

## **The targeting of my research students by university management following my public interest disclosure**

As an academic neuropathologist with experience at leading institutions in a total of six countries, I have had the opportunity to compare their management practices. I can confirm that I have never seen students being targeted by university management before.

When I noticed this practice at the University of Sydney, I filed a formal complaint on 11 September 2019. Later, I was provided with the attached letter (pages 2-3) that confirmed the targeting of students who were not under my supervision. The student newspaper published an eye-opening article on the context (pages 4-11). The targeting of my own students increased significantly after I made my public interest disclosure (PID) about alleged management criminality at the beginning of 2021.

In 2021, the first of my students was unfairly terminated, and management falsely claimed that they had "withdrawn" (page 12). The student described this behavior as "fraudulent", an assessment with which I have to agree given the circumstances I know. The following year, another of my students was unfairly terminated but later reinstated with help from the student body. However, they eventually gave up due to management's unimproved behavior as I understand. Earlier in 2022, a very talented student of mine had been prevented from enrolling in their PhD program after years of preparatory work, which I found shocking and malicious. Audit never properly investigated the cases I submitted (pages 13-14). A fourth student of mine was unfairly terminated in 2023.

Months after this last student's termination, management attempted to create a false narrative that I had not acted in the best interest of my students, as part of fabricating a misconduct case against me. This is particularly egregious given that these students had already been unfairly terminated by management prior to the creation of this narrative. Furthermore, the fact that the same students had been terminated months earlier highlights the sloppiness and deliberate deception in management's fabrications, as well as the carelessness of those who sign off on these falsehoods (pages 15).

I consider targeting students, especially domestic students who generate less revenue, to be a reprehensible low point in managerialist excess. This behavior aligns with such managers' disregard for academic values and is incompatible with their presence at a university. It is crucial that the public has access to this information, given the misleading information disseminated by university management with the assistance of compliant journalists, particularly those at the Sydney Morning Herald - notably, a former editor of which now serves as chief of staff at our university.

Professor Sarah Young  
Head of School of Medical Sciences  
Anderson Stuart Building (F13)  
The University of Sydney NSW 2006

May 19 2021

Dear Professor Young,

Re: Complaint against Professor Robert Vandenberg and Associate Professor Suzanne Ollerenshaw in their conduct during interviews held with students on March 17 & 18.

We write on behalf of the undersigned HDR students residing in the Medical Foundation Building (MFB) in response to one-on-one interviews held with HDR students, following an incident in the building on March 5.

On March 15 HDR students received an email from Professors Robert Vandenberg and Suzanne Ollerenshaw requiring their attendance at one-on-one meetings to, “check-in with everyone following the incident in Medical Foundation Building”. However, we are advised that students felt ambushed by interrogation-style questioning, in which leading questions were asked pertaining to a “toxic culture and bullying” in the building. No evidence was provided to substantiate the inference that any student or staff was involved in the March 5 incident nor that the building’s occupants were guilty of exhibiting “toxic culture or bullying” towards any members of our community.

Students involved in this complaint strongly denounce the actions behind the March 5 incident and in fact are very much looking forward to the conclusion of the police investigation so they can be cleared of any wrongdoing.

Specific complaint matters raised against Robert Vandenberg and Suzanne Ollerenshaw in conducting the interviews on March 17 and 18, include:

- Students were accused of bullying, directed towards school executive, if students did not actively remove posters from the walls
- Failure by Rob and Suzanne to take seriously students concerns about Workplace Health & Safety during the evacuation processes conducted on March 5, despite the apparent motivation for interviews being student safety
- Apparent student profiling based on their building of origin (MFB or AS), scholarship status, their networks within the building, their supervisors and their involvement in Students Against Disruption (SAD, a student-led advocacy group)
- Harassment via students’ personal non-university email accounts where students did not immediately respond to requests for an interview
- Urging students to report to the school their colleagues for odd behaviour, despite this being a police responsibility
- Advising students they would certainly be questioned by police and not following up with a formal notification, compounding student confusion and anxiety
- Threats of ramifications if students did not submit to the school

Regarding this last point one student wishes to clarify that in their interview they were told that students were “bullies” for not removing the posters put on display in MFB, and that because the faculty’s “authority was being undermined”, they “could make life difficult” for students. It was explained to the student that this was "the consequences of your actions, and you would not get any support from executive" [speaking about requested support for Medical Foundation Young Investigators Seminar Series]. This appears to accuse HDR students at MFB as being perpetrators of the March 5 incident and the student reasonably felt personally threatened in the interview.

