overseas students receiving favourable treatment.

"I've made my point, but if it comes up again I will say the same thing again," he said.

Dr Steele was speaking after a departmental meeting ordered by Biological Sciences Department head Associate Professor Mark Walker.

Prof Walker said the meeting had not been a "trial" and that 13 staff members at the meeting - excluding Dr Steele - had reaffirmed the department's process for allocating honours marks.

The meeting followed Vice-Chancellor Professor Gerard Sutton's request for a departmental comment on Dr Steele's controversial claims.

Last week Dr Steele gave Prof Sutton a statutory declaration alleging mark roting.

Dr Steele claimed that at least two of his honours students had their marks boosted from a fail to a

high grade.

However, Prof Sutton said Dr Steele had not given him "a skerrick of evidence to support his claims" and categorically denied that any grade alteration had taken place at the university.

Prof Sutton said Wollongong's image as a destination of educational excellence would suffer because of the allegations.



ABOVE: Associate Professor Ted Steele arrives for yesterday's departmental meeting at Wollongong University. Picture: GREG TOTMAN

Prof Walker said every academic staff member from his department was invited to express their views at yesterday's meeting with Dr Steele which was described as "amicable".

"They (the 13) confirmed that this process was correctly applied in the cases of the two students in question," Prof Walker said.

Asked if Dr Steele had been asked to produce evidence to substantiate his claims, Prof Walker said: "The meeting wasn't a trial ... it was simply a sharing of views."

"None of the marks of the two students were raised ... none of their marks were lowered.

"A composite mark was produced from all of the assessment items that are used to assess honours grades. That mark was then discussed at the departmental exam meeting and agreed on."

Prof Walker said Dr Steele denied to the meeting that he had made an allegation to the Sydney Morning Herald that he (Dr Steele) had been "instructed to increase the grades of honours students".

Prof Walker said he would seek a retraction and apology

from the SMH or ask the newspaper to provide evidence that the allegation attributed to Dr Steele was correct.

Dr Steele later rejected suggestions that he had denied making the comment.

"I told the meeting that this was newspaper language and not what I said. I said the expert opinions were overridden by the chair and rest of the people present at our (exam) meeting and I've been consistently saying that," he said.

"To me over-riding the expert people is tantamount to upgrading and going against the wishes of the experts."

Dr Steele said many people would be surprised to hear that yesterday's meeting confirmed honours years were "not the years to decide whether a person should go and do a PhD".

"The key issue is ... has the student got what it takes to go on."

"If not, they get a lower mark which prevents them going on and they then go and become a research assistant or work in a government lab somewhere under supervision from someone else."



PROF WALKER

Dickheads, Redheads match up in court

Federal Court justices could soon find themselves passing judgment on Dickheads and Redheads.

Australian entrepreneur Dick Smith is set for a court showdown with a Swedish match company which is opposing his Dickhead trademark.

Dickheads have been on the market for six months in a red box, featuring a woman's face, just like the Redhead box, but Dickheads come with a warning.

"We would have to be complete Dickheads to let most of our famous Australian brands be taken over by foreign companies," the box says.

Mr Smith maintains he started up the match venture as a protest against Redheads, which are manufactured by a foreign-owned company in Sweden.

Lawyers for Swedish company Intermatch Sweden Aktiebolag have indicated their opposition to the trademark of the Dickheads logo but say they need more time to lodge official opposition.

Mr Smith will fight Intermatch in court to keep Dickheads on shelves.

"A dickhead is a very Aussie word, I just don't think they have any grounds (to deny the trademark)."

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