

Investigator's report into Wilfrid Laurier University vindicates Lindsay Shepherd

'No formal complaint, nor informal concern relative to a Laurier policy, was registered about the screening of the video'



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Wilfrid Laurier University teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd has been vindicated, her interrogators sharply criticized, by the independent investigator who reviewed the bizarre incident last month that saw Shepherd called on the carpet for daring to show her class a video clip from a televised debate featuring Jordan Peterson.

In early November, the 22-year-old Shepherd, a graduate student, showed a short excerpt from the debate between Peterson, the controversial University of

Toronto psychology professor, and Nicholas Matte, a lecturer at the U of T's Sexual Diversity Studies program, about the use of gender-neutral pronouns.

The full debate, moderated by Steve Paikin, had aired months earlier on TVO, Ontario's public service broadcaster.

Shepherd was hauled into a meeting with her supervising professor, Nathan Rambukkana, the head of her program, Herbert Pimlott, and bureaucrat Adria Joel from the Gendered Violence Prevention and Support Program.

During the meeting, Shepherd was accused of the equivalent of "neutrally playing a speech by Hitler" by not first denouncing Peterson and his views, was identified as "transphobic" and told she was not to show any such videos again and that "one student/many students" had complained about her.

The news clearing Shepherd of wrongdoing – and revealing there never was a complaining student — came in an announcement posted Monday on the Wilfrid Laurier University website by university president Deborah MacLatchy.

MacLatchy, who is the only person who will see the full report from Toronto lawyer and investigator Rob Centa, was unequivocal.

The meeting at which Shepherd was browbeaten "never should have happened at all," MacLatchy said in the statement.

"No formal complaint, nor informal concern relative to a Laurier policy, was registered about the screening of the video," she said.

"This was confirmed in the fact-finding report."

MacLatchy didn't say how, in the absence of a complaint, the interrogation of Shepherd came to be in the first place.

But the logical inference is that if there was no complainant, one or another of the professors may have taken the matter into his own hands, and invited Joel to sit in on the meeting to lend it an air of bureaucratic formality.

While Shepherd said Monday in a telephone interview "I was happy when I saw" the announcement, "I could never have imagined there was no complaint at all."

That would mean, as she put it, "It (the meeting) was total abuse."

Howard Levitt, the Toronto lawyer who represents Shepherd pro bono, was concerned by the lack of specificity in MacLatchy's promised corrections.

The university president, for instance, said the incident highlights "the need to enhance our faculty and TA (teaching assistant) training," and pledged to make such training mandatory in the future for "both TA supervisors and teaching assistants."

That leaves open, Levitt said, the suggestion that "Lindsay's behaviour was not as they would like and that she should have been supervised better.

"If this is not intended as an implicit criticism, then why would they not say that she did precisely what she should have done in showing both sides of the debate...?"

MacLatchy did say clearly "There was no wrongdoing on the part of Ms. Shepherd in showing the clip from TVO in her tutorial.

“Showing a TVO clip for the purposes of an academic discussion is a reasonable classroom teaching tool.”

But she added that all instructional material “needs to be grounded in the appropriate academic underpinnings to put it in context” and noted “the entire discussion also needs to be handled properly.

“We have no reason to believe this discussion was not handled well in the tutorial in question.”

But, Levitt said, if MacLatchy believes, as she said, that the conduct of Rambukkana, Pimlott and Joel “does not meet the high standards I set for staff and faculty,” why didn’t she make a clear finding of wrongdoing on their parts?

MacLatchy also said “the interviews conducted by the fact-finder confirmed that the rationale for invoking” the new Gendered and Sexual Violence Policy “did not exist.”

“It was misapplied and was a significant overreach.”

As a result, the policy will be reviewed, its oversight tightened.

The fact-finding process was but one of the university’s two-pronged response to the Shepherd incident.

The other is to strike a task force on freedom of expression that is to develop a statement for the university.

Membership is to be decided by the end of December.

Seven seats in total, or the majority of members, are to go to the university’s faculty association, five of whom are to be directly elected.

Twenty-three nominees are running for those seats, the National Post has learned, and only three of them appear, from the statements they were asked to submit, to be overt defenders of free speech.

A half dozen others appear neutral on the issue, but the majority have either signed petitions of support for the school's "transgendered community" or expressed support for the non-existent complainant in the Shepherd matter.

The task force is to report back by March.

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