

War clouds gather over Institute

The rarified world of academia doesn't take too kindly to outside interference as events at the re-named Darwin Institute of Technology have demonstrated.

Academics returned to the institute in full force last week and immediately held a council of war to fight the Territory Government's intrusion in higher education.

Outraged press statements went around the country, there were calls for the institute's council to resign and even a token resignation by one senior lecturer.

Dr Graham Davidson resigned his position on the institute council and as humanities and social sciences department chairman. This does not affect his position as a senior lecturer at the institute.

Vocal

There is also the question of who is paying for the hundreds of dollars in press statements sent on behalf of the Federation of College Academics (NT) using the institute's telex.

Statements of concern issued from all sectors of staff and students over the Chief Minister, Mr Ian Tuxworth's, high-handed appointment of institute director, Mr Kevin Davis.

The FCA was particularly vocal about Mr Davis's lack of academic qualifications: minimal when compared with his counterparts in other states.

Mr Davis also is considerably less qualified than many of the academics under his charge which also is a bitter pill for them to swallow.

Assault

The unilateral renaming of the institute by Mr Tuxworth also is greatly resented.

It appears one of the most surprised individuals at the time was Education Minister, Mr Tom Harris.

Mr Harris was under fire last week as the counter assault, led by the FCA, moved into full swing.

Academic status is at the heart of the furore and the FCA, led by NT spokesman, Dr Trevor James, feel this has been greatly undermined by the Territory Government.

There is a pecking order in higher education which places universities at the top, institutes of technology and colleges

By LEONIE BIDDLE

of advanced education next and TAFE (technical and further education) colleges last.

Members of the FCA (NT) believe, at the least, they are the equal of their counterparts in other institutes of technology and colleges of advanced education.

The more highly qualified of their members see themselves as potential university lecturers and resent the sort of treatment which relegates their institution to government department status.

To quote Dr James, such interference wouldn't be tolerated at institutes of technology such as the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology or Queensland Institute of Technology.

"It wouldn't be tolerated or even contemplated in the first place," Dr James said during a recent interview.

And it wouldn't. Heads of these institutions are not government appointees and their qualifications are not in question.

It could be said DIT is not in the same category as these institutions but there can be no harm in striving to be.

The concerns of Darwin academics also might be written off as those of a small elite. But surely their desire for a credible institute with highly regarded degrees also must be in the interests of students and higher education in the Territory.

The campaign against Territory Government interference intensified late last week following Dr James's announcement that national support, including that of the Federal Government, would be sought.

Weekend meetings were held to form a tactics committee to co-ordinate the campaign at Territory and national level.

The committee was to be representative of higher education comprising staff and student association members, the Northern Territory Teachers' Federation DIT branch and the FCA.

But it seems the representative committee is not so representative.

A memo by the institute's staff association chairman, Mr John Krajsek, on Thursday, dissociated the association from statements by the committee this week.

But Mr Krajsek said the association was still prepared to have a representative on the tactics committee if it was "truly representative and not just a group of individuals," namely the FCA.

Signs the academics' campaign was losing ground became evident earlier in the week.

These followed claims by the FCA of government members putting pressure on institute lecturers to "bend the rules" for particular students.

Asked to back up the claims with specific examples, the FCA produced documents which named Berrimah MLA, Mr Barry Coulter, as intervening on behalf of a failed student.

But events since have shown the FCA should have been let that hornets' nest well alone.

Rather than embarrass the Government, it has turned the revelation into an effective counter-attack on the academics concerned.

Education Minister, Mr Harris, backed Mr Coulter's actions saying it was the right of every politician to investigate a constituent's complaints.

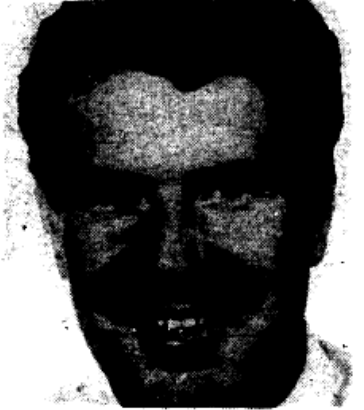
Mr Harris also claims to have documentation which indicates the student had "more than reasonable grounds" to believe she had been unfairly treated.

The timing of this no-holds-barred counter-attack from Mr Harris also put the academics at a further disadvantage.

It came on Thursday morning as the FCA was about to meet to vote on a cooling-off period in the campaign.

The academics believed the public confrontation had gone on long enough and the time had come for quiet talks with Mr Davis who apparently will officially take up the concerns with the Government.

The irony in this approach is that the academics want Mr Davis out of the director's seat and he is supposed to take up this and other concerns with the Government which is backing him to the hilt.



Mr Harris...surprised

While the academics were talking about removing discussion from the public arena and cooling-off periods, Mr Harris fired back with allegations which also included the student had been threatened in a letter from Education Studies department head, Dr David Ingram.

Dr Ingram yesterday described the Minister's statements as a "gross distortion of the facts."

Special

He said the institute had "bent over backwards" to help the student who, under the regulations, should have had her enrolment terminated for 12 months for twice failing a unit of her course.

"We arranged a special program, including individual tuition, which allowed her to complete her course at the end of 1984," Dr Ingram said.

If the regulations had been carried through the student would not have been able to complete requirements until May, 1986, he said.

But Mr Harris remains confident evidence before him will clearly show the student was unfairly treated and the sorry affair will be publicly revealed in the Assembly.

Dr Ingram is equally certain he has the necessary evidence to show the student was rightly failed and the institute went out of the way to help her complete the last requirement of her course as soon as possible.