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Wednesday 31 January 2001

Dear Colleagues:

The text of the letter below from Associate Professor Mark Walker is an electronic transcript of a hard copy letter I found in my departmental letterbox on Thursday 25th January at 1.30pm. The letter was typed on University letterhead.

In the next open e-mail entitled "Response to Ultimatum" I will formerly respond to this letter and the directives it contains to contact various media organisations. I have delayed responding immediately on legal advice (which I communicated in a short letter hand delivered to Walker's secretary on Thursday 25th at 3.15 pm.- a copy of the text of this letter [edited for typos] follows the Walker letter)

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG (letterhead)

24th January 2001

Associate Professor E Steele
Department of Biological Sciences
Faculty of Science

Dear Associate Professor Steele

I refer to the reports widely circulated in the media attributing to you a claim that you have in the past been told to increase the grades of honours students. In particular I refer to the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald on 9 January 2001:

"Dr. Ted Steele, an Associate Professor at Wollongong University, Australia's University of the Year, said that he had been told to increase the grades of honours students"

and to the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald of 12 January 2001:

"This prompted Dr Ted Steele, of Wollongong University, to allege he had been instructed to increase the grades of honours students"

and to the Illawarra Mercury of 12 January 2001:

"Wollongong University Department Biological Sciences associate professor Ted Steele has signed a statutory declaration stating that at least two of his honours students had their marks boosted from a fail to a high grade."

I also refer to your letter to the Vice Chancellor of 10 January 2001 (accompanied by your Statutory Declaration verifying its truth and accuracy) where you state in part:

"The story in the Sydney Morning Herald is therefore a truthful account of what transpired in my case."

I note also that you chose to circulate widely your response to the Vice Chancellor's request that you provide him with particulars of your claim.

The position adopted by you until recently therefore is that your claims had been accurately reported by the media and, indeed, this appears to be confirmed by the fact that you have to date taken no steps of which I am aware to correct that public record.

I note that at the Department meeting held on 17 January 2001 after you explained:

"that in one instance I was misrepresented" you were asked" so you are saying that you did not allege that you were instructed to increase the grades"

and you replied

"No, I never said that."

I further note in your e-mail of 23 January 2001 you have stated unequivocally that you did not use the word "instruct" in your discussions with the reporter from the Sydney Morning Herald.

The position as I see it, therefore (and as I am confident your work colleagues and many members of the public in general see it as well), is that you have allowed the public record to show in very clear terms that you have made a claim that you were told or instructed to do something. Clearly this means that you have indicated that those in the hierarchy of your workplace who have authority over you have given you an instruction or direction to upgrade the marks of students. You have also, at the very least, allowed the report of your assertion to be linked with statements that this was done for the purpose of keeping overseas full fee paying students happy.

I further note that not only have you allowed the public record of your remarks to go unchallenged and uncorrected, but you have further sought to frustrate the attempts of your employer and other members of the Department to have the record corrected. I note in that regard that when I attempted to correct the record by accurately recounting what transpired in the Departmental meeting, you denied in the media making a comment which you were clearly recorded as having made. I draw your attention to page 3 of the Illawarra Mercury of 18 January 2001 where the following appears:

"Professor Walker said Dr Steele denied to the meeting that he had made an allegation to the Sydney Morning Herald that he(dr Steele) had been instructed to increase the grades of honours students"....

Dr Steele later rejected suggestions that he denied making the comment."

In case you regard these matters as merely a matter of semantics (which some of your recent statements indicate) let me stress to you that I have serious concerns that your actions have done real harm to the operations of the University and to the reputation of your Departmental colleagues.

I believe it is incumbent upon you to appropriately correct the public record as a matter of urgency. Accordingly I request that you immediately advise all media outlets who to your knowledge have reported on this matter of the correct situation and in particular that you:

- 1) Make it perfectly clear that you were not instructed to increase the grades of honours students;
- 2) In the cases you cited selectively, make it perfectly clear that, although you did not agree with the decision made, this process did not involve you or any one else changing the marks allocated to those students;
- 3) Indicate that you are the only academic member of your Department who is unhappy with the process used to assess honours students;
- 4) Make it clear that the process involved in assessing honours students is not applied differently in the cases of students who are overseas students.
- 5) Request the media outlets to provide the same degree of prominence to your corrections of the public record as they did to their reports of your initial assertions.

Since you chose not to use any appropriate internal methods of addressing your concern about the process with other members of your Department but chose rather to air your concerns in the media, I repeat that you have, in my view, an essential responsibility to correct the public record so as to minimise the very real damage done to the reputation and good name of your work colleagues and your employer.

I urge you to attend these matters immediately

Yours sincerely

Associate Professor Mark Walker
Head of Department, Biological Sciences

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Associate Professor M Walker
Department of Biological Sciences
University of Wollongong

Thursday 25th January 2001

Dear Associate Professor Walker :

I have received today your letter of 24th January 2001 typed on University

letterhead (at 1.30 pm in my letter box).

Your requests and statements raise serious and complex questions, and I have also inferred may be a precursor to action or procedures capable of affecting my position within this University.

In these circumstances I am seeking legal advice as to my position and as to appropriate response on my part. I would also wish in any case to have time to consider in my own mind the issues involved before committing myself to a reply.

May I therefore request that you will not think it evasive or discourteous if I ask that you permit me until 1.00pm Thursday February 1st inst. to reply more fully.

I would wish however to reserve my right in the meantime publicly to seek to correct any misapprehension or error in any of the matters to which you have referred in your letter.

Yours sincerely

Dr. EJ Steele
Associate Professor