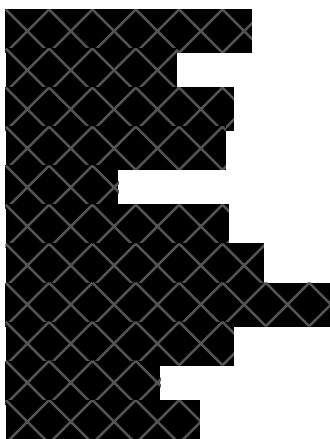
The students acknowledge the stressful situation in which Robert Vandenberg, as deputy head of school, and Suzanne Ollerenshaw were working under in their attempts to safeguard everyone at the time, but they do not accept the manner in which they were treated in those interviews and hope to obtain an apology from Robert Vandenberg and Suzanne Ollerenshaw. We also acknowledge that not all interviewees were subjected to each and every one of these actions described, but the undersigned students stand in solidarity with all of those that were.

Students request an immediate statement by the school that clearly communicates whether the NSW Police are actively investigating the 5 March incident and whether it is likely that NSW Police will seek statements from students regarding this event.

Students also seek an acknowledgement by the school of recent efforts and initiatives by HDR students in building a vibrant and cooperative workplace culture at the MFB. The students only wish to move forward and focus on their research. An acknowledgement would also reassure students of the school’s good intentions and that these matters of complaint are in the past and will not be repeated in the future.

In closing students express their frustrations that the majority of their cohort has experienced unprecedented disruptions to their studies which include the relocation of wet laboratories from Anderson Stuart, closure of the Bosch Institute, reorganisation of SOMs teaching staff and now this. We feel it’s time for students and the school executive to rebuild this wonderful MFB community. This should start with the abandonment of the school’s use of the term, “toxic”.

Yours sincerely (in alphabetical order),



Features, Investigation //

# Crisis after crisis: The 'toxic' managerial culture in the Faculty of Medicine and Health

How student and staff trust has been eroded in the Faculty of Medicine and Health.



Art by Claire Ollivain

by Oscar Chaffey  
May 31, 2021



Three and a half years ago, I picked a medical science degree, like many confused seventeen-years-olds before me, because I'd always loved biology in high school but couldn't quite close the deal on undergraduate medicine. I quickly found a genuine love for medical science. While it is true that its students are occasionally awkward and often competitive, I have never met a more earnest group of people in my life. One of my first university memories is of a lecture introducing diabetes where a lecturer wore a shirt extolling the virtues of the pancreas. I am also deeply fond of the Anderson

Stuart Building, a building that despite *Honi's* postulation that it was haunted in my first week on campus, has since become my second home.

In noting these things, I would be remiss to ignore the very public crises of management that have coloured my years here. In the first semester of 2019, on my way to anatomy and histology classes, I would walk through corridors where flyers and posters begged for Anderson Stuart to be saved. The building's staff were being threatened at the time with eviction, and I tried to show solidarity in whatever small ways were possible.

In 2020, against the backdrop of a pandemic that ought to have strengthened the imperative for basic science teaching, staff in my own major of physiology were threatened with losing their jobs. I rallied with them, fought police repression and even participated in a historic occupation of the F23 building to try and protect their jobs. This year I watched as several of my friends who had gone on to start their honours years were threatened with eviction from the Medical Foundation Building, once again under the auspices of safety concerns and an allegedly 'toxic' workplace culture. Over the past few weeks, I resolved to speak with staff, unionists and student activists to try to understand exactly why the Faculty of Medicine and Health (FMH) has generated these yearly crises.

