

Silenced for the sake of the corporate university

*There's little hope of raising university standards when outspoken critics of the system are driven out, writes **Padraic P. McGuinness**.*

TED Steele, the whistleblower academic who has just been sacked by the University of Wollongong, is not an easy person to have as a colleague. He has been a noisy critic of the vice-chancellor of that university and of many of his colleagues. He has deluged them – and many outsiders, including myself – with emails through the university's system, and some have even taken steps to bar his email.

Those who, like me, are interested in the internal affairs of universities have read much of his email (and the replies to it) with interest, though I occasionally quail on turning on the computer in the morning to see yet another huge batch.

It has been obvious for a long time now that Steele was courting trouble with his unrestrained criticisms of his vice-chancellor, other administrators, and some colleagues. In private business, he would probably have been out on his ear long before this. But, of course, universities are not private businesses.

They are public educational institutions, funded to conduct research and to teach at the tertiary level. They are everybody's business.

Moreover, the most valuable element in the concept of a university is that ideas should be unfettered, discussion uninhibited, and the person of the scholar safe from attack either in physical or economic terms.

The concept of academic tenure, though much abused in practice by the inferior intel-

lects who find their way into its protection, is of the utmost importance. Moreover, Associate Professor Steele is no ordinary academic hack. He is a distinguished biologist conducting original research at the highest level, questioning the orthodoxies in his own field. He is a troublemaker there, too, questioning the most sacred tenet of modern evolutionary biology: that there can be no inheritance of "acquired" characteristics.

The Darwinian orthodoxy is that evolution takes place through the favouring of chance, random mutations by natural selection.

The great French naturalist Jean Baptiste de Lamarck (1744-1829) is usually treated as the originator of the view that the external environment can modify genetic endowment. The Lamarckian heresy was revived under Stalin as Lysenkoism and became an article of faith in the "proletarian" pseudo-science of the Soviet Union which opposed "bourgeois" science, in biology referred to as Mendelism after the founder of modern genetics.

Stalin was imitating the Nazi invention of "Aryan" science as against "Jewish" science. The same idea underlies, in a milder form, modern ideas about "feminine" science or logic as against "masculine" science. But Lamarck was a serious scientist, in no way responsible for such abuses.

Likewise, Steele is a serious scientist, who is not trying to revive some kind of quackery but has advanced the view, based in his research,

that there is evidence that reproductive (germ) cells can be modified by external influences from body (somatic) cells in a heritable fashion.

He is not denying basic biology or evolution, but arguing that there may be more complex factors operating in some cases which would modify evolutionary theory.

Whether he is right or wrong is of major scientific significance. Certainly he is taken seriously by many highly qualified biologists, and his work is gaining recognition elsewhere in the world. As in all good science, it can be ratified or invalidated by other scientists.

Steele is a combative character, and has fought for recognition of his priority in these discoveries. He has also vociferously criticised some colleagues when he has thought that his work in this and related matters – breeding mice with special laboratory characteristics is not a small thing – has been used without adequate acknowledgment.

One would not like to have Steele as an enemy. Especially when he seems in at least some matters to be either right or at least to have a case which ought to be listened to.

Now he has been sacked for a trivial offence. He was quite right when he pointed to the debauching of standards in his own university (the naming of the University of Wollongong as "university of the year" is a national joke), but he may have erred in some details on a specific case. It may have been that he attributed an upgrading of an underqualified student to a particular person rather than to pressure from a group. That can be sorted out by the courts.

At the same time the courts will have to sort out just why the Deputy Ombudsman made a rapid ruling against him without any proper

investigation of the whole issue. It seems that we may now need an Ombudsman to oversee the Ombudsman's office.

Instead of extending a degree of tolerance to a scientist whose work in the long run might prove to shed great credit on Wollongong University, there has been a concerted attempt to silence and marginalise Steele, culminating in the sacking.

He is inconvenient for the modern corporate university which wants to present itself as a business rather than as a community of scholars. A university which valued research would have set out to try to accommodate his concerns rather than to destroy him. But, of course, among his concerns is the fact that there has been an erosion of academic standards in his university.

His public expression of this belief is the unforgivable sin. He has not attacked the Government, or the Prime Minister, or capitalism, or the whole male sex, or rational discourse in science or economics, or mainstream religion. He has not seduced his students, or converted them to "queer studies". These are all permissible in the modern university.

Nor has he written incomprehensible twaddle. He does not write terribly graceful English, but it is at least clear and grammatical English in which his assertions, right or wrong, can be conveyed and exposed to scrutiny.

He has not set out to attract contracts or students regardless of ability, but has devoted himself to fundamental scientific research, the results of which are reproducible.

Clearly the presence of such a person cannot be tolerated in the University of Wollongong.