

UPEIFA
UNIVERSITY OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND
FACULTY ASSOCIATION

30 March 2022

Dr. Greg Keefe
Interim President
University of Prince Edward Island

RE: COVID-19 Recommendations (April 2022)

Dear Interim President Keefe:

As part of the *UPEI Moving On: Transition Plan to Living with COVID-19*, it is our understanding that the PEI CPHO anticipates removing all mandatory masking and vaccination requirements no later than **Thursday, April 7**. Given that UPEI Administration will need to reach a decision regarding campus health and safety measures in the context of loosening provincial restrictions, we are writing to provide you with some additional context as you make your decision and to make recommendations that we believe can make a significant contribution to improving the health and safety of the entire campus community.

We would like to begin by noting that as an academic staff association representing the teachers, scholars, and practitioners at a Canadian post-secondary institution, we believe health and safety decisions need to be based on evidence – to the extent that such evidence is available – and with due consideration to the precautionary principle in those instances when the available evidence may make it difficult to reach an unambiguous conclusion. Recognizing that Employers have a responsibility to take “every reasonable precaution ... to protect the occupational health and safety of persons at or near the workplace,” we also share your understanding – as outlined in the current *UPEI Operational Plan* - that in the midst of a public health crisis, such precautions may need to move beyond PEI CPHO guidance and/or legislated requirements that were developed under pre-pandemic conditions.

Throughout the pandemic, we have stressed the importance of developing a comprehensive strategy that deploys a range of interconnected COVID-19 mitigation measures. The most important of these involve adequate ventilation, vaccinations, and masking/physical distancing.

University of Prince Edward Island Faculty Association

550 University Avenue, Duffy Science Centre, Rm 415, Charlottetown, PE C1A 4P3

T 902-566-0438

| F 902-566-6043

| office@upeifa.ca

| www.upeifa.ca

While adequate **ventilation** is extremely important for mitigating the spread of COVID-19, it is certainly challenging to make such improvements on a short-term basis. Long-term infrastructure improvements have to be initiated and brought to completion in the midst of significant uncertainty about the trajectory of the pandemic. It is therefore important to stress that commitments to improving campus ventilation systems must not be allowed to fluctuate with the trajectory of the pandemic. These improvements must be initiated early, address all indoor spaces (i.e. classroom as well as other workspaces), and be completed along reasonable and transparent timelines.

Although **vaccinations** have been extremely useful for slowing the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19, we also recognize that their effectiveness has changed throughout the course of the pandemic. While in the early part of the pandemic, vaccinations played an important role in reducing infections and improving outcomes, evidence increasingly suggests that with the highly transmissible Omicron variant, current vaccines may be more valuable for reducing the likelihood of severe disease than preventing infection or transmission. It is vital that any University policy around mandatory vaccinations follow the science surrounding the efficacy of vaccination and be subject to revision based on updated guidance and emerging variants.

As mitigation measures, **masking and physical distancing** have proven to be effective when used in conjunction with the other mitigation measures outlined above. Because masking and physical distancing can often be implemented more rapidly than other mitigation measures, they represent an important line of defense in reducing the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19.

Membership Survey

In anticipation of the PEI CPHO's easing of pandemic restrictions, we asked our members to complete a brief survey to understand their experience of these mitigation measures and the importance they place on maintaining these and other measures after the provincial requirements have been loosened. Here is what we learned from the approximately 100 of our members who completed the survey.

- With respect to **keeping mandatory masking / social distancing policies in place**, 85% of respondents indicated that they would like to see these policies in place at least until the end of the Winter Semester (April 29) if not longer.
- As for the **UPEI Mandatory Vaccination Policy**, most of our members expressed a preference for keeping this policy in place for the foreseeable future.

For both masking/social distancing and the vaccination policy, a number of our members suggested that they would prefer if decisions around these policies were based on reliable case information – particularly hospitalization rates – rather than calendar dates. As such, there was strong interest in better communication around case numbers both on the Island as well as campus more specifically. Our members also made it clear that they prefer a comprehensive strategy that address ventilation, vaccination, and masking/social distancing as a whole.

The results of the survey also make it clear that in the drafting of any policy, it is absolutely vital that we not lose sight of individuals circumstances and risk assessments. Some of our campus community face higher risks of severe outcomes from COVID-19, including those who are immunocompromised or have other health issues, as well as those who cannot, for various reasons, be vaccinated. Others in our community may not have these risk factors themselves, but are anxious to protect loved ones or others close to them facing higher risks. Single and/or working parents may also face unique difficulties when an outbreak forces children to remain home from school. While *UPEI's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy* makes it clear that our institution is committed to taking these issues seriously, we feel this is an important opportunity to ensure that our rhetoric matches our reality.

In addition to the foregoing, we also note the large and growing body of research pointing to the very serious long-term health implications of long COVID, which some studies suggest may impact up to 30% of those infected (including many who have initially experienced only mild symptoms). Furthermore, epidemiological evidence shows that widespread transmission of COVID-19 greatly increases the risk that variants and sub-variants of concern will continue to develop, and so make the pandemic even longer and more dangerous than it would be otherwise.

Clearly, then, it remains absolutely critical to take all reasonable measures to limit and mitigate COVID's spread in our campus community. To that end, we respectfully submit the following recommendations:

Recommendation #1:

The current masking, physical distancing, and vaccination policies should be maintained until at least the end of the semester (April 29) with a further decision based on case numbers – hospitalization rates in particular - and in consultation with the entire campus community

Recommendation #2:

The recent ventilation evaluation of UPEI classrooms should be enlarged and extended to an evaluation (and if necessary remediation) of all indoor workspaces on campus

Prior to the pandemic, the UPEI Faculty Association encouraged UPEI Administration to develop an **Employee Accommodations Policy** congruent with its equity, diversity, and inclusion strategy and every bit as robust as the existing UPEI Student Accommodation Policy. At that time, UPEI Administration declined our request. Given the lessons we have learned throughout the pandemic as well as UPEI Administrations public commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion, we believe it is time for UPEI to reconsider its resistance to developing a robust employee accommodation policy.

Recommendation #3

Given the lessons we have learned throughout the pandemic as well as UPEI Administrations public commitments to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), UPEI Administration should reconsider its resistance to our Employee Accommodation Policy proposal

At the beginning of the pandemic, we asked UPEI Administration to consider inviting representatives from the *UPEI Infection, Prevention, and Control (IPC) Committee* to advise the *UPEI Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee (JOHSC)* on appropriate precautions and protocols for addressing health and safety concerns in the midst of the pandemic. Unfortunately, UPEI Administration declined to do so. To enable JOHSC members to make evidence-based recommendations to the Employer for improving the health and safety of the entire campus community, we believe that UPEI JOHSC members should be provided with current and accurate information from infectious disease specialists.

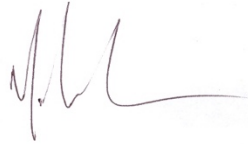
Recommendation #4

Representatives from the *UPEI Infection, Prevention, and Control (IPC) Committee* should have a standing invitation to attend *UPEI Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee (JOHSC)* meetings and be permitted to make direct recommendations to UPEI JOHSC for preventing and controlling infectious diseases on campus

We believe the implementation of all these recommendations will make a significant contribution to the health and safety of the entire campus community. We welcome

any opportunity to discuss these recommendation with you in greater length at your convenience.

Sincerely,



Dr. Michael Arfken
President
UPEI Faculty Association

cc: Dr. Katherine Gottschall-Pass, VPAR (Interim), UPEI
Ms. Jackie Podger, VPAF, UPEI