

The bogus-journals plot thickens at a B.C. university

Embroiled in a fight over academic freedom, the Kamloops university is about to get a new boss with a record of suspending a prof who criticized the University of Saskatchewan.

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Updated: November 19, 2018

<https://vancouversun.com/opinion/columnists/douglas-todd-the-bogus-journals-plot-thickens-at-a-b-c-university>



Prof. Brett Fairbairn is taking over as president of TRU in two weeks, but his controversial record in regards to academic freedom at the University of Saskatchewan has raised questions. RICHARD MARJAN / STAR-PHOENIX

Concerns are rising about how the incoming president of the Kamloops university, Brett Fairbairn, resigned from his previous position at the University of Saskatchewan after violating the academic freedom of an outspoken professor. The messy 2014 case echoes the growing controversy at TRU over the July suspension of Derek Pyne.

Pyne, an economist, has drawn international attention for his peer-reviewed research revealing how more than 15 members of his own TRU department of economic and business have published articles in deceptive academic journals. TRU suspended the tenured professor in July and he remains banned from campus.

Now questions are being raised about the implications of TRU's choice early this year to hire Fairbairn as president. The former provost of the University of Saskatchewan suspended professor Robert Buckingham for criticizing the administration's budget cuts and, after an uproar over academic freedom, Fairbairn resigned (while staying on as a professor).

Meanwhile, the acting TRU president, Christine Bovis-Crossen, is refusing to cooperate with an investigation into whether Pyne's academic freedom has been violated. The probe is being conducted by the Canadian Association of University Teachers, which represents faculty across the nation.

"The optics are clearly bad," Pyne said, when asked about how people will view Fairbairn's approach to academic freedom when he takes over as president on December 1.

"But as far as the reality is concerned, I'm agnostic. I have heard different opinions (about Fairbairn) from colleagues. A minority view is that he will have learned from his mistakes after the publicity of the University of Saskatchewan incident. However, I have heard many express skepticism that administrators of that age can change."

Thompson Rivers University economist Derek Pyne is arguably the institution's most famous academic, quoted in the New York Times and The Economist for his study of deceptive scholarly journals. But he's taken a hit after his work was published and has been suspended by the university. ALLEN

DOUGLAS / PNG

David Robinson, executive director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, said Fairbairn's official arrival at TRU in less than two weeks will offer him "an important moment" to remedy past mistakes.

"I would call upon him, as his first act, to cooperate with our investigation. Academic freedom ... is the central value of the university. Any suspicion that academic freedom is being compromised should be of concern to the entire academic community, including quite centrally the administration. The university's reputation is at stake."

TRU's acting president, who has cited privacy guidelines for not explaining why Pyne is being disciplined, declined to respond to questions about how the university will deal with faculty and public worries that Fairbairn's record suggests he will not be an adequate defender of academic freedom.

A TRU spokeswoman instead referred to an earlier statement in which board chair Jim Thomson, a property developer, said the hiring committee had closely reviewed the allegations around Fairbairn's resignation and concluded he had "great strength of character and integrity."

In the midst of Fairbairn's 2014 conflict over academic freedom at the University of Saskatchewan, a media outlet published Fairbairn's reputedly confidential five-page

statement in which he suggested his sudden resignation was an act of loyalty that came after fraught conversations with Ilene Busch-Vishniac, then-president of the University of Saskatchewan.

Busch-Vishniac, an American engineering professor, was also terminated from her position. In another plot twist over TRU's drawn-out struggle over bogus academic journals and academic freedom, TRU's acting president said last week the university will not cooperate with the Association of University Teachers investigation because the Thompson Rivers University Faculty Association has not filed a grievance about Pyne's academic freedom.

"TRUFA, who is aware of the facts relating to the discipline imposed on Dr. Pyne, is fully entitled to grieve the discipline imposed on Dr. Pyne," Bovis-Crossan said in a statement. "No grievance related to academic freedom has been filed by TRUFA. That would be the appropriate process to follow if TRUFA believed Dr. Pyne's academic freedom had been infringed."

The president of the TRU faculty association, Tom Friedman, did not respond to a series of questions about why his association has failed to launch a grievance about the academic freedom of Pyne, who is again receiving a salary after initially being suspended without pay.

Prof. Mark Mercer, president of Canada's national Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship, said faculty associations are frequently caught in "conflicts of interest" in situations like that of Pyne, since in many ways his case pits one faculty member's rights against the career aspirations of other faculty. He urged more transparency by the administration.

Meanwhile, Robinson at the Canadian Association of University Teachers is not deterred in continuing the investigation, which will be conducted by the former head of the UBC Faculty Association, Mark Mac Lean, SFU's Carla Graebner and others.

"The non-co-operation from the admin (at TRU) is regrettable. It is in everyone's interest that we determine the facts of the case and hear from all those involved. We can still proceed with our investigation with the admin and will give them further opportunities to provide additional material and information," said Robinson, who added that the TRU faculty association is cooperating.

Although TRU's administration has never released any details of its disciplinary case against Pyne, who has tenure, the human resources department claimed he had made "defamatory" comments about others at the university. Yet no one has filed a lawsuit against him for libel.

Pyne's research, published by a reputable journal based at the University of Toronto, explored how many of his colleagues were among those advancing their careers by publishing frequently in some of roughly 10,000 blacklisted journals, most of which are new, hardly ever conduct peer review and typically charge a hefty fee.

Asked about the rapid rise around the world of deceptive publications, also known as "predatory journals," Robinson said Canadian academics are "not widely known" to be publishing in them to build up their resumés. But he acknowledged it's a phenomenon that's difficult to measure.

“The problem may be, as Dr. Pyne’s research shows, that as our institutions emphasize simple research-performance metrics, there may be a tendency to privilege quantity over quality in scholarly publishing.”

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