

Dr. Bonnie Henry
BC Provincial Health Officer
Via email: bonnie.henry@gov.bc.ca

January 7, 2022

Dear Dr. Henry,

We are reaching out to you as the union for 1800+ members who teach and work at BCIT everyday for high-quality, public education. The work our members do makes a vital contribution to economic, social, and cultural well-being of the province. Our members have continued to do that work throughout the pandemic under challenging circumstances. However, the emergence this latest Omicron variant and your order to return to in-person instruction in January has left many of our members frustrated, demoralized, and to be candid, fearing for the safety of themselves, their families, and their students.

We are taking the extraordinary step of writing to you because we understand that, unlike the research universities in British Columbia, institutions under the BC Colleges and Institutes Act are bound to follow your direction – even where that direction is not a legal order. As you know, the research institutions have decided not to follow your directive and are offering post-secondary education remotely until at least January 24, 2022. Our members, on the other hand, have been told they must deliver classes in person starting Monday, January 10, 2022. While we concur with your view set out in your December 21, 2021 letter that in-person instruction is preferable, we are perplexed why your office is intractable in not allowing a brief period of online instruction in order to allow the worst of this wave to pass, and for a greater proportion of the community to receive booster shots.

To be blunt, with a minimum of over 3000 new cases a day, rising hospitalization, and a testing and contact tracing process under unsustainable pressure, the push for in-person instruction at all costs makes little sense. The unprecedented transmissibility of the Omicron variant, the growing evidence that cloth masks are not as effective against this variant, and the extended period students, staff, and faculty spend together in enclosed spaces makes us very concerned that the claim in your December 21, 2021 letter that post-secondary education campuses are safe with low risk of transmission, will turn out to be wrong.

At this time, we find ourselves in the position of having to advocate for a different public health position from your office. Health and safety is foremost on our members' minds and they are facing a return to campus on Monday amidst a rapidly changing and concerning time in this pandemic. We are calling on you to instruct BCIT to make health and safety decisions in the interest of the entire community.

Based on your advice that employers should prepare for one third of their workforce to be away at any given time, recognize that for “business continuity” for BCIT – and possibly other post-secondary institutions - remote delivery may be the best pedagogical decision at this time and could support

business continuity. BCIT's programs are very condensed and it is critical our members and their leadership are able to make decisions based on the required learning outcomes and not based on the PHO's position that in-person learning is preferential. Utilizing remote delivery has the potential to protect BCIT from mass absences during this period.

While we are well-versed the legal frameworks that make BCIT different from the research universities, this distinction is irrelevant on the frontlines. Faculty, staff, and students do not make their choices about where to work or study based the legal distinctions between PSEA and UPSEA. Nor do they make the distinction between studying in BC or in another province at this time. The virus also does not distinguish. To our knowledge, your office is the only public health office in the country that precludes certain post-secondary institutions from adding additional safety measures and prescribing the mode of education delivery. This level of control is further complicated when one set of institutions in the province is bound by your directive and others are not.

Our members were promised that rapid testing would occur in September for those members of the community who were either unvaccinated or who did not disclose their vaccination status. Given your order that in-person instruction take place starting January 10, 2022, it is particularly disappointing that proactive action was not taken to ensure that post-secondary institutions have access to rapid tests.

Others in the BCIT community, both employees and students, are calling for a delay for a full return to campus. The BCIT Student Association has appealed directly to BCIT leadership, faculty Departments are appealing to their Deans and the BCIT President, and we are getting non-stop correspondence from our members making both pedagogical and safety-based arguments for being able to adapt their delivery to delay a full return to campus.

As a union, our priority is the health and safety of our members, as well as respecting their on-the-ground knowledge of the pedagogical realities of their work and the learning needs of students. We urge you to allow our members and BCIT make decisions in the best interest of our community's health and safety.

Stay safe and healthy,



Colin Jones, FSA President

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