

Staff reject Steele claims

Biology dept defends honours exam marking policy

By LISA SEWELL

The University of Wollongong academics at the centre of soft marking allegations by outspoken professor Ted Steele have broken their silence to defend their reputations.

The 13 academics were all members of the biological sciences department when Dr Steele made his original claims that he had been coerced into upgrading the marks of two honours students.

In a statement signed by the academics, they claim that "no marks were boosted, increased or upgraded - they simply received the average mark of three highly qualified thesis examiners".

The academics stated that no coercion was applied to Dr Steele at any time.

"Furthermore, our honours exam policy excludes supervisors from thesis examination for their students. Consequently, Dr Steele was not a marker of his honours students' theses and therefore could not increase or decrease their thesis marks."

Dr Steele was sacked on the basis of the claims last February, although he will be reinstated later this month after a Federal Court ruling that the dismissal was unlawful.

His allegations, however, will still be put under the spotlight at an inquiry - the details of which are yet to be decided upon by university management and the National Tertiary Education Union.

The academics claim an inquiry will give them the opportunity to defend themselves against the accusations of their former colleague, whom they will again have to work beside upon his reinstatement on April 22.

They said they had refrained from public comment while the court case was pending.

"As the staff who are as yet undefended victims of his accusations we request that all parties work quickly towards an agreement on a process that gives us the opportunity to have the facts heard, our reputations repaired, and our past, present and future students cleared," they stated.

The academics went on to say that the department's marking and assessment procedures were among Australian best practice.

"Our processes for assessing honours student theses are similar to those used by most other Australian universities," they said.

"In fact our processes are more stringent because we use three, not two, highly qualified examiners, one of whom is external to the department and the final thesis mark is an average of their marks. The supervisor is not a thesis examiner.



ON THE DEFENSIVE: University of Wollongong professors (front) Rob Whelan and Bill Buttemer with fellow academic staff from the Biological Sciences Department. Picture: DAVID TEASE

The signatories

- Professor Rob Whelan
- Associate Professor Mark Walker
- Associate Professor David Ayre
- Associate Professor Andy Davis
- Associate Professor Bill Buttemer
- Associate Professor Mark Wilson
- Associate Professor Ross Lilley
- Associate Professor Tony Hulbert
- Dr Kris French
- Dr Sharon Robinson
- Dr Marie Ranson
- Dr Wendy Russell
- Dr Ren Zhang

"These procedures are designed to allow the supervisor to guide the student (without conflict of interest), to provide a thorough

examination, to ensure a fair outcome for the student, and to protect against favouritism and bias."

Acting head of the biological science department Associate Professor Bill Buttemer - one of the statement signatories - said he had been "surprised" by Dr Steele's allegations.

"We continually review and try to improve the Bachelor of Science honours program and assessment procedures," Prof Buttemer said.

"In fact Dr Steele was involved in the 2000 review and made no objection or criticism at that time."

Former department head Professor Rob Whelan, recently appointed as the Dean of the Faculty of Science, said the intense media and academic scrutiny had been hard for academic staff.

"Dr Steele's claims have had a big psychological

impact on every member of the department," he said.

"It is the reputation of the whole department, which is regarded as one of the strongest research and teaching departments in the country, that has come under fire."

Dr Steele said yesterday he was not surprised by the comments from his former work colleagues.

"Their claim that the procedures are Australian best practice can be challenged by all sorts of people."

On Monday

Another University of Wollongong academic has made allegations of soft marking at the university, claiming students' marks had been "changed or massaged".

Read his story in Monday's Mercury.

Post-mortem clue to death

By DANIELLE WOOLAGE

A post-mortem will be conducted today to determine if a Dapto man's death required further investigation.

Police were called to the man's Byamee St unit after the 59-year-old's body was discovered by his wife yesterday morning.

There were no visible wounds to the man's body, but his torso was covered in blood, suggesting "minor thrashing injuries". Police set up a crime scene just before 11am and volunteers canvassed nearby residents for any information that might provide

Man, 59, found in Dapto unit

clues to the man's death.

Lake Illawarra Police Superintendent Gary Hodsdon said the man suffered from diabetes and may have had a fit.

But he said police could not rule out foul play until the results of forensic and pathology tests were received.

"There doesn't appear to be any clear motive and there are no suspects at this stage," he said.

"Until we receive the results of the post mortem we will treat the death as suspicious, but we are 75 per cent sure he died from natural causes."

A neighbour from a nearby unit said she had not heard anything to suggest an intruder was in the man's home.

"I have never seen him or heard him have a fight with anybody," she said.

Mr Hodsdon said the victim's family was at the scene assisting police with inquiries.

Laws Auctions

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10.15AM: LOUNGES, SOFA BEDS & TIMBER FURNITURE: Brand new leather and fabric lounge suites, most with recliners, sofa beds, entertainment units, coffee tables, bookcases, beds, buffets and hutches, also desks and bedside chests.
10.30AM: NEW CONSIGNMENT: Famous brand king, queen & single mattress and ensembles.
10.45AM: WHITEGOODS: Fridges, Freezers, Ranges, Ovens, Cooktops (gas & electric), Rangehoods, Washing machines, Dryers, Dishwashers & Microwaves 19 to 37 ltr incl. convection models most items sold with warranty.
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