Jamie\*, a former FMH staff member who spoke to me on condition of anonymity, describes a once drastically different workplace culture and attributes recent changes to the appointment of the inaugural Dean, Professor Robyn Ward, in July 2018. Before that time, they said that while management was not perfect, staff felt that their opinions were valued by Heads of School and that they collaborated freely and extensively.

Ward was appointed three years ago to oversee the centralisation of what were once seven separately administered schools – Medical Sciences, Medicine, Dentistry, Nursing, Pharmacy, Public Health and Health Sciences – into a single “mega-faculty.” Jamie says that staff in the School of Medical Sciences (SoMS) perceived themselves as particularly targeted, and that their trust in faculty leaders has been most especially eroded by a “lack of collegiality or consultation” over the last two years.

Jamie believes that the targeting of staff in SoMS began in late 2018 when staff who worked in wet laboratories (those that use biological material or liquids) in the Anderson Stuart Building were told that they would be evicted on the grounds that

their laboratories did not adhere to safety standards. Initially, Ward argued that the workplace health and safety risks were so intolerably severe that they could not be remedied by usual procedures, and mandated full relocation to other facilities by, at the latest, mid-2019. Staff say they were confused by this sudden development on two accounts. First, many staff reported that immediately before this proposal, their labs were found to meet Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) standards or had received minor, rectifiable recommendations. Additionally, management were extremely reticent to provide any detailed WHS reports on which the claim that the laboratories were unsafe was based.

Rob Boncardo, a member of USyd's National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch committee, says that these actions on management's behalf led staff to seek NTEU involvement to wage a dispute with the Faculty on their behalf. Boncardo argued that given the lack of WHS evidence, management's initial actions were a breach of the University's enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) as they did not engage in a formal change process, in which consultation and discussion would be required to move staff from the Anderson Stuart Building. This motivated the NTEU to challenge the decision "with the Provost, the Vice Chancellor and ultimately arbitration by the Fair Work Commission." In October 2019, the Fair Work Commission ruled in favour of staff in the Anderson Stuart Building and declared that the University should have entered into genuine bargaining through a formal change process.

Both Jamie and Rob tell me that there was a noticeable shift in the narrative of management during the dispute. After it became clear that FMH had insufficient evidence to support evictions on WHS grounds, they began to prosecute an argument that the staff deserved better facilities and so ought to be moved out of their presently suboptimal spaces in the Anderson Stuart Building.

Jamie says that staff were sceptical of this narrative as they had seen "management promises of new buildings and facilities fail to materialise" in the past and ultimately felt that the move was done to specifically demoralise and separate staff who had previously become accustomed to close collaboration. Campbell Watson, a fourth-year student in the Faculty and long-time activist, tells me that this was the first time that students became aware of what he described as a longer term 'culture war' between management and SoMS staff. Watson also recalls the high levels of staff militancy and the horror of many students when they discovered how their teachers were being treated.

In 2020, Watson was a key organiser in the campaign to Defend Medical Science Education, an involvement he says was motivated by his belief that the staff who were to be made redundant were “some of the best people” who had ever taught him. In late 2020, Professor Sarah Young, the current Head of the School of Medical Sciences, put forward a Draft Change Proposal that made redundant positions in the disciplines of Physiology and Pathology. Jamie was one of the many staff members whose job was ultimately made redundant under the proposal, and notes that several attempts to be genuinely consulted on the proposal were rebuffed and that directly negotiating with management was difficult.

The justification for the proposal was argued on two grounds: a) an attempt to further centralise teaching and b) to address what was argued to be overstaffing of the Physiology and Pathology disciplines. Physiology staff reported to management that the data being used to calculate the full time equivalent (FTE) value of their work was incorrect and did not take into account its full scope. In one other incident, management was especially combative, insisting staff were not being paid for a bioengineering class that staff knew they were being paid to teach.

