

ANTIPODES Ian Lowe assesses Academe

# The dissent of Steele



THE recent summary dismissal of molecular biologist Ted Steele by the University of

Wollongong raises two important issues. The first is the procedural question of how universities handle dissenting academics. The second is a growing concern about academic standards in the Australian university system.

Most of the facts of the case are not in dispute. Steele supervised two honours students whose theses were both marked by an external expert assessor, Robert Blanden, professor of immunology in the John Curtin School of Medical Research at the Australian National University. Blanden regarded both theses as poor pieces of work. In one case his assessment said "unequivocally a Fail", and in the other, he saw "many serious flaws" and recommended a grade of 3rd class honours. In each case, the departmental process whereby the mark from the external assessor was combined with internal assessments and coursework grades gave the student 2nd class honours.

Faced by this outcome, Steele made public criticisms of what he saw as the lowering of academic standards. He was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) as saying that he had been instructed to upgrade the marks of the students. The university managers responded in legalistic terms. Vice-chancellor Gerard Sutton said in a letter to the SMH that the statements attributed to Steele were "not supported by departmental records", while

department head Mark Walker is reported to have told Steele he had "an essential responsibility to correct the public record". Steele responded by saying he had "blown the whistle on a deeply flawed process of honours assessment". Late last month, Sutton wrote Steele a letter terminating his employment. Sutton said Steele had made "knowingly false allegations" which endangered the university's reputation and undermined "the essential fabric of the employment relationship". Whatever the rights or wrongs of this argument, the university's capacity to sack its staff member summarily is now under question.

Steele is a controversial but important scientist. He co-authored the book *Lamarck's Signature* with Blanden and Wollongong computing lecturer Robyn Lindley. The book presents evidence from molecular biology that some aspects of immunity developed by parents during their lifetime can be passed on to their children. This challenges a famous tenet of evolutionary biology, Weissmann's Barrier, the belief that developmental changes to our bodies cannot become incorporated into the germ cells and passed on to offspring. If the work of Steele and his colleagues becomes generally accepted, they will have significantly advanced thinking about evolution.

It is a fundamental principle of universities that academics have tenure, or secure employment unless they are shown to be incompetent or guilty of serious misconduct. The freedom to be the conscience and critic of society was endorsed nearly 50 years

ago by an Australian Government inquiry into universities, known as the Murray Report, which argued that tenure was necessary to ensure that academics "seek the truth and make it known".

Formal tenure statutes are now rare in the university system. But procedures for considering charges of misconduct have been carefully negotiated to ensure that whistle-blowers or those who hold unpopular views cannot be dismissed capriciously. If the Wollongong decision stands, it will be a worrying precedent.

The case also has increased concern about university standards. A report released in January by the Australia Institute in Canberra claimed that, in spite of poor results, some full-fee paying students are being passed by universities that need the income from them. Sydney academic Alison Elliott then wrote that universities have in recent years passed students who had failed exams, missed exams or simply not met the minimum standards of English expression. Labor senator Kim Carr said that several reputable academics have given him formal complaints about "the payments of very large sums of money in return for guarantees of academic outcomes".

There are now too many complaints of this sort for the issue to be ignored. Whether the problem is the financial dependence of universities on fee income or the pressures on staff teaching more students with less resources, something has to be done. The reputation of the university system and the willingness of other countries to accept Australian graduates is at stake.

ENIGMA

1126

## ENIGMATIC DICE Colin Singleton

George has been winning free drinks at his local pub using a trick with four non-standard dice. Each face of each die is marked with one of the numbers 1 to 9, not necessarily all different. One of the nine numbers does not appear on any die, but each die has the same total of its six faces.

George allows you to choose one die, then he chooses one of the others. The two selected dice are thrown simultaneously, and the one who throws the smaller number buys the drinks. Draws are impossible.

His friends have discovered that if they choose the red die, George chooses the yellow—if they choose yellow, George chooses green—if they choose green George chooses blue—and if they choose blue, George chooses red! George expects (statistically) to win exactly two throws in every three with any of these pairs of dice.

We can conveniently represent the markings on a die as a six-digit number, with the digits in ascending order. You can check that 334455 beats 222288 two-to-one, but George's set does not include either of these dice. The red die includes at least one lucky seven. There is only one set of four dice which will do the trick. List the six numbers for each of the four colours.

*£15 will be awarded to the sender of the first correct answer opened on Thursday 19 April. The Editor's decision is final. Please send entries to Enigma 1126, New Scientist, 151 Wardour Street, London W1F 8WE, or to [enigma@newscientist.com](mailto:enigma@newscientist.com) (please include your postal address). The winner of Enigma 1120 is Peter Pakulski of Hobart, Tasmania.*

**Answer to 1120 Assorted numbers  
BANANA = 763636.**