



Post-Secondary Unions Call for Safer Return in January

(For immediate release - Vancouver, BC, December 22, 2021) – With the Omicron variant, faculty and staff at BC's post-secondary institutions are seeing an increase in COVID-19 cases among students and campus communities. As this year wraps up, some have managed to implement online exams through the end of term to minimize transmission but as the next term approaches, post-secondary labour organizations CUFA BC, FPSE, and BCITFSA continue to urge the BC government to support institutional autonomy in the sector, an autonomy established by legislation and available to post-secondary institutions across Canada. This is crucial so that our post-secondary institutions can make decisions in the interest of the health and safety of BC's students, faculty, and staff.

In the absence of a sufficient, safety-focused province-wide [directive for the post-secondary sector from the public health officer](#), we call on institutional leaders to take the lead in establishing health and safety rules in the best interests of their campus communities. Such protective measures could include, but are not limited to, offering alternate modes of course delivery for at least the first month of the term, delaying the start of the term, providing enhanced PPE and engineering protections, and/or reducing class sizes for in-person delivery. Administrators must work closely with unions and joint workplace health and safety committees to make decisions, and to minimize and compensate for increased workload burdens on all faculty and staff.

Given the troubling scenes from overcrowded exam spaces this past week and the reality that hundreds of students gather in communal spaces on campus between classes, we call on post-secondary institutions to implement the same 50% capacity limits in lecture halls, classrooms, and labs as the provincial orders require for social gathering spaces.

The fall term was chaotic and stressful for faculty, staff, and students. This has a direct impact on the mental health and well-being of our members. In large part, this chaos was the result of a series of fast-paced, changing rules governing campus safety decisions. There were also disruptions from the high frequency of absenteeism for sickness and self-isolation due to exposures and balancing necessary accommodations for these interruptions throughout the semester. We expect those disruptions to increase next term.

We need bold governance decisions at BC's post-secondary institutions and a responsible approach to the January term given the uncertainty created by the exponential growth of the Omicron variant. In the face of an extremely contagious variant, it is no longer adequate to assume there is no or low transmission in post-secondary settings. Nor is it enough to claim that transmission occurring from non-academic gatherings does not impact learning and teaching. Further, it is critical that we rely on information for making decisions that is more robust than the unenforced self-disclosure surveys of vaccination status that do not capture all members of the post-secondary community.

If the current trend of cases continues or worsens, it is imperative to make these decisions immediately, well in advance of the new semester, to allow faculty, staff, and students the necessary time to prepare. It is imperative that faculty unions be involved in this dialogue given the timing and that any work done by faculty, including adjunct, and staff to adjust to this rapidly changing situation be fairly and adequately compensated. Campuses, like the broader community, include folks who face significant health and economic barriers and all decisions should be made with accessibility, equity, and safety at the centre.

Signed by:

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Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of BC

BC Post-Secondary Education Labour Sector Partners

BC Institute of Technology Faculty & Staff Association: BCITFSA <https://www.bcitfsa.ca/>

The BCIT Faculty & Staff Association (BCITFSA) is a certified trade union and a member-driven association that represents 1,800+ full-time and part-time technological faculty and staff at the B.C. Institute of Technology (BCIT). The BCITFSA has worked since 1964 for excellent working conditions for all members through representation, negotiation, and advocacy. The well-being of BCIT as a unique educational institution in British Columbia is at the heart of our work.

President – Colin Jones cjones@bcit.ca

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Confederation of University Faculty Associations of BC: CUFA BC <https://www.cufa.bc.ca/>

CUFA BC represents over 5,500 faculty members, professional librarians, lecturers, instructors, and other academics at the five research-intensive universities in British Columbia, which include University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, University of Victoria, Royal Roads University and University of Northern British Columbia. CUFA BC celebrates fifty years of working closely with the member Faculty Associations at each institution. Our purposes are to support high-quality post-secondary education and research in British Columbia and to advocate for the interests of our members.

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Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of BC: FPSE <https://www.fpse.ca/>

The Federation of Post-Secondary Educators is the provincial voice of 10,000 faculty and staff at BC's teaching universities, colleges, institutes and private sector institutions.

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