

Higher Education

DEAKIN LOSSES

NELSON REVIEW

ACADEMIC PUBLISHING

Higher Education news at www.theaustralian.com.au/highered

Line of fire: Members of Wollongong's biological sciences department, main picture; Steele, inset picture: Bob Finlayson

STEELE TRAP

Intrigue, legal threats and collateral damage have followed the 'soft marking' allegations by

WHEN renegade academic Ted Steele denounced his university for alleged soft marking 16 months ago, it was his academic colleagues who took a collateral hit.

You may think the biological sciences department shattered internally when Steele attacked: but the

ported Steele. Some of Steele's 14 former colleagues in biological sciences gathered in department head Mark Walker's office last week to talk about the effects on their professional and personal lives of Steele's decision to go public with some questionable criticisms. They bristle at media references to him as a "whistleblower".

The academics are getting

almost every social occasion, we have to explain what's in the media isn't right. At kids' football games, people come up asking how come he's being treated so badly. People say, 'If it's not true, why aren't you fighting?'

Now they're ready to. The department says it believed it had to stay quiet during the

allegations, preferably with evidence under oath. They are dismayed at the possibility that he may be paid out with public money after his recent reinstatement without an inquiry to clear the air.

The affair began when Steele allowed his claims on soft marking to be quoted in *The Sydney Morning Herald*,

standards of learning have fallen in the past 20 years as staff-student ratios have worsened.

It has emerged that several weeks before the sensational reports of Steele's claims, he had dissented from the averaged marks given by one external and two internal examiners to a local HECS honours student he had supervised.

Funding is dependent on reform

Jane Richardson
AAP

FEDERAL Education Minister Brendan Nelson has again rejected calls for more higher education funding, saying he would not take such a proposal to cabinet until there were substantial reforms.

Dr Nelson kicked off his review of the sector on Friday with an issues paper that has drawn criticism for failing to acknowledge the main need of universities: enough income to do their jobs.

His issues paper for the review is seen by Labor as a blueprint for increasing student fees, and as unbalanced by the National Tertiary Education Union.

But others have welcomed the chance for policy input.

As *The Australian* reported exclusively on Friday, Dr Nelson's 100-page Higher Education at the Crossroads paper sets out ideas for reforms in policy framework, financing, teaching, the structure of degrees, academic working conditions, management, and university specialisation, to be considered by a reference group in a year-long process.

The group comprises mainly academic and industry leaders, and is notable for the absence of representation from the pre-Dawkins but non-Group of Eight universities.

The NTEU said that by placing the emphasis on private funding, the Govern-

whether universities really were rigid and unresponsive.

John Hay, chair of the Group of Eight wealthy research universities, and a member of the reference group, said there had to be a significant increase in funding, which had to be applied in a "differentiated way from a variety of sources".

But University of Southern Queensland vice-chancellor Peter Swannell was concerned about Dr Nelson's intentions on regional universities: it was unclear whether his comments that regionals should be supported for their community role would lead to stronger institutions or to a significantly different role for them, he said.

Australian Technology Network chairman and Curtin University vice-chancellor Lance Twomey said that while he was "disappointed with the general flavour and tenor", the positives to come out of the discussion paper were on issues of diversification, collaboration and deregulation.

Dr Nelson said universities had a "fair way to go" in becoming more efficient.

"Twenty per cent of the units being offered by Australian universities have fewer than five students enrolled; 4200 units offered in Australian higher education have only one student enrolled. Our universities offer 100

I carry a copy of the ombudsman's finding.

STEELE TRAP



Line of fire: Members of Wollongong's biological sciences department, main picture; Steele, inset
Picture: Bob Finlayson

Funding is dependent on reform

Jane Richardson
AAP

FEDERAL Education Minister Brendan Nelson has again rejected calls for more higher education funding, saying he would not take such a proposal to cabinet until there were substantial reforms.

Dr Nelson kicked off his review of the sector on Friday with an issues paper that has drawn criticism for failing to acknowledge the main need of universities: enough income to do their jobs.

