

TRU opts out of investigation into professor discipline

By James Peters

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Derek Pyne Image Credit: Derek Pyne



Image Credit: Derek Pyne

KAMLOOPS — Thompson Rivers University says it won't participate in an investigation launched by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) into allegations that TRU violated the academic freedom of economics professor Dr. Derek Pyne.

CAUT announced the investigation earlier this week, after Pyne alleged the university took action against him for exposing colleagues whose work had been published in bogus and disreputable academic journals.

The organization of faculty and staff unions says if Pyne's allegations are borne out, it could result in TRU being censured and blacklisted among Canadian academics.

In a memo sent to staff today, Interim President Christine Bovis-Cnossen said CAUT does not have "authority or jurisdiction to bring such an investigation into matters covered in our Collective Agreement" with TRU's faculty association.

Bovis-Cnossen says if TRUFA believes "the discipline imposed on Dr. Pyne" has infringed on his academic freedom, it should file a grievance under collective agreement provisions.

She says to this point, that has not happened.

Pyne, who spoke to CFJC Today this week, says he was initially banned from campus on the basis of what were explained as mental health concerns, and was suspended for criticizing his colleagues.

During a recruitment process for an administrator in TRU's School of Business and Economics, Pyne says he expressed concerns that an internal applicant had taken advantage of so-called "predatory" or disreputable academic publications.

Pyne has also been publicly critical of colleagues' research publishing practices within the School of Business and Economics'.

"The department passed two motions against me. Supposedly, the motions were about comments I left on [CFJC Today]. However, I'm told that when they debated the motion, they did bring up (a) New York Times interview, because that got shared with a lot of academics," said Pyne.

"A lot of authors, I think, know they're phony journals when they submit to them, but they do it to try to increase their publication count."

While he believes many institutions ignore published works in phony journals, Pyne says TRU rewards quantity of published research over quality.

"At a lot of universities, I don't think you would get any benefit from predatory publications, but at TRU you definitely do seem to get a benefit in terms of winning research awards and, to some extent, higher salary," says Pyne.

In a statement, TRU spokesperson Darshan Lindsay says peer review committees and Senate "review publishing credentials during the tenure and promotion process of faculty."

Lindsay goes on to say "close scrutiny of publications" is included in criteria considered for tenure and promotion.

The university's tenure and promotion guidelines are more explicit:

"Rather than merely emphasizing minimum quantitative requirements in the areas of teaching, research, scholarly or creative work, professional work and service, qualitative language should also be used where appropriate."

Pyne says he doesn't know what the future holds for his career at TRU, but he's troubled by the direction of his department.

"I do hear more positive things about people getting grants in other faculties. But as far as my experience within the School of Business and Economics, I do get the impression they're going downhill," said Pyne.