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Queen’s dispute highlights issues of academic freedom, harassment

JENNA ZUCKER

The Globe and Mail

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An independent arbitrator will soon hear a case at Queen’s University that raises serious questions about protection of faculty who allege colleagues’ academic misconduct.

The university’s office of the provost has found Professor Morteza Shirkhanzadeh guilty of workplace harassment in a dispute that dates back a decade. As a result, he is banned from entering three university buildings and communicating with certain administrators, professors and the board of trustees.

But a recent Canadian Association of University Teachers report says

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Queen’s is punishing Prof. Shirkhanzadeh for being a whistle-blower and argues a national body is needed in Canada – similar to what exists in the

U.S. – to investigate allegations of academic fraud and misconduct. Canadian universities are responsible for investigating allegations of research misconduct against their own professors.

Prof. Shirkhanzadeh has been embroiled in a series of disputes since 2005 with other professors in the engineering department and with Queen’s administrators. His allegations – which were contained in a steady stream of e-mails to university officials as well as published on a website he created – prompted the university to conduct several investigations, but

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Queen’s rejects his contention that the findings add up to academic misconduct.

Prof. Shirkhanzadeh’s allegations centre primarily on two of his colleagues, one of whom is deceased. He alleges, among other things, they falsified and fabricated data, and that one researcher re-published text from previously published papers without acknowledging the duplication.

Some Canadian and international organizations involved with the challenged research have criticized the university’s investigations of Prof. Shirkhanzadeh’s complaints.

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Earlier this year, the university initiated proceedings against Prof. Shirkhanzadeh, alleging that postings on the professor’s website constituted workplace harassment against his colleagues and the

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administration.

“The university has a responsibility to maintain a workplace that is free from harassment,” Queen’s provost Alan Harrison said in an interview with The Globe.

“It takes this responsibility seriously and investigates, and acts upon, findings of harassment accordingly.”

Officials at Queen’s refused to comment on other aspects of the dispute, citing the pending arbitration hearing.

No date has been set but an independent arbitrator has been asked to deal with the professor’s grievance against the university., alleging unfair discipline.

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Prof. Shirkhanzadeh calls the university investigations “superficial and flawed.”

“The university does not really want to seriously investigate the allegations,” he says. “The outcome of such an investigation would be too embarrassing for them.”

The CAUT report published this summer supports his argument.

The CAUT report adds: “The behaviour of Queen’s administration in this matter is a typical reaction of an organization that has to deal with issues brought to it by a whistleblower.

“Rather than deal with the allegations in a fair and impartial manner, it seeks to silence the whistleblower to preserve its own reputation.

“We conclude that there is a pattern of retaliation against Professor Shirkhanzadeh in response to his allegations of fraud and misconduct.”

The Queen’s University Faculty Association asked the CAUT to investigate the treatment of Prof. Shirkhanzadeh. The school’s administration declined to participate in the process on the grounds that its collective bargaining agreement with QUFA makes QUFA the sole bargaining agent for its members and that CAUT has no jurisdiction on Queen’s campus.

The CAUT report says that while Queen’s has established policies to investigate academic fraud and misconduct, the association would prefer a new “investigative body [which] must be at arm’s length from the home university of either the accuser or target of the allegation.



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Since the release of the CAUT report, Queen’s has developed a revised

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policy for allegations of research misconduct, which it worked out with

QUFA.

Mr. Robinson, the CAUT report author, called this is a “big step forward” but argued that more needs to be done.

The United States has established the Office of Research Integrity, an independent body within the Department of Health and Human Services to investigate scientific fraud and research misconduct. Canada has no similar institution.

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