

Honi Soit

Accusations of a relationship behind Deputy Vice Chancellor's shock dismissal

Allegedly homophobic rumours were circulating amongst staff, but the University did little to mitigate them.



Image: Supplied (University of Sydney)

by Natassia Chrysanthos
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Allegations of a relationship between Shane Houston, Deputy Vice Chancellor for Indigenous Services and Strategy, and another male member of staff were a catalyst for Houston's sudden dismissal on 24 August.

The University's only statement at the time of Houston's departure was in an email from Vice Chancellor Michael Spence to staff that stated: "It is with regret and disappointment that I must advise that Professor Shane Houston will be stepping down from his role ... and leaving the University today."

While the University did not provide reasons for Houston's dismissal, a comment issued to the *Sydney Morning Herald* yesterday, and repeated to *Honi*, alleges that: "Professor Houston's departure from the University was related to a number of issues; best summarised as a developing management style that was both deeply inappropriate and incompatible with a publicly funded institution."

These allegations were not specifically presented to Houston as grounds for his dismissal.

Rather, an email sent to Houston days before he was dismissed cited concerns about a close personal relationship between Houston and Shane Perdue, who was also employed in the Indigenous portfolio.

Honi understands that Perdue and Houston were not in a relationship, and that the University had been made aware that allegedly homophobic rumours were circulating amongst staff, but had done little to mitigate them.

Emails show Houston denied the rumours, and turned to Spence for support in addressing them in April. Spence conceded that the allegations were unfair.

Houston took the matter to the University's Director of Culture Strategy on Spence's advice, and was told that there would be a survey conducted on the matter in two years' time.

The University later conducted an internal audit on the relationship between Houston and Perdue, and alleged that Houston was overly invested in Perdue's professional development.

The audit includes the citation of an email line in which Perdue responds "yay" to the prospect of studying a PhD as evidence of an inappropriate relationship.

The audit does not compare Houston's investment in Perdue's professional development to that of his other senior staff, one of whom was sponsored to undertake a program in executive management valued at about \$30,000.

Houston and Perdue jointly pioneered the University's Service Learning in Indigenous Communities (SLIC) program, which is a landmark initiative in taking students to remote indigenous communities to work on long-term projects with local stakeholders.

Perdue, who is of Native American descent and from the Cherokee people, has a working history of engaging with Indigenous communities, also co-organising the Healing Our Spirit Worldwide gathering which brings together Indigenous people from around the world.

Despite his achievements at the University, with the SLIC program a finalist at the *Australian Financial Review* Higher Education Awards this year, Perdue was not rehired in August. He was replaced as Director of Strategic Management (Indigenous Services and Strategy) by Kylie Gwynne, who is not Indigenous.

Houston was excluded from the hiring process for the position, despite the role existing directly under him and within the terms of his portfolio. Nobody from the Indigenous portfolio was involved in Gwynne's appointment.

Since Houston's departure, the University has wound back programs he initiated.

The Sydney Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics, which is hosted by the Faculty of Health Sciences and aims to collect, analyse and understand information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, will lose its funding on 31 October.

Aspects of the SLIC program have also been temporarily put on hold. A spokesperson said that the University “had recently become aware of issues with [the program], including safety and compliance concerns”.

When asked what those safety and compliance concerns were, the University declined to comment.

Honi understands that an internal review of the SLIC program has been undertaken, but that staff, students, or Aboriginal communities directly involved with the program were not consulted as part of that review.

This follows news that Houston will take his case to the Fair Work Commission later this month.

A university spokesperson told *Honi*, “The University is aware of the case lodged in the Fair Work Commission and vigorously denies any wrongdoing.”