

Honourable Anne Kang

Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Training

Via email: AVED.Minister@gov.bc.ca; Anne.Kang.MLA@leg.bc.ca

October 28, 2021

Dear Minister Kang,

I am writing, on behalf of our almost 1800 members, to voice disappointment at the recent announcement by BCIT that it would not be proceeding with rapid testing for those staff, faculty, and students who are either not vaccinated or do not disclose their vaccination status. The rationale BCIT initially stated was that their optional, self-identifying survey confirmed high rates of vaccination. While the survey did indicate a high rate of vaccination, the response rate on the survey (42% student / 65% faculty and staff) was low relative to other institutions. Given the low response rate, many of our members have been contacting us to express concern about the rather dubious conclusions drawn by BCIT about what the data indicates about the overall rate of vaccination on BCIT campuses.

It is crucial to note that the recent announcement breaks the commitment that BCIT President Kathy Kinloch made to the student and employee community on August 27 which indicated that BCIT *would* be inquiring about the vaccination rates of the BCIT community *and* requiring those who “choose not to share their vaccination status or to not be vaccinated” to undergo mandatory rapid testing on a regular basis. This previous commitment was an important part of the plan to assure our members that a full return to campus operations would be safe.

As you might imagine, many of our members are quite upset with this decision and we are concerned about the role the Province played in this outcome.

The protocols for return to campus have been shifting regularly and this has presented numerous challenges for our members. As you know, the Provincial Health Officer (PHO), in concert with the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training (MAEST), has been, formally and informally, directing institutions as to what they can and cannot do in response to our wide-spread concerns about returning to campus in the midst of a fourth wave of this pandemic. Dr. Henry initially resisted any attempts to have a mask mandate on campus, opposed inquiries about vaccine status, and continues to oppose the provision of rapid tests to the post-secondary community. Dr. Henry only partially relented after intense pressure from the community, including a coalition of unions in the sector, and institutions were allowed to proceed with vaccine surveys and rapid testing. Or so we thought.

It would now appear that the PHO does not support rapid testing for our sector on the basis that it is ‘low risk,’ and it seems clear that institutions under the Colleges and Institutes Act, in particular, have been actively discouraged from honouring their commitments made to employees and students. As you can imagine, it is unnerving for our members to hear this when they are often, for example, teaching hundreds of students in an unventilated room. We are also informed that most of the research institutions in BC were granted more autonomy to proceed with vaccine disclosure and some form of rapid testing. For example, on October 20, UBC announced significant consequences for students that remain non-compliant with vaccination status disclosure or rapid testing. This discrepancy is not lost on

our members who are understandably asking why BCIT is discouraged from providing rapid testing while others, like UBC, SFU, and the University of Victoria, appear free to make local decisions. That sends a very mixed message to our members about their health and safety versus that of their colleagues teaching and working elsewhere in BC.

I felt the need to write you directly because we have gathered that the Province may have been actively undermining institutional autonomy at BCIT. While we appreciate your assurance of BCIT's autonomy in the September 28 letter you sent to us, subsequent developments leave us concerned and confused about the level of autonomy BCIT actually has to make health and safety decisions. In the aforementioned letter you state:

"With respect to the autonomy of institutions, you correctly note that although my Ministry provides funding for post-secondary institutions in British Columbia, under the College and Institute Act, institutions such as BCIT are responsible for the management and administration of their institution, including ensuring any orders, notices, or guidance issued by the PHO are incorporated into their planning. This now includes adherence to the mask mandate and proof-of-vaccine requirement."

That assurance is at odds with what is happening on the ground at BCIT and what the, now public, letter from MAEST Deputy Minister Shannon Baskerville on July 29 in which institutions were expressly told that they did not have the autonomy to bring in health and safety measures as they saw fit.

Our members are noticing this dissonance and we believe that the Province's interference with BCIT undermines our members' working conditions and BCIT's ability to communicate with our members in a consistent, clear, and transparent way.

In short, our members and our union have noticed this mixed messaging and we believe it is time for clarity on this important question of just how much freedom BCIT has to make decisions locally.

We would ask that you reconsider the role of your Ministry to ensure the safety of post-secondary institutions in British Columbia. Post-secondary institutions flourish when they have the flexibility and autonomy to make decisions locally that are in the best interests of staff, students, and faculty. External interference can undermine labour relations and leaves our frontline members feeling anxious and frustrated about the contradictory and changing directives from your Ministry and the PHO.

We are hopeful that we can continue to discuss these issues in a productive manner and work towards solutions. At this stage, we also felt the need to be candid with you to express the realities our members are facing as they deliver BC's in-person, post-secondary education amidst this wave of the global pandemic.

Yours Sincerely,



Colin Jones, BCITFSA President

CC: Kathy Kinloch, President, BCIT, kathy_kinloch@bcit.ca
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