His issues paper for the review is seen by Labor as a blueprint for increasing student fees, and as unbalanced by the National Tertiary Education Union.

But others have welcomed the chance for policy input.

As *The Australian* reported exclusively on Friday, Dr Nelson's 100-page Higher Education at the Crossroads paper sets out ideas for reforms in policy framework, financing, teaching, the structure of degrees, academic working conditions, management, and university specialisation, to be considered by a reference group in a year-long process.

The group comprises mainly academic and industry leaders, and is notable for the absence of representation from the pre-Dawkins but non-Group of Eight universities.

The NTEU said that by placing the emphasis on private funding, the Government had raised the white flag and was saying it no longer accepted responsibility for ensuring that universities were properly funded.

Griffith University vice-chancellor Glyn Davis said it was important that universities "engage with gusto" in the review.

It was policy, rather than decisions by universities, that had shaped today's sector.

Data released with the issues paper showed significant increases in productivity across the sector, he said.

The review could evaluate

whether universities really were rigid and unresponsive.

John Hay, chair of the Group of Eight wealthy research universities, and a member of the reference group, said there had to be a significant increase in funding, which had to be applied in a "differentiated way from a variety of sources".

But University of Southern Queensland vice-chancellor Peter Swannell was concerned about Dr Nelson's intentions on regional universities: it was unclear whether his comments that regionals should be supported for their community role would lead to stronger institutions or to a significantly different role for them, he said.

Australian Technology Network chairman and Curtin University vice-chancellor Lance Twomey said that while he was "disappointed with the general flavour and tenor", the positives to come out of the discussion paper were on issues of diversification, collaboration and deregulation.

Dr Nelson said universities had a "fair way to go" in becoming more efficient.

"Twenty per cent of the units being offered by Australian universities have fewer than five students enrolled; 4200 units offered in Australian higher education have only one student enrolled. One university offers 167 courses, 96 of those courses have fewer than five students enrolled," he said.

"We need to ensure that every single dollar invested in Australian higher education ... is efficiently invested before perhaps arguing for that level of additional funding."

AVCC meets — Page 24
The paper — Pages 26-29

LINKS

www.detya.gov.au/crossroads

Intrigue, legal threats and collateral damage have followed the 'soft marking' allegations by Wollongong academic Ted Steele. Patrick Lawnham looks at new evidence

WHEN renegade academic Ted Steele denounced his university for alleged soft marking 16 months ago, it was his academic colleagues who took a collateral hit.

You may think the biological sciences department shattered internally when Steele attacked: but the yellow-shuttered building is only being renovated.

Inside, however, the post-trauma stress lingers. The mood is incomprehension.

Steele's criticisms of thesis assessments, made through the media, is an unresolved issue although he is back on the payroll after the Federal Court in March reversed his summary dismissal in February 2001 by vice-chancellor Gerard Sutton.

Four academics have resigned in protest from their union, which has sup-

ported Steele. Some of Steele's 14 former colleagues in biological sciences gathered in department head Mark Walker's office last week to talk about the effects on their professional and personal lives of Steele's decision to go public with some questionable criticisms. They bristle at media references to him as a "whistleblower".

The academics are getting tired of explaining the media accounts and tired of hearing Steele treated as a martyr.

Associate professor Walker says: "I carry a copy of the ombudsman's finding in my pocket, I simply give it over rather than be subject to a discussion." He is referring to a letter to Steele from the NSW Ombudsman's office more than a year ago saying it could find nothing worth investigating.

Another academic adds: "The whole thing has just been so frustrating. At

almost every social occasion, we have to explain what's in the media isn't right. At kids' football games, people come up asking how come he's being treated so badly. People say, 'If it's not true, why aren't you fighting?'"

Now they're ready to. The department says it believed it had to stay quiet during the

'I carry a copy of the ombudsman's finding, I give it over rather than have a discussion'

Mark Walker
Head of biological sciences, Wollongong University

Federal Court case, which ended with an appeal judgment just before Easter. The seeds of potential bitterness are sown already: the whole department is at risk of becoming like its critic in a way.