Undergraduate and higher degree by research (HDR) student attempts at consultation were also rebuffed. Watson recalls a meeting with Sarah Young after the Revised Change Proposal was released, in which he and other students demanded that they be given the opportunity to make submissions and be consulted in the negotiating process. Watson describes Young's approach in the meeting as “completely retaliatory” as she referred to technical descriptions showing that students did not need to be consulted on matters of staff employment.

Everyone I spoke to noted that after the Anderson Stuart incident, management appeared to now be weaponising the terms of the enterprise bargaining agreement to their benefit, particularly against concerned students. Jamie notes that while the EBA required the Faculty to demonstrate that it was consulting staff, they were not obliged to make concessions to anyone, and appeared unwilling to do so throughout the process. In one survey conducted by the Defend Medical Science Education campaign in 2020, 69.17% of the 132 SoMS staff they surveyed reported feeling bullied by the actions of senior management.

Despite a large-scale campaign of resistance involving two disputes issued by the NTEU and a mobilisation of both staff and students, SoMS ultimately proceeded with the majority of the planned staff redundancies. Kelton Muir de Moore, a casual staff

member in Physiology and member of the NTEU, remembers the campaign as a moment of unprecedented staff mobilisation, describing the campaign as “the best level of collegueship I’ve seen in my time in Physiology.” Although relationships between staff had become tense, Muir de Moore says that the “struggle against the brutal management of staff gave staff a commonality that nurtured friendships and desires to fight the mismanagement of the University.”

This year, in a sequel befitting of a scripted drama, honours students were threatened with eviction from the Medical Foundation Building (MFB) and asked to change their supervisors on short notice. The eviction was initially justified on safety grounds by the fact that an unknown white powder and broken glass were found underneath a poster criticising management. Many of the same staff and postgraduate students that were evicted from Anderson Stuart in 2019 were relocated to MFB, and the culture of the building has been described by staff to be particularly sceptical of senior management. Subsequently, the eviction of honours students was justified on the basis of a supposedly “toxic” workplace culture within the building.

Boncardo explains that the NTEU closely engaged with the affected students in the MFB as losing honours students can “significantly impact staff workload provisions” and make them appear as if they were not performing their job adequately. Initially, Boncardo says, FMH management did not respond to NTEU appeals for mediation and proceeded to contact students informing them of an intent to evict regardless. The NTEU subsequently used a right of entry protocol to audit the evidence for the toxic workplace culture. The evidence, Boncardo says, was found to have been sourced from only six Faculty members, all of whom were members of the senior management team, and only one of whom worked in the building. At this point, Boncardo recalls, staff began to suspect that the phrase “toxic workplace culture” was management’s way of describing the strong union culture in the building.

Students, helped by the NTEU and the Students’ Representative Council (SRC), attempted to bargain with the Faculty and wrote individually and collectively in order to stay in the building and continue their original projects. The Faculty eventually reneged on good faith negotiations with the NTEU and the students were told that they would be moved out of the building at the end of the week. Subsequently, a meeting was held between management and students in which Boncardo attended in his capacity as a representative of the NTEU and the interests of students. Despite the students’ wish for Boncardo to remain in the meeting, management asked him to leave. Boncardo describes these actions as a “breach of the University’s enterprise bargaining



agreement” and a “transparent effort” at union busting. Eventually, after two weeks of negotiations, the Faculty decided to allow the honours students to remain in their building.

An honours student affected by the incident, who spoke to me on condition of anonymity, described the personal toll of the two weeks on their education. The student said that they “lost weeks of work and what feels like years off my life [and] I really cannot emphasise enough the mental and emotional toll. Several students expressed to me that they were finding it impossible to sleep and eat properly as they were feeling too hyped up by the adrenaline, stress and uncertainty around the decision and our meetings with management.”

The student further described dealings with management as “devoid of empathy.” Several honours students affected by the project have reportedly lost their trust in the Faculty and have strongly reconsidered their intentions to undertake further studies.

