

MEDIA RELEASE

Faculty Continue to Raise Concerns About the Safe Return to Campus

Vancouver, April 27, 2021 – The Confederation of University Faculty Associations of British Columbia (CUFA BC) has [cautiously and optimistically welcomed](#) the announcement from the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training about the [fall return to campus](#). Faculty have continued to express concern with Government’s directions as well as their institution’s implementation of return to campus planning. While most faculty are eager to return to campus, they deserve a *safe* campus to return to and at this time there is little assurance that adequate health and safety protections will be in place to support a full return to campus in the fall.

Faculty and students are at the front line of risk exposure on campus as are the support staff, custodial, and food service providers on campus who are necessary to make the campus safe for all community members--many of whom have limited or no sick leave protections. There are legitimate concerns about the precautions and safe return to campus for those who have needs-based accommodations or compromised immune systems (for faculty and loved ones in their care). There are also concerns about how to accommodate students in similar situations. Not all classes are structured equally and often first year courses offer larger enrolments than later year courses while laboratory and clinical courses require significant physical interaction with others. *How can one safely deliver a course to 600 or more students? Faculty and students alike participate in mass public transit to commute for work and school, in what ways will this affect the return to campus? What PPE requirements will be in place to support lab and clinical work?* International students are another human element to the pandemic with geopolitical complication, for many their status to return to the province remains uncertain. *From a logistics perspective, how will faculty be able to support international students virtually while also teaching in-person and maintaining their other work-related responsibilities? How will faculty embody the anti-racism needed in our classrooms when international students have differential access to education?*

Over the course of this past year, the faculty associations have worked tirelessly with university administrators to secure temporary accommodations that address the working conditions and supports necessary to continue academic programs throughout the pandemic. Indeed, faculty have moved mountains to support students and maintain programs while research and personal lives have taken a back seat. There will be long-term consequences on faculty, including negative mental health outcomes and interrupted research careers, for the unsustainable workloads and emotional labour faculty have undertaken and continue to experience in supporting their students and institutions.

As faculty complete the spring semester and turn their attention, not to their research programs or much-needed recuperation, but to the preparations for an unknown fall, they worry that the term will bring confusion similar to last summer’s uncertainties. Faculty and the students in their classes are anxious. *Will the term require the kind of partial preparations for in-person offerings and remote pivot that drives down student enrolments? Will international students be left behind as faculty are left to accommodate competing demands from local students and those needing to attend from a distance and in different time zones with poor internet connectivity?*

With the ongoing pandemic showing no signs of ending anytime soon and the variants of concern on the rise, CUFA BC makes the following recommendations to government and institutional decision-makers:

- Student, faculty, and staff concerns must be prioritized before returning to campus;
- Affirm departmental autonomy. Departments (or equivalents) are the appropriate level of decision-makers to work with faculty and program offerings to support a safe and efficient return to campus;
- Ensure faculty and others who are eligible for the vaccine have every opportunity to be vaccinated before returning to campus;
- Ensure suitable accommodations are in place to support those who are unable to safely teach face-to-face;
- Consider organizing on-site vaccine delivery on campus in the summer to support access and to overcome vaccine hesitancy;
- No one should be required to teach face-to-face until they have had the opportunity to be fully vaccinated; and
- Ensure that there are properly trained medical staff on campus.

Over the longer term, the pandemic has exposed significant structural vulnerabilities in our post-secondary system. Government will need to work closely with the post-secondary sector to address issues, including health and mental health supports and services; paid sick leave for all campus workers; and reducing the over-reliance on both term-limited contracts and international tuition to cover systemic underinvestment. The greatest mental health aid universities can provide faculty is fair and equitable working conditions.

CUFA-BC looks forward to being an active partner in the return to campus, and in helping to address the systemic vulnerabilities revealed by the pandemic.

For further information or comment please contact CUFA BC Executive Director Annabree Fairweather at 604-367-5856 or executive.director@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.

