

B.C. university defends controversial suspension of professor

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POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION REPORTER

NOVEMBER 16, 2018

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-bc-university-defends-controversial-suspension-of-professor/>

Thompson Rivers University says the decision to suspend and then ban an economics professor from the campus had nothing to do with the research he pursued on colleagues who publish in questionable academic journals.

Derek Pyne, an economics professor at the university in Kamloops, B.C., was initially suspended in May and remains banned from campus. Prof. Pyne published an article in 2017 in which he examined the practice of publishing in what are called “predatory journals,” which typically lack the rigorous review processes associated with more stringent academic publications. Some of his colleagues at Thompson Rivers have published in these kinds of journals, he said in an interview with The Globe and Mail on Friday.

He believes that his research lies at the root of his problems with his employer, and argues that it should be protected by his right to academic freedom. The university says that’s not the issue.

“Action taken against Dr. Pyne was not related to his specific research, the dissemination of his research, or the exercising of his right to academic freedom,” TRU’s interim president and vice-chancellor Christine Bovis-Cnossen said in a statement.

“We have a strong faculty complement committed to excellence in teaching, research, and scholarship. Any faculty member hired or promoted at TRU goes through a robust process which involves a review of research activity and publishing credentials.”

Prof. Pyne said the university at one point alleged he had made defamatory statements about colleagues, and at another point said his colleagues were fearful of him. He also said they mentioned an instance where he’s alleged to have raised his voice with a student. The university has not explained the reasons behind its actions.

The university says its focus is on “resolving such disputes through the appropriate internal processes and in a way that is respectful of all individuals and their right to privacy.”

During a hiring process for an administrative position, Prof. Pyne said he raised the issue of whether a candidate had published in a predatory journal, a concern that resulted from his research on the subject. That rankled some of his colleagues, he said.

“They’re trying to get even with me and they want me to stop talking, especially to the press,” Prof. Pyne said.

The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) announced last month it was launching an investigation into whether TRU’s actions amounted to a breach of Prof. Pyne’s academic freedom. The university declined to participate.

“The purpose of our investigation is to determine whether in fact Dr. Pyne was the subject of retaliation,” CAUT’s executive director David Robinson said.

“It is unfortunate that the administration is not co-operating with our investigation, as it is in everyone’s interest to gather all the facts so that a full and fair conclusion can be reached.”

Prof. Pyne said it has been a difficult process. At one point, he sought permission to enter the campus so he could return a library book and he was told he had to send it in the mail.

“It’s not nice, especially early on when they were making accusations, saying people were afraid of me,” he said. “Now I’m more positive. I’ve had e-mails from people across Canada and even in Europe expressing support.”