The SRC President, Swapnik Sanagavarapu, who was heavily involved in assisting students as a representative during the incident, confirmed that management were particularly hostile during meetings and did not seem to want a resolution. When asked to speak generally about accusations of a toxic culture in the faculty, Sanagavarapu said that in his experiences advocating for students, he felt that there was no faculty that “has had so many instances back to back of people being treated so poorly (by management).”

The NTEU has since conducted an audit into the workplace culture of the Medical Foundation Building and found that there was “no evidence of a toxic or urgently unsafe workplace in the area.” Overwhelmingly, respondents to the NTEU’s audit said that the space was safe and had a positive culture among colleagues. 69% of respondents, however, felt that the senior management of the Faculty negatively impacted the culture of the building. On 27 May, the NTEU recommended that further consultative processes with staff should be taken by senior management in order to best meet their needs. As Boncardo surmises, “while this process began with management cruelly accusing staff of cultivating a “toxic workplace culture”, it has ended with a rigorous and wide-ranging audit showing that it is in fact management themselves who have a lot of work to do to improve their relations with staff and students.”

Senior management may well have had an important (even good) idea when they set out to establish this mega-faculty. Change of this scale, however, requires a well articulated vision, clear communication, regular trustworthy consultation and authenticity where actions match a shared vision. The narrative so far seems sadly lacking in all of these attributes. Staff, students and unionists all appear to agree on one thing: FMH management have, for multiple years now, been engaging in a campaign of obfuscation, bullying and managerialism. If a toxic culture exists in the Faculty of Medicine and Health it is surely not one that exists amongst its students and teachers. Instead, it is one created by senior managers who have, thus far, unsuccessfully tried to divide and conquer them.

FILED UNDER: [ANDERSON STUART](#) [FACULTY OF MEDICINE](#) [MANAGEMENT](#) [MEDICAL SCIENCE](#) [NTEU](#) [UNI MANAGEMENT](#)



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We acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. The University of Sydney – where we write, publish and distribute Honi Soit – is on the sovereign land of these people. As students and journalists, we recognise our complicity in the ongoing colonisation of Indigenous land. In recognition of our privilege, we vow to not only include, but to prioritise and centre the experiences of Indigenous people, and to be reflective when we fail to be a counterpoint to the racism that plagues the mainstream media.

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Subject: Your request  
Date: 2021-09-27 15:37  
From: [no-reply@sydney.edu.au](mailto:no-reply@sydney.edu.au)  
To: [REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED],

Your request to discontinue your Doctor of Philosophy (Medicine) has been approved. You will be withdrawn or discontinued [1] from any units of study you were enrolled in, according to the relevant deadlines. If you would like to return to study in future you will need to re-apply for admission through Sydney Courses [2] or UAC.

Contact us if you would like information about this decision.

These changes may not be visible in Sydney Student immediately.

Contact us

If you have any questions, call us on 1800 SYD UNI (1800 793 864) or +61 2 8627 1444 (if outside Australia), or ask a question online [3].

The University of Sydney  
[sydney.edu.au](http://sydney.edu.au) [4]

CRICOS provider: 00026A ABN: 15 211 513 464  
Authorised by: Brendon Nelson, Executive Director Student Administration Services.



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

*Professor Manuel B. Graeber MD PhD FRCPATH  
Barnet-Cropper Chair of Brain Tumour Research*

06 March 2022

**Internal Audit  
The University of Sydney**

**cc: SUPRA, NTEU**

**Re: Enrolment of [REDACTED]**

[REDACTED] is an excellent student and we have been preparing her PhD project for a considerable amount of time (almost two years). [REDACTED] is in the process of registration and was diligently doing her work as I can confirm when she was informed out of the blue on 25 February that there is suddenly no place for her. The Admissions Office then advised that [REDACTED] should discuss with me for further clarification but I don't have any information myself.