The academics are calling for Steele to be given what he says he wants — an external independent inquiry into his

allegations, preferably with evidence under oath. They are dismayed at the possibility that he may be paid out with public money after his recent reinstatement without an inquiry to clear the air.

The affair began when Steele allowed his claims on soft marking to be quoted in *The Sydney Morning Herald*,

standards of learning have fallen in the past 20 years as staff-student ratios have worsened.

It has emerged that several weeks before the sensational reports of Steele's claims, he had dissented from the averaged marks given by one external and two internal examiners to a local HECS honours student he had supervised.

He was still fuming at being overruled in his objection that the thesis average, which constituted 70 per cent of the student's bachelor of science honours grade, was too high.

Steele also cited a case of a smaller divergence of marks in which he says an overseas honours student he had supervised was also given too many marks on average in 1997, and should not have scraped through with honours.

Both he and his collaborator and supporter, Bob Blanden of the Australian National University, are uncomfortable with the "bums on seats" approach in today's university funding and are not alone in believing

standards of learning have fallen in the past 20 years as staff-student ratios have worsened.

It has emerged that several weeks before the sensational reports of Steele's claims, he had dissented from the averaged marks given by one external and two internal examiners to a local HECS honours student he had supervised.

He was still fuming at being overruled in his objection that the thesis average, which constituted 70 per cent of the student's bachelor of science honours grade, was too high.

Steele also cited a case of a smaller divergence of marks in which he says an overseas honours student he had supervised was also given too many marks on average in 1997, and should not have scraped through with honours.

Continued — Page 24

STEELE TRAP



From Page 23

Professor Blanden was the sole external examiner for both of the students, and it was his "expert" opinion that alone should have decided the results, according to Steele, who was not a thesis marker.

Staff in the department say in response that this would have amounted to deliberate downgrading of the two students in breach of due process, as opposed to the "instructed upgrade" alleged in reports in January last year.

No impropriety in the cases in the department has been even remotely substantiated or — when Steele's on-the-record remarks over the past 16 months are scrutinised — even alleged. The university is expected to announce either a settlement or inquiry within weeks — and a demand for an apology to the university from Steele could become a condition of any settlement that did not involve an inquiry.

Wollongong's biological sciences academics, meanwhile, are in a quandary; how to clear their department's reputation at a time when Steele's trial and appeal victories in the Federal Court over the legality of his dismissal may cloud the fact that his wins had nothing to do with his allegations nor, as trial judge Justice Catherine Branson emphasised, academic freedom.

The dismissal by vice-chancellor Sutton in circumvention of the university's enterprise agreement caused widespread concern. The department's plight is due to a conjunction of circumstances in January 2001. These include a long history during his roughly 16 years at Wollongong of personal tension between Steele and the Wollongong administration: a previous failure by Sutton to act against complaints within the department against Steele; Sutton's perception he suddenly had the opportunity to act; and a publicity drive by Canberra think tank the Australia Institute for a survey of university problems including worries about falling standards.

At the same time, the federal Opposition was keen to draw attention to the Senate's pending higher education inquiry, the *Herald* had a new higher education writer and new editor-in-chief, and the academics' union was ready to defend

working standards. Put together, they combusted.

The Steele controversy burned brightly during student intake time, and apparently hurt. Walker says first-year student enrolments in the whole science faculty were down 40 per cent in 2001 though they bounced back this year.

"There's no doubt that in the local community, where a lot of students still come from, it was very well publicised," he says.

One academic in the department adds: "Honours graduates are angry, totally outraged that their degrees have been tarnished by this. I've been contacted by a former student from overseas, who has had dealings with Ted Steele, felt the status of the degree had been downgraded."

The story spread overseas. "At international conferences, people would say, 'Oh, you're from Wollongong University,'" one academic said. "And it's eaten up an enormous amount of our time, which we don't have much of."

With the issue of an inquiry unresolved, Steele, a molecular immunologist and associate professor, has been reinstated on what is officially termed study leave. He is researching from home and is an honorary research fellow working with Blanden at the ANU. He is adamant his former colleagues are "defending the indefensible".

