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E-mail broadcast results in suspension

A SENIOR academic at Wollongong University has been suspended from using the university's electronic mail service for allegedly breaching its Code of Practice — E-Mail.

Molecular biologist Associate Professor Ted Steele is believed to be the first academic suspended under the university's code, introduced in 1991.

The one-week suspension came last Friday after Professor Steele broadcast a confidential warning to him not to continue a debate through general e-mail, which went to the "mailboxes" of 2000 academic and general university staff.

Vice-chancellor Professor Gerard Sutton said Professor Steele failed to heed the warning to conduct the debate through a different e-mail category and was subsequently suspended.

Professor Steele broadcast the confidential memo, which he said he interpreted as a threat to silence him.

The university has a special e-mail

category, Forums and Debates, which management said was the appropriate forum for such discussion.

Professor Sutton said Professor Steele contravened section 6 (1) of the code, which says "persistently posting mail under inappropriate categories or to inappropriate groups, thereby causing clutter of mailboxes with unwanted communications" is an abuse.

The debate erupted after Professor Steele sent out a long internal e-mail last week critical of the university's system of professorial appointments.

His comments attracted a rash of responses on the issue, dubbed the "Mickey Mouse" debate, through the e-mail system.

Professor Sutton said Professor Steele failed to heed a warning to restrict his debate to the Forums and Debates e-mail user group. He said the

suspension had nothing to do with the content of the debate and its criticisms of management. Professor Steele could have continued the debate in the correct category instead of "forcing" people to read it by sending it to everyone's address.

"We cannot have the university grind to a halt because of an individual wanting to express their views," Professor Sutton said.

"Nor can we have an individual interfering with other individuals who don't wish to participate in the debate."

Professor Steele said management was trying to stifle academic discussion on matters that affect the whole university. Further, he said, several other people who took part in the debate outside the Forums and Debates category were not suspended.

He said he has been at Wollongong for

10 years and, while many buildings have gone up, the "intellectual, scientific and scholarly climate has been stunted" through its system of appointments.

National Tertiary Education Union branch president Dr Mike Donaldson said there was a longstanding perception among staff that "things were not right" regarding criteria used to appoint academics to middle-management posts. He said the e-mail incident raised two important questions: freedom of expression and the apparent capacity of non-academic staff — technicians — to decide what would be and would not be acceptable on the e-mail.

Dr Donaldson said the union was not happy with the way the code of practice was handled in the first place and the lack of consultation.

But Professor Sutton said the initial code was widely circulated on campus

and staff had several months for input before its adoption.

In response to criticism of the professorial appointment system, Professor Sutton said an external professor, generally chosen for his or her expertise in a specific area, was always on professorial selection committees.

He said the results of the appointment processes were reflected in Wollongong being the only institution outside a capital city to gain a place in the first two bands of last year's higher education quality round, and in a dramatic increase in its external research grants.

The debate was similar to one that raged on the university's e-mail in 1991 and prompted the introduction of the code.

According to the university, the e-mail accounts of a number of students have been suspended and some academics have been warned about breaching the code. But until last week, no academics had been suspended.