

Suspended B.C. prof who exposed fake journals welcomes investigation

Professor was suspended after publishing an article exploring the use of so-called 'predatory publishers' by faculty at Thompson Rivers.

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<https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/investigation-launched-into-possible-breach-of-b-c-profs-academic-freedom>

The association representing Canadian university faculty has launched an investigation to determine whether Thompson Rivers University has violated the academic freedom of economics professor Derek Pyne.

He had gained international attention for his peer-reviewed research into the way faculty in his own department were advancing their careers by publishing in deceptive academic journals, also known as “predatory” publications.

The investigating committee of the Canadian Association of University Teachers will be chaired by Mark Mac Lean, a University of B.C. mathematics professor and former president of the UBC faculty association. Carla Graebner, a Simon Fraser University data librarian, will also serve on the committee.

“Professor Pyne published an article exploring the use of so-called ‘predatory publishers’ by faculty members and administrators in the school of business and economics at Thompson Rivers. He says he was subsequently targeted by the administration in violation of his academic freedom,” said an Association statement.

The faculty group’s involvement in the case is a “positive development,” Pyne said by email.

Pyne was suspended without pay in July by administrators at the Kamloops university. However, TRU restored his pay in August when The Vancouver Sun researched and wrote an article about his work. He remains banned from teaching and going to the TRU campus, except in a few circumstances.

There has been a dramatic rise around the world in such deceptive academic journals and conferences, which offer to publish or present scholars' papers for significant fees, without putting their work through the rigour of peer review by fellow experts or other checks for validity. Several lists have been created, notably by Colorado librarian Jeffrey Bealle and an information firm called Casell's, that list the names of more than 10,000 questionable academic journals.

The controversy over bogus academic organizations recently hit Vancouver, when British professor Jane Essex exposed a conference held by the World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology. A confrontation at the conference at a Vancouver hotel led to angry academics demanding their money back. Police were called and the organizer of the pseudo-technology conference fled.

The debate over predatory publication often revolves around which academics are genuinely duped by the deceptive journals and conferences and which academics take advantage of them to advance their careers.

Prominent academics have called on the B.C. government to force the president of TRU, Alan Shaver, to answer questions about the suspension of Pyne. But the minister responsible for universities, Melanie Mark, said the province is required by law to avoid interfering with the running of B.C.'s universities.



Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops is embroiled in a battle over deceptive journals and academic freedom. It has 13,000 on-campus students and another 13,000 distance learners.

A spokesperson for Thompson Rivers University, Darshan Lindsay, issued a statement Wednesday: "As we have not yet had the opportunity to respond formally to (the faculty

association), 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.”

Lindsay did not reply to a question about how TRU would treat the results of the investigation into whether Pyne’s academic freedom was being suppressed. She cited Section 33 of B.C.’s freedom of information and privacy act to justify TRU’s near-total silence on the case.

Tom Friedman, president of the TRU faculty association president, also declined to comment on the new investigation. However, he said his organization is providing full representation to Pyne and “has always been a passionate advocate for academic freedom.”

Although accusations have flown back and forth among TRU administrators, faculty and Pyne, one of the few to be made public is the allegation by TRU’s human resources department on June 15 that Pyne had used “defamatory language and accusations.”

Prof. Mark Mercer, president of Canada’s national Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship, urges TRU to be more open. “Privacy is good, but confidentiality usually isn’t. Much of what universities protect as confidential should be made public.”

Mercer, the head of the philosophy department at St. Mary’s University in Halifax, also said faculty associations are frequently caught in “conflict of interests” regarding situations like that involving Pyne.

Pyne’s case in some ways pits one faculty member’s rights against the career aspirations of other faculty. Pyne’s paper describes how about half of more than three dozen faculty in TRU’s school of business and economics appear to have published, sometimes frequently, in suspect journals, with some recently getting promotions.

“Faculty association often find themselves not with a faculty member against management, but with ... faculty members against each other,” Mercer said.

If a TRU faculty member has complained about Pyne, Mercer said the faculty, association ends up being “both for and against the accused professor.” He said it has to insist that the university investigate the complaint by a member, but then has to protect the target of the complaint, another of its members, from the university.”

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