Since no reasonable explanation has been forthcoming over the last week in spite of repeated queries by both [REDACTED] and myself, I am very concerned that this is another case of management misconduct in the Faculty of Medicine and Health

<http://honisoit.com/2021/05/crisis-after-crisis-the-toxic-managerial-culture-in-the-faculty-of-medicine-and-health/>

and I would therefore like to ask you to investigate immediately.

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

*Professor Manuel B. Graeber MD PhD FRCPATH  
Neuropathologist  
The University of Sydney Brain and Mind Centre  
Director, Brain Tumor Research  
THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY  
Editor-in-Chief, Neurogenetics  
President, University of Sydney Association of Professors  
President, Australian Association of University Professors*

[REDACTED]

*Student*

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*Professor Manuel B. Graeber MD PhD FRCPATH  
Barnet-Cropper Chair of Brain Tumour Research*

**To**  
**Internal Audit**  
**The University of Sydney**

**cc: SUPRA, NTEU**

**Re: Candidature of [REDACTED]**

[REDACTED] student record reads [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

However, [REDACTED] was not allowed to submit an ethics application as Chief Investigator which in our view is appropriate for the dissection of his late wife's brain of which he is the legal custodian. The required application for an exemption to the Academic Board was blocked by the then Chair, Professor Anthony Masters, which represents a violation of university policy because the board is the relevant body that needs to be approachable and the body in charge of making the decision. Most importantly, [REDACTED] holds documentation which proves that the decision to terminate his candidature was premeditated by Faculty management. When [REDACTED] put his concerns to the Chancellor, Ms Belinda Hutchinson, she ignored the wrongdoing in correspondence. [REDACTED] being the Chief Investigator is also appropriate because he is a senior academic already.

*It needs to be investigated: a) who made the premeditated decision in the Faculty to terminate [REDACTED] candidature, b) why was access to the Academic Board to have the exemption discussed blocked, c) why did Kerrie Henderson of the Office of General Counsel declare a conflict of interest when I asked her whether Professor Masters had overstepped his authority?*

This appears to be another example where proper process has not been followed to the detriment of a student and brain tumour research at the University.

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

*Professor Manuel B. Graeber MD PhD FRCPATH  
Neuropathologist  
The University of Sydney Brain and Mind Centre  
Director, Brain Tumor Research  
THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY  
Editor-in-Chief, Neurogenetics  
President, University of Sydney Association of Professors  
President, Australian Association of University Professors*

[REDACTED]  
*Student*

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**

**Professor Emma Johnston AO FAA FTSE FRSN**  
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research)

**15 June 2023**

Professor Manuel Graeber  
Brain & Mind Research Centre  
Room 705, Level 7, Building F

By email: [manuel.graeber@sydney.edu.au](mailto:manuel.graeber@sydney.edu.au)

## Private and Confidential

Dear Professor Graeber

experiencing difficulties in their candidature by providing the structure and support that they need to overcome adversity and work towards completion. As a result of your lack of engagement, your PhD student, [REDACTED] and your MPhil student, Dr C [REDACTED] have missed critical deadlines and are at risk of termination of candidature.

[REDACTED]



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**

**Professor Victoria Cogger BSc (Hons) PhD**  
Associate Dean (Research Education)  
Faculty of Medicine and Health

**04 August 2022**

Student Name: R [REDACTED] S [REDACTED]  
SID: [REDACTED]  
Program: Doctor of Philosophy  
Email: [REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]

**Termination of Candidature**

**From:** RECS No-Reply <recs.noreply@sydney.edu.au>  
**Date:** Friday, 31 March 2023 at 06:36  
**To:** Manuel Graeber <manuel.graeber@sydney.edu.au>  
**Subject:** (CC) Extension - Dr C [REDACTED] L [REDACTED] - [REDACTED]

## RECS

Dear Manuel

The following notification has been sent to C [REDACTED] L [REDACTED] and is copied below for your information.

Dear C [REDACTED]

Your extension has not been approved.

**Extension - Dr C [REDACTED] L [REDACTED] - [REDACTED]**