Steele and the National Tertiary Education Union

'Honours graduates are totally outraged their degrees have been tarnished by this'

Unnamed academic
Wollongong University

are resisting attempts by Sutton to appoint an inquiry, even an entirely external one, unless freedom from bias can be guaranteed to their satisfaction, which may mean no inquiry. Sutton seems content for the moment to use the department as a stalking horse in negotiations, in which it's believed a possible exit payout for Steele is being discussed.

Four of nine department members in the NTEU have resigned from the union in protest at being, in their view, ignored by it.

NTEU national president Carolyn Allport says the union has urged department academics to get involved in an inquiry into assessment

practices to be held by the Wollongong academic senate. It is not, she says, the union's role to push for a disciplinary inquiry, although the academics are genuine in their concerns. Management was responsible for their present predicament by not observing the agreement and should be helping relieve any stress, she says.

Walker agrees that in hindsight the university administration had made "a big mistake" by dismissing Steele summarily and the NTEU had appropriately defended the enterprise agreement.

Evidence against Steele includes a staff meeting on January 17, 2001, taped at his own insistence soon after the reports began appearing, where he denied he had told the *Herald* he had been instructed to upgrade marks — "No, I never said that" — but endorsed its reports as "the language of newspapers" and told his colleagues, "I don't share your sensitivities". The *HES* has obtained a copy of the tape. A week before the meeting, Steele had signed a statutory declaration for the university on January 10, saying the newspaper story was "a truthful account of what transpired in my case".

He added that he wanted to get the "story of the upgrade" into the public domain "because quite frankly I was thoroughly disgusted with the way the

department raised those marks". He understood colleagues "might be upset" but accused them of "basically agreeing to a flawed system".

The events surrounding both honours students were reported in detail last year (*HES*, March 7, 2001). On the staff meeting's eve, Steele emailed the other scientists threatening them with defamation or harassment actions if they "collectively engage as directed by VC Sutton in the supposed determination of these matters of fact at this juncture ... in any manner, shape, form or substance injurious to me".

Commented a staffer last week: "It's ironic if it's a case of academic freedom and

everyone else is denied it."

About six weeks later, after Steele had refused to deny the reports publicly, and instead had denied he was recanting, Sutton dismissed him, relying on now discredited legal advice.

Steele later told the Senate higher education inquiry in August last year that, "I cannot control the media". He repeatedly told senators he "never used the words 'instruct' or 'told'" but "the press captured the spirit of the coercive nature

of those honours meetings" and he "considered [the marks] were upgraded".

The two students were "substandard", he testified. His actual words to the newspaper had been similar to "upgrading in a coercive atmosphere and against best advice and expert opinion", he said. At least one senator felt Steele was correctly interpreted by the paper.

The department says Steele did not complain about the honours process when it was reviewed in 1999 — he says he later told some people he was unhappy with it — and gave no warning of his attack through the media. "The department has good morale, we talk to each other," says one staffer.

The report in *The Sydney Morning Herald* "was the first we knew of Steele's concerns, there was no attempt to bring it to the attention of the dean or vice-chancellor or anyone", Walker says.

In the 1997 case, the department says all examiners agreed that the thesis was of a low standard, but the average thesis mark only constituted 40 per cent of the student's biotechnology honours grade. It says higher performance in other assessment items resulted in the student obtaining an overall 2.2 class grade.

In the 2000 case, Wollongong staff were puzzled by Blanden's honours thesis report, which a staffer says was "very brief and failed to identify in sufficient detail specific shortcomings in the thesis which might have justified [the] class 3 grade he awarded".

"In this case, we got a fourth person to look at the thesis who said 'the thesis is of a class 2.1 standard.'" This reflected the average and was what the student got.

Walker says: "In both cases, if we had done as Steele asked and downgraded the marks, that would have been completely inequitable for the students concerned."

Another staffer said: "We have failed many students, up to the biotechnology masters level, and full-fee undergraduates have had to repeat failed subjects. We don't know who the full-fee payers are at the time anyway. The system may feel pressure, but in biological sciences, there are not a lot of overseas students. They're treated the same as local students."