

‘Unprofessional conduct’ at Deakin’s Koorie institute

- THE AUSTRALIAN
- SEPTEMBER 16, 2015
- **Kylar Loussikian**



Institute of Koorie Education director Liz Cameron, left, with Deakin VC Jane den Hollander.

An independent investigator has found senior leaders at Deakin University’s Institute of Koorie Education engaged in unprofessional conduct, following a series of claims put to Deakin by aggrieved staff.

However, claims of discriminatory behaviour and bullying have been dismissed.

Deakin had appointed human resources specialists at the Zalt Group, which reported that some of the allegations against the institute’s deputy director Brian Martin had turned out to be correct.

“The allegation that Professor Martin had at times engaged in unprofessional behaviour inconsistent with the code of conduct has been substantiated,” a message sent from Deakin’s human resources division to the complainants reads.

Allegations that Professor Martin and another staff member, engaged in bullying or discriminatory behaviour were not substantiated.

Liz Cameron, the newly appointed director at IKE, has been directed to follow up with Professor Martin and the other member of staff in relation to the findings of the report, which will not be made publicly available.

Gwen Tinkler, Deakin's executive director of human resources, said the matter was now closed.

"I acknowledge it has been a difficult time for all involved and I thank you for your participation in the process," Ms Tinkler wrote in the email.

"This advice serves to now formally conclude this matter, save for the recommendations which will be implemented under Dr Cameron's leadership."

A university spokeswoman said Professor Martin continued to have Deakin's full support.

"The report has been taken out of context and does not reflect the culture or values at the IKE," she said. "(Deakin) is dismayed at the continued negative focus on past internal matters rather than the positive work ensuring indigenous Australian students can access higher education within a culturally embedded community-based framework."

One academic, who declined to be named, said it was disappointing the report had not been made public. "We have been unable to receive a copy of the Zalt investigation report in its original form given to Deakin, we have only received Deakin's watered-down version," the academic said.

In August *The Australian* revealed allegations senior academic staff at Deakin University had orchestrated a campaign to remove Wendy Brabham, IKE's long-time director, in a fashion that involved enlisting students to file complaints about bullying and harassment.

One student was left so traumatised by the experience that she required psychiatric help.

The HES is not suggesting the complaints about Professor Martin related to this incident, with Professor Martin not employed by Deakin till well after that period.

Documents obtained through Freedom of Information legislation listed staff grievances about a "hostile/unsafe working environment", "intimidatory behaviour" and "bullying" following the removal of Professor Brabham, who was suspended in 2013 and later dismissed. A significant number of indigenous staff have since departed.

Deakin has categorically rejected allegations of impropriety.

Nevertheless, the HES last week revealed emails that appeared to show Deakin vice-chancellor Jane den Hollander promising the job of deputy director to Professor Martin even before it was eventually advertised externally. "For your own reputation I think we must advertise — you will easily get the job and be seen to have won it in a fair and transparent way," Professor den Hollander wrote to Dr Martin in October 2013.

“I hope you can trust me and know I never break my word.” Professor den Hollander denied it was a promise; she said that she had no say in the promotion process and was merely encouraging a “talented man who needed a confidence boost”.

Dr Cameron said it was time to move beyond the troubled period,

“With a deep commitment to addressing the inequities in higher education for indigenous peoples, I have a strong sense of personal integrity, motivation and determination to drive change by embracing leadership skills that (give priority to) quality learning, culturally supportive environments and open, trusting communication channels,” she said.