



January 13, 2022

Dear Interim President Dr. Keefe,

As the Winter 2022 semester begins, we must acknowledge the current circumstances that PEI faces in our first significant wave of COVID-19. The Island has repeatedly broken records of high case counts over the past three weeks, impacting critical pandemic supports, such as contract tracing, exposure notifications, and testing. Health PEI CEO, Michael Gardam, expects that trend to continue with infections and hospitalizations likely peaking towards the end of this month[i]. Despite extending online learning until January 31<sup>st</sup>, staff are expected to resume working in-person next week. This decision does not address the fears and concerns that staff have in returning. Our next steps are crucial for the safety of *everyone* on campus as well as the extended Island community. Therefore we request that you delay the return of staff until January 31<sup>st</sup>.

COVID-19 is publicly recognized as an airborne virus, which has been confirmed by the World Health Organization[ii]. A New Zealand study released on December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021 has substantiated the high transmissibility of the virus[iii]. The study revealed that through simultaneous door opening (lasting 3-5 seconds), the virus can be transmitted to individuals in rooms across a corridor. It is then understood that these findings could be replicated in an office setting, like those at UPEI.

Despite repeated requests from campus unions, the air quality and ventilation report initially requested in August 2021 has yet to be released. VP Administration & Finance, Jackie Podger, responded to the inquiry about its status on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022, advising that the report has yet to be finalized. Though next steps were outlined, we have not been provided with a timeline for when we will receive it. It is unacceptable to assume that staff are safe returning to campus without knowing the current air quality and ventilation conditions while facing a highly transmissible airborne virus.

On an island with an aging population and an abnormally high level of respiratory illness and cancer, it isn't surprising that many staff and their families are particularly vulnerable to the

impacts of COVID-19. Besides facing serious impacts themselves, many have young children who are not yet fully vaccinated. In Canada alone, COVID-19 has resulted in the deaths of over 30,000 people and latest studies confirm *that over half of COVID cases result in long-COVID symptoms*[iv]. We are witnessing a massive disabling event and must do all that we can to mitigate its impacts. Doing otherwise is irresponsible and jeopardizes the health of everyone on our island.

Though we know the date for when staff are expected to return, we have not been advised of *how* the university will ensure our safety once there. We expect a comprehensive plan in place, created in concert with the campus unions (CUPE 1870 Collective Agreement - Article 32; *PEI Occupational Health and Safety Act* - 12.1.a, 12.2.a), so that all those coming on campus are safe, comfortable, and protected.

UPEI's detailed plan for a safe return to campus should explicitly answer the following questions:

- How will positive cases be tracked and communicated on campus in the case that a student, staff, or faculty member contracts the virus?
- Staff may work in departments with twenty or more and often share spaces. What procedures are in place for staff when one of our colleagues contracts the virus? What steps must staff take and what actions will the university take? Likewise, what does this process look like for faculty and students?
- How will you support staff who contract COVID-19 and/or later suffer from long-COVID symptoms?
- The spread of COVID-19 in our community impacts us all. With thousands of students returning to in-person learning at the end of the month, aligning with what Dr. Gardam expects to be the height of cases and hospitalizations in PEI, how will the spread of COVID-19 be mitigated? Will students be seated in large classrooms at full-capacity?
- Will there be on-campus testing options for those who are symptomatic or believe they may have contracted the virus?
- Is there a plan to procure and distribute rapid tests on campus?

We are requesting the following measures be put in place:

- Staff continue to be encouraged to work from home until in-person classes resume on January 31<sup>st</sup>. Staff have worked diligently throughout the pandemic whether in-person or from home. It is not safe enough to teach in-person classes and it is no safer for staff to congregate on-campus or offer in-person services. This extension allows for more time to monitor the community spread in our province and for the university to ensure that it has a plan in place to support the safety of all persons coming to campus.

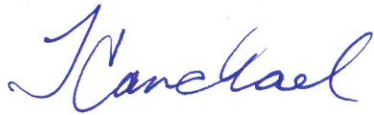
- Staff unable to work from home or choosing to return to campus must have additional supports and enhanced protections, including limiting in-person access to buildings where they are located.
- Clear and concise communication. Written communication about the virus, procedures, and expectations, including working from home, must be provided. This must be clearly communicated so as to allow no room for misinterpretation, confusion, uneven pressure, or different applications across campus. This should also be easily found on the website to be accessed by staff, faculty, and students.
- Ensure continued flexibility to accommodate isolating, symptomatic, or caregiving staff, faculty and students through sick time, work from home or other accommodations.
- It has been brought to our attention that some in-person programs, including the AVC, have a limit of 8 sick days. This adds pressure on students to come to campus while symptomatic and potentially spread the virus to others. We must make sure that our policies encourage and allow for those needing to stay home to do just that.
- Release the air-quality and ventilation report in advance of staff's return to campus. We must know (*PEI Occupational Health and Safety Act, 12.1.a, d*) the level of protection staff have and whether buildings on campus have HEPA filtration systems and other measures to best protect us.
- To mitigate virus exposure, when staff return, cohorting must be implemented in all departments.
- Extend the testing clinic on campus to symptomatic individuals and close contacts. Offer free rapid tests and N95 or Kn95 masks to those working or studying in-person, as needed.
- Educate campus. Online learning until the end of January provides an opportunity to educate students about the needs of masking properly, receiving their booster, and steps to take if they have tested positive or are identified as a close contact. A short video from the Health centre that is posted in all Moodle accounts or is distributed to all campus community members would be an incredibly positive step towards educating campus.

We are a small campus within a small Island community, one that has limited resources and is suffering its worst outbreak with harsher days ahead. As a centre for higher learning and the sole university in Prince Edward Island, UPEI must ensure that it does not simply meet bare minimum requirements but instead takes every reasonable precaution necessary including measures greater than those set out in any recommendation, statute, or regulation to guarantee the safety and security of its community. We ask that the university administration immediately address our concerns by taking further measures.

There is a high probability for an outbreak when staff return given the ability of this virus to spread - and since this variant is still not fully understood it makes prudent sense to minimize

contact for as long as is possible. UPEI asserts itself as a leader in many institutional and academic areas. Today we are asking you to be a leader in pandemic preparedness by listening to the science and the data regarding COVID-19 to ensure the safety of all who work, study and visit our campus. We love our campus and look forward to returning but it must be safe to do so.

Sincerely,



Tracy Carmichael,  
CUPE 1870 President



Michael Arfken,  
UPEI Faculty Association President



Blair Somers,  
IBEW, Vice Chair/ Shop Steward

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[i] Umana, Y. (2022, January 6). *Expect more COVID-19 hospitalizations, Health P.E.I. CEO says* | CBC News. Retrieved January 10, 2022, from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-more-covid-hospitalizations-1.6305239>

[ii] World Health Organization (2021, December 23). *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): How is it transmitted?* Retrieved January 10, 2022, from <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-how-is-it-transmitted>

[iii] Fox-Lewis, A., Williamson, F., Harrower, J., Ren, X., Sonder, G. J. B., McNeill, A., de Ligt, J., & Geoghegan, J. L. (2022). Airborne transmission of SARS-COV-2 delta variant within tightly monitored isolation facility, New Zealand (Aotearoa). *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 28(3). <https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2803.212318>

[iv] Penn State. (2021, October 13). How many people get 'long COVID'? More than half, researchers find: Half of COVID survivors experience lingering symptoms six months after recovery. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved January 9, 2022 from [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/10/211013114112.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/10/211013114112.htm)