

# Thompson Rivers University subject of academic freedom investigation

Professor Derek Pyne has been suspended since June and claims it is because he called attention to academics paying to have papers published in questionable journals

Chris Foulds / Kamloops This Week

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The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) is investigating whether a Thompson Rivers University professor has had his academic freedom violated by the school.

TRU professor Derek Pyne has been suspended by the university since June. While TRU brass will not comment on the reasons for the suspension — citing privacy rights of its staff, faculty and students — Pyne told the CAUT he was targeted by university administration after he

published an article in the Journal of Scholarly Publishing (published by the University of Toronto) April 2017.

Pyne's article looked into the use of so-called predatory publishers by faculty members and administrators in TRU's School of Business and Economics.

At issue is the practise of university professors paying to have their papers published in journals with dubious reputations.

The practice has led to Jeffrey Beall, a former University of Colorado librarian, creating a database of 12,000 such journals that demand payment in exchange for publishing a paper, which is then routinely not peer-reviewed. A Texas company called Cabell's has a similar database of almost 9,000 journals it has deemed to be questionable.

Pyne's case has been reported on by the Vancouver Sun and The Economist.

The latter publication, in a June story, detailing a sting operation undertaken by John Bohannon, a journalist with a doctorate in molecular biology. Bohannon created a fake paper that claimed a molecule found in lichens inhibits cancer, with no clinical trials cited and poor methodology presented.

Bohannon created fake African medical institutes and invented names of fictional biologists.

"Of 121 [journals] chosen from a blacklist, 69 per cent offered to publish the paper for a fee," The Economist reported. "And, even when he turned to journals on a whitelist of supposedly trustworthy open-access journals, 38 per cent of the 167 he approached fell into the trap."

David Robinson, executive director of CAUT, told KTW Pyne contacted the association in the late summer, asking that it launch an investigation into his allegations that TRU has violated his academic freedom.

"We were hoping that the university and the local faculty association might have been able to resolve this," Robinson said. "It appears that is unlikely right now."

Robinson said the investigation, which is being undertaken by a committee that includes chair Mark MacLean of UBC and Carla Graebner of SFU, will consist of a review of documents, a site visit and interviews with people involved in the case, including Pyne, other faculty members and TRU administration.

“The operate very much like a public inquiry,” Robinson said, noting the university and faculty can choose not to take part. “We certainly hope that the administration will co-operate because it’s in everyone’s interest to get to the truth of the matter.”

The CAUT will fund the investigation.

“Even if the administration does not agree to participate, once they (committee) produce a draft report, we share the findings with the administration one more time and ask them to correct any facts or provide any additional information,” Robinson said.

Once the report is completed, Robinson said, the committee will have recommendations, depending on the findings.

“If there’s no violation of academic freedom, they may still uncover some procedural problems that may have happened, so there may be some very detailed recommendations for the administration,” he said.

If the committee has found Pyne’s academic freedom has been violated by TRU, it could recommend that the CAUT take further action.

“Normally, Robinson said, that entails trying to negotiate a resolution with the administration.

If the administration is not willing to do so, he said the CAUT’s governing body can impose censure on a university, something he said happens rarely, with the last such actions taking place about 15 years ago at First Nations University in Regina and in the 1970s at Memorial University in St. John’s.

“Which is, essentially, a notice to the academic community here in Canada and internationally that this is an institution that does not respect academic freedom and we advise you not to take positions here, not to attend any conferences here, so it’s kind of an academic boycott,” Robinson said.

The final report from the investigation is not expected until late spring or early summer and will be available to the public.

Thompson Rivers University is not commenting on the investigation by CAUT.

Instead, Darshan Lindsay, the university's director of executive communications, released the following statement:

“TRU received a letter from CAUT regarding this matter yesterday. As we have not yet had the opportunity to respond formally to CAUT, it would be inappropriate for us to comment at this time.

“We are also legally bound to protect the personal and private information of individuals within our employ which does limit our ability to provide comment. It is important for the public to know, though, that TRU is unequivocally committed to academic freedom and the independent research activities of its faculty.

“This is the bedrock of Canadian universities — that we provide and promote an environment where the thoughtful exchange of ideas and research is cultivated.”