



Cedric Nunn

FIGHTING UNIVERSITY BULLYING

BY LAUREN INGRAM

When I submitted a Freedom of Information request to my university as part of my studies I never expected that it would result in national media coverage, bullying by academics from my faculty and threats of expulsion from my university.

Earlier in the year, as a final year journalism student at the University of Canberra, I was required to draft and submit a request to a government department or agency as part of my investigative journalism unit. The goal was to teach us about investigative journalism and how you could use Freedom of Information requests to get an investigative story. I decided to submit a request to my own university targeting documents relating to the changes to the bachelor of journalism degree which, despite assurances from the university about openness and transparency, were being kept secret.

I drafted my response and submitted it to the University of Canberra. Then, a week before the date by which the university was legally required to provide me with the documents, I received an email from my lecturer Crispin Hull.

“The FOI office feels swamped and will have to spend a lot of time and enormous cost with your FOI requests ... [the FOI officer] would like to be relieved of the legal burden of having to fulfill the FOI requests according to the FOI Act,” Hull wrote.

He requested I formally drop our FOI requests in exchange for a guest lecture from David Hamilton, the university’s FOI officer: “It would be good if you could officially withdraw your FOI requests as soon as possible and in return we will get [David’s] FOI insights and you will get the opportunity to ask him questions about the FOI process. I think this will go further towards achieving our educational aims than doggedly persisting with the formal FOI process.”

I was astounded that my lecturer, who had been teaching me all semester to pursue stories despite opposition, was requesting for me to drop my request. I sent him a reply email that said I would not drop my request as it “went against everything I’d been taught about journalism”.

Hull then informed Prof Greg Battye, the deputy dean of the faculty, that I had refused to withdraw my request. In response, Battye asked Hull to pass on a message to me: that if I continued with my request and refused to withdraw it I could be in breach of the student conduct rules. If I was found in breach of these rules then I could be suspended or expelled from the university or failed in the investigative journalism unit. Battye claimed that legal advice given to him suggested that because I did not have an academic ethics clearance to write a story for an assignment on the university, I could be determined to be in breach of the conduct rules.

However no student has had to gain an ethics clearance from the university for a journalism assignment before. This claim was just another attempt to scare me into submission, to attempt to force me into dropping the request.

Hull responded to Battye at this point saying that there was no reason why a student would need ethics clearance and that he would not support a warning to students on this. “Such a warning, in my view, would be tantamount to bullying conduct, and I will not be a part of it,” Hull wrote.

Dr Johan Lidberg, an FOI researcher and Monash University journalism academic, says that even asking someone to withdraw an FOI request is out of order.

“It’s completely inappropriate and against the spirit of FOI laws to pressure or even ask applicants to drop requests,” Dr Lidberg said. “FOI is a democratic accountability tool... to pressure someone to withdraw an information request could be seen as undemocratic and would probably not be viewed favourably should the case progress to an appeal.”

It was after I learnt of this threat of a student conduct breach and the further attempts to prevent me from accessing the documents that I decided to go public with my story. I published a piece exposing the university on the Australian news website Crikey.com.au. The story was picked up by national and local media and the university faced scrutiny over what it attempted to do.

After I refused to bow to the pressure from Battye, the university was then forced to complete my request and I received over 400 pages of documents relating to the changes to the journalism degree. These documents proved that the university lied about the changes to the degree, including statements made by the university that there would be extensive student and industry consultation about the changes. Emails I obtained show that the Faculty of Arts and Design decided to cut the number of practical journalism units in order to “provide efficiencies” in the department, and that this decision was made before journalism staff, students or journalists in the industry were consulted.

After I published this information the university administration only became more secretive and more hostile towards me. Requests for interviews for follow up stories were either ignored or refused. Faculty of Arts and Design administrative staff began to follow me on twitter and the Students Association succeeded in preventing me from becoming involved with their student magazine publication.

Despite my successes, I still find irony in the fact that it was my strong journalism education so far – something the University of Canberra gave to me – that made me fight their pressure to drop my freedom of information request. This battle, however, has only strengthened my desire to work in journalism and uncover truth in the world.