

Wilfrid Laurier University completely exonerates TA Lindsay Shepherd

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Wilfrid Laurier University teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd should never have been reprimanded for showing a clip of a debate featuring psychology professor Jordan Peterson, the university's president said Monday after receiving a report on the incident from an independent investigator.

The report showed that no formal or informal complaint on the incident was filed in writing or verbally with either the university's diversity and equity office, or with Nathan Rambukkana, Ms. Shepherd's supervisory professor.

"It's become clear to us that there was significant overreach for invoking one of our policies on campus," said Deborah MacLatchy, the president of the university in Waterloo, Ont. "Those policies and procedures were misapplied through errors and judgments that were made by staff and faculty."

The findings from the report by lawyer Robert Centa completely clear the 23-year-old graduate student in communications and will lead to questions about whether any of the people who attended a meeting with Ms. Shepherd in which she was reprimanded will face sanctions.

Ms. Shepherd said she was relieved that no student in her class had in fact launched a complaint.

"As much as people criticize students for being snowflakes, it turns out it was the professors," she said.

"Imagine if I had not made the recording and alerted the media.

"I would have gone through my whole life thinking I offended someone and really hurt someone, and I violated policies, and it would not have been true. It's a complete abuse of their power to pretend that someone had complained," Ms. Shepherd said in an interview.

Dr. MacLatchy said she could not comment on possible sanctions for the professors and staff involved at the university as they are confidential human resource matters.

"I've made it clear the conduct of those involved did not meet the high standards I've set for staff and faculty," Dr. MacLatchy said. "This is a case where firing someone might seem to be an easy answer, but what has happened at Laurier in this controversy has exposed more fundamental [issues] at the institution which need to be addressed."

Ms. Shepherd faced Dr. Rambukkana, Adria Joel, the acting manager of the gendered violence and support program, and another faculty member, Herbert Pimlott, to discuss why she showed a five-minute clip on gender pronouns that had been screened on TVO's *The Agenda* program. Ms. Shepherd showed the clip because she wanted to illustrate a discussion on the use of pronouns, she said.

As a result of that meeting, Ms. Shepherd was told she would have to discuss her future tutorials with Dr. Rambukkana.

The incident made headlines as far away as Australia when Ms. Shepherd released an audio recording she made of the meeting in which she is told she should have contextualized the Peterson discussion.

Showing the video has "created a toxic climate for some of the students," Dr. Rambukkana tells her in the recording.

"How many, who? One?" Ms. Shepherd responds. "I have no concept of how many people complained, you have not shown me the complaint," she says.

"There are confidentiality matters," Dr. Rambukkana says.

"The number of people is confidential? OK," she says.

"It's one or multiple students who have come forward saying that this is something that they are concerned about and that it made them uncomfortable," her professor says. "It would be the equivalent of debating whether a student of colour should have rights."

The report shows the discussion of the complainants was not accurate.

Students in the class talked about the video screening on campus, and staff in the diversity and equity office found out about those conversations, although they were not asked to intervene.

"The information came via the staff person from students who had been on campus talking about it," Dr. MacLatchy said. "The policy was not designed to deal with those kind of comments and concerns not actually being raised through the process."

A task force will examine freedom of expression and academic freedom at the university next term, and another review will take a look at the gendered and sexual violence policy, which was incorrectly applied, Dr. MacLatchy added.

The report from Mr. Centa will not be publicly released, including to the four people who participated in the original meeting.

"I appreciate that the president let us know a little bit about it," Ms. Shepherd said, adding that she would like to see the report. "If I can get it, I could post it if I am allowed to do that."