



University of Tasmania academic Vadim Kamenetsky under investigation for criticising the institution on Facebook

By investigative reporter Emily Baker

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A celebrated University of Tasmania academic is under investigation for "serious misconduct" after criticising the institution's planned campus move on social media.

Professor Vadim Kamenetsky, who is in Russia caring for his elderly mother, was notified late last year that comments he made on the Save UTAS Campus Facebook page were considered a potential breach of his employment agreement.

The group is campaigning against the university's plan to move its southern campus from the Hobart suburb of Sandy Bay into the city's CBD and redevelop the existing site.

UTAS has alleged Professor Kamenetsky posted confidential information and made "disparaging comments" about the university and some staff, including:

"We are witnessing the destruction of UTAS and its people. And prospective development of the (Sandy Bay) campus is just a part of this process."

"When there's a person, there's a problem. When there's no person, there's no problem.' (Josef Stalin) Rufus Black thinks alike about the current staff at UTAS."

On the latter comment, UTAS accused Professor Kamenetsky of comparing Professor Black to the Soviet dictator.

It alleged the comments came after he had been vocal about waiting for a redundancy, and said he had published research without displaying a UTAS affiliation.

Key points:

- The professor is accused of posting "disparaging comments" about Tasmania's university and some staff in a forum critical of the planned move of campus
- Staff have been reminded of confidentiality provisions in their employment agreements as a control against "anti-university community sentiment"
- UTAS said there was "no widespread use of non-disclosure agreements" when staff leave

In his formal response to the university's claims, Professor Kamenetsky denied the allegations, and said the "confidential" information he shared to the Save UTAS Campus Facebook page was also published in the university's publicly available annual reports or in mass emails to all staff.

Professor Kamenetsky reminded UTAS that English is his second language.

"I made my comments under mitigating circumstances, which include two years of mental depression, stress from everyday carer's duties, and the effects of COVID-19 (twice contracted) on my nervous system," Professor Kamenetsky said.

He pointed to the university's own definition of academic freedom, which includes the right for staff to express their opinions on their employer.

"Also consider that over 1,100 members of that Facebook group, including other UTAS staff, have expressed their opinion without being persecuted, so why am I being specifically targeted?"

Professor Kamenetsky has been a researcher at the University of Tasmania since 1992 and a New Star Professor in Earth Science since 2010.

He said the allegations came against a backdrop of other workplace bullying, which he said he believed was an attempt to force him out of the institution.

Professor Kamenetsky has been locked out of the UTAS intranet since late last year and accused of travelling overseas and working without permission, despite internal HR systems showing his application for carer's leave to look after his mother in Moscow was approved last year.

His son Dmitri wrote to Professor Black in June 2020 to appeal for support.

"These events have driven him to clinical depression and an attempted suicide," Dmitri Kamenetsky wrote.

"This has placed a huge strain on my entire family who are all connected to the university ... this is no way to treat a man who has done so much for the university."

A university spokesman said: "While we cannot comment on confidential staff matters, we are strong supporters of free speech at the University of Tasmania.

"We welcome discussion and debate about ideas — this is central to how universities operate — but we are concerned about personal attacks against our people."

Confidential documents obtained by the ABC show UTAS fears negative public sentiment could impede its plans for the Sandy Bay site.

The university wants to convert the existing campus to include 2,700 homes, a tourism precinct and new sporting facilities.

A risk register, dated February 2021, notes staff have been reminded of confidentiality provisions in their employment agreements as a control against "anti-university community sentiment".

Nelson independent MLC Meg Webb has asked questions of the state government on the university's use of non-disclosure agreements in the Legislative Council.

"UTAS is an important institution in this state, and it is in the public interest for there to be a high level of transparency and accountability when it comes to its operations and activities," Ms Webb said.

"Many constituents are raising questions with me, including on the reported use of NDAs for staff resigning or taking redundancies from UTAS.

"If this practice has become standard, it would be unfortunate if it were to create a sense of suppressed freedom of public discussion in relation to the university."

In a statement, a UTAS spokesperson said there was "no widespread use of non-disclosure agreements when staff leave the university".

"The university will occasionally use NDAs, for example where they are used to protect intellectual property."

