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Dear Colleagues :

Due to the widespread interest in this matter I have decided to make public the full text of the letter I received as an e-mail letter attachment yesterday afternoon (3:30 pm 1.2.01) from the Deputy Ombudsman Chris Wheeler (below).

In a discussion with the NSW Ombudsman office this morning I found out that "they do not like getting involved with academics in disputes over marking/assessment quality" - apparently the Ombudsman assumes everyone is considered an "expert" in the context of a department examination/assessment meeting. So this matter cannot be resolved by the office of the NSW Ombudsman viz: the devaluing of expert opinion vs superficial non-expert opinion (in research discipline area) in Honours assessment meetings, resulting in an upgrade of students who did not deserve it (as judged by genuine expert evaluation).

I hope this contributes to the momentum for the establishment of a national "Universities Ombudsman" (eg by NTEU's Dr Julie Wells call in Syd Morn Herald "Opinion & Comment" page 14 January 24 2001).

Sincerely

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1 February 2001

Associate Professor E Steele
Department of Biological Sciences
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<mailto:ejsteele@uow.edu.au>

Dear Professor Steele

Re: Complaints concerning Wollongong University

I refer to your e-mails of 31 January and 1 February 2001 setting out various allegations and comments concerning the process of Honours assessment in the Department of Biological Sciences at Wollongong University.

You assert in your e-mails that the procedure followed in the cases in question resulted in a situation where you "...certainly felt that [you] had been instructed to elevate marks from FAIL/borderline pass to mid-range pass or PhD entry at the Honours assessment meetings of Nov 1997 and 2000". You go on to assert that the result of the above process was the "...active 'upgrading' of marks against the expert evaluation of the external examiner and the informed view of the expert supervisor (myself); and this was done by non-experts within the department".

In your e-mails you claim that the process of Honours assessment "...treats internationally recognised scientists (both myself as Hons supervisor and the external examiner of the two Hons theses in question (student A 1997, student B 2000) with contempt, and gives undue weight to the superficial opinions of non-experts in the discipline area". You further claim that the process "...allowed PhD entry to a student deemed unqualified by internationally recognised experts in the field".

>From the information contained in your e-mails it appears to me that the situation can be summarised as follows:

- Σ the assessments in question occurred in 1997 and 2000 and involved two students, one of which was a full fee paying overseas student;
- Σ the Honours thesis assessment procedure used in the Department of Biological Sciences at Wollongong University involves assessment by three or four markers comprising:
 - usually one or two external experts in the discipline area, chosen by the supervisor; and
 - one or two staff from within the Department (as I understand it not including the supervisor), being staff with PhDs in a related field (in the cases in question the general fields of Cell and Molecular Biology/ Biotechnology);
- Σ the individual marks given by each of the examiners are averaged, with equal weight being given to the evaluations of each examiner;

Σ the thesis examiners reports are considered by an Honours Evaluation Committee composed of all available academic staff members on campus with PhDs (and in relation to the two cases in question the chair of the Committee was the Head of Department, Professor Robert J Whelan);

Σ at the Honours Examination Committee meeting:

- presumably, in accordance with standard practice, all collated marks were presented and discussed, and the examiners' reports and a copy of the thesis were available to all staff;
- as supervisor you would have been given an opportunity to interpret, defend or rebut the comments of the other three examiners;
- the committee then came to a resolution on the final mark and the grade of Honours to be forwarded to the University;

Σ you indicate that although you strongly supported the assessment of the external examiner, no extra weight was given to the external examiner's opinion by the Examination Committee even though you state that the Committee has the discretionary power to "value the expert opinion highly";

Σ you note that you are the only academic member of your department who is unhappy with the process used to assess Honours students, the other 13 academics fully endorsing the mark;

Σ you note, I think particularly importantly, that the individual marks of each examiner were not altered (but in your view the outcome of averaging all marks resulted in an 'upgrading' of the mark actually awarded, given that it was above the mark given by the external examiner - a mark with which you agreed).

>From my assessment of the information you have provided it appears to me that:

1. the University has in place a procedure for the assessment of Honours theses;
2. the procedure involves separate assessments by three or four examiners, each of which is given equal weight;
3. while the Honours Examination Committee may have a discretion to place greater weight on the opinions of certain persons, or to take into account comments that may be made by the supervisor, this discretion may not have been or was not exercised in the two cases in question;
4. the marks assessed by each examiner in the two cases in question were not altered during or after the assessment process and you do not allege that any directions were given by any other party to any examiner to alter or upgrade any mark;
5. you do not allege that the standard assessment procedure was not followed in the two cases in question.

>From the above it does not appear to me that you were directed or instructed in any way to elevate or upgrade the marks awarded to the two students in question, or that this can properly be described as the effect of the process which took place on both occasions. In the case of the theses in question, it does not appear that you could have been pressured or instructed to upgrade a mark since, from the information contained in your e-mails, it appears that you were not in fact a marker. If I have read this wrongly due to the ambiguity in the information on this topic in the e-mails and you were in fact a marker, you are still not alleging that any individual assessment you may have made was changed in any way.

In effect, it appears to me that you are not arguing that the implementation of the assessment procedure was flawed, but that the standard procedure established by the University or the Department for the assessment of Honours theses does not, in your view, give sufficient weight to the views of the external examiner or the supervisor.

You seem to be further arguing that the other academic members of your department who were members of the Honours Examination Committee should, as a matter of course, have preferred the assessment of the external examiner

(supported by you) over that of the two internal examiners. It appears to me that if such an approach was standard practice, there would be little purpose in appointing any thesis examiners other than the external expert selected by the supervisor.

For the reasons set out above, on the information you have provided it does not appear to me that the procedure followed in the assessment of the two theses in question was flawed. I therefore decline to investigate your complaint. If you are able to show that any of my observations are inaccurate such that my conclusions may be flawed, I am happy to review any further material from you.

As the material you have forwarded to us shows that you have informed Associate Professor Walker that copies of his letter of 24 January and your response have been sent to this Office, I will be forwarding a copy of this e-mail to Professor Walker to advise him as to my decision on your complaint and the reasons on which it was based.

Yours sincerely

Chris Wheeler
Deputy Ombudsman