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<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/uni-damaged-over-lecturers-demotion/2008/05/20/1211182764879.html> accessed 8.40am 21/05/08

Uni 'damaged' over lecturer's demotion

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May 20, 2008 - 2:21PM

The University of Melbourne's reputation for upholding academic freedom has been damaged by the demotion of a senior lecturer after a complaint against him by the State Government, the tertiary union says.

The Age revealed today that Paul Mees, a senior lecturer in transport planning and a prominent public transport advocate, was told his pay would be slashed after he made a strongly worded attack on the Government over transport privatisation.

In the attack, made at a public forum last year, Dr Mees said the authors of a 2007 report on privatisation were "liars and frauds and should be in jail".

Documents obtained by The Age showed that one of the university's reasons for acting against Dr Mees was a concern about its relations with the Government.

In a statement issued today, the National Tertiary Education Union said the University of Melbourne's reputation and standing as an institution upholding the highest standards of intellectual rigour and academic freedom had been damaged by its handling of the issue.

The statement says the university, in its own collective agreement, committed itself to "upholding the scholarly values of intellectual freedom, honesty, openness and rigour, consistent with the university's vision" and defined intellectual freedom as "the freedom of academic staff ... to engage in critical inquiry, intellectual discourse and public controversy without fear or favour, but does not include the right to harass, intimidate or vilify".

"The commitments of the university as stated in their collective agreement do not state that these values are contingent on not upsetting Government funding bodies," union state secretary Matthew McGowan said.

"Yet, the basis of the university's investigation into Dr Mees' case was to determine if he had damaged the reputation of the university.

"If the university's view is that Dr Mees is vilifying the department, then they cannot assess his conduct without examining the validity of his claim or the basis of his belief in the allegations, which is something the investigation specifically ruled out."

Mr McGowan said "universities must stand up for the right of staff to engage in robust debate against the pressures placed on it by funding bodies".

"The fact that it is a Government department applying the pressure makes this an even more insidious example of their failure to meet the test they themselves have applied through their collective agreement," Mr McGowan said.

In a letter to the Government on October 23, Professor Nick Low of the university's transport research centre wrote that Dr Mees' remarks were "directly contrary to our wish to conduct our relations with the State Government in a spirit of partnership and collaboration".

Dr Mees, a former president of the Public Transport Users Association, made his remarks on August 23 at a university forum on the privatisation of Melbourne's public transport.

He told the forum that figures in a report by then director of public transport Jim Betts on the results of privatisation were deliberately misleading.

About two months later, Mr Ronaldson complained in writing to Melbourne University vice-chancellor Glyn Davis and to Professor Low.

Mr Ronaldson demanded Dr Mees' speech be removed from the university's website.

A podcast of the speech was immediately removed.

Without telling Dr Mees, the university also launched an investigation into whether he had damaged the university's reputation.

The inquiry, conducted by Michael King of Monash University's law faculty, found Dr Mees had "brought the university into disrepute by making derogatory and insulting comments" about Government officers.

In the report, Professor Low is quoted saying the Government "had had enough of Dr Mees' over-the-top remarks and (wanted him) reined in".

Professor Low has been in negotiations with the State Government over funding a research project into greenhouse gas emissions from transport.

Mr Betts has agreed to be a partner in the application for funding.

Dr Mees has since quit the university, and will give his final lecture next week. He has accepted a role with RMIT's planning department.

Dr Mees has also appealed against the university's finding against him, and is

planning to sue the university over the way it conducted the investigation, and "for charging me with misconduct over being a whistleblower".

The university told Dr Mees his pay would be cut from \$96,000 to \$88,000 a year after it investigated the Government's complaint.