

The future of academic freedom and the curious, disturbing case of Derek Pyne



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Academic freedom is supposed to form the bedrock of our institutions of higher learning, as important to their existence as the liberties extended to all of us in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

However, it appears that for some universities, the independence their faculty is supposed to enjoy comes with a caveat: anything a professor writes that is embarrassing to the school or its staff is problematic, no matter how valid it may be. In these instances, those cherished freedoms can be rescinded.

Which bring us to the curious and disturbing case of Derek Pyne, an economics professor at Thompson Rivers University (TRU) in Kamloops, B.C. Prof. Pyne was banned from campus and suspended, with pay, by his school this past summer over research he conducted into so-called predatory journals – publications that offer academics a home to publish their research (sometimes for as little as a hundred bucks) with little to no scrutiny of the work itself.

These bogus journals have proliferated, as scholarly papers remain vitally linked to pay raises and promotions in the halls of academia. By some estimates, there are more than 10,000 of them in the world. They often go by names that sound strikingly similar to those of legitimate, peer-reviewed publications. Cenyo Shen and Bo-Christer Bjork, professors at the Hanken School of Economics in Finland, estimated in one study that the number of articles published in these controversial journals today is more than 400,000 annually, up from 53,000 in 2010.

They have been labelled predatory because initially the belief was they were preying on naive scholars desperate for a place to be published – even for a fee. Increasingly, however, there is a feeling that many of these same academics know exactly what they

are doing – using dubious sources to inflate their publication records for financial gain and prestige.

Prof. Pyne had his peer-reviewed study published last year in the University of Toronto's respected Journal of Scholarly Publishing. His research found that 50 per cent of more than three dozen administrators and professors in one faculty at a particular Canadian university (later identified as TRU's department of business and economics) had their careers furthered by getting work printed in outlets with highly questionable professional credentials.

The suspended professor has said he raised his findings with both the president and provost of TRU but his concerns were ignored. On the contrary, he was made the problem and was very quickly kicked off campus.

Like many universities facing a crisis, TRU has handled the situation about as poorly as one can. Instead of being open about what is going on, the school has effectively gone to ground, citing legal constraints and privacy rights. As far as why Prof. Pyne was suspended, all the school has said is he used defamatory language and accusations in his writings on the matter. Many have urged president Alan Shaver to clear the air about what is taking place. So far, he has remained silent.

Prof. Pyne, who has gained international acclaim for his research into this area, has levelled an incredibly serious allegation against the school. I'm sure this has not made him very popular with many of his colleagues – but that is beside the point. The fact is the public has a right to know whether members of the faculty have benefited from fake journals. How legitimate is the long list of publication references that many of these teachers boast?

To simply treat Prof. Pyne as a nettlesome whistleblower who has needlessly brought the school into disrepute won't do here. The university has a duty to its student body – past and present – to address the charges that have been rendered. The school would have helped itself immensely if it had issued a statement saying it was taking the allegations made by Prof. Pyne seriously and was conducting a thorough investigation of the matter, the results of which would be made public. But no.

The Canadian Association of University Teachers, which represents faculty across the country, has launched an investigation into whether Prof. Pyne's academic freedom was violated by TRU. The school said it will not participate in the probe, but previously issued a statement saying "it's important to know that TRU is committed to academic freedom and the independent research activities of its faculty."

The Pyne saga is undoubtedly being monitored closely by postsecondary institutions across the country. If there is a problem with predatory journals at TRU, it is unlikely to be alone. This case could set off a bomb that would shake the walls of colleges and universities from coast to coast. There are likely many professors feeling more than a little uncomfortable today.

Thompson Rivers has a genuine reputational emergency on its hands. The longer it refuses to publicly address this situation, in an open and transparent manner, the more its credibility will be eroded. So far, the university's silence speaks volumes.

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