



## **Students and Workers concerned about unsafe campus reopening plans**

Post-secondary students and workers in colleges and universities have faced many challenges throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. While the announcement that post-secondary institutions will be opening in the fall is exciting news, safety needs to be the top priority. Sadly, with less than a week before the fall term begins, guidelines have finally been introduced but they do not meet needed safety standards and address the concerns of students, faculty and staff. These last minute guidelines increase the exposure risk of students, faculty and staff. Despite having over a year to figure out clear guidelines and acknowledge the science on COVID-19's airborne nature, the Ford government has come forward with half measures and has passed the buck to post-secondary institutions.

The government's Postsecondary Education Health Measures Framework for Fall 2021 exempts most postsecondary education institutions from needed capacity limits and distancing measures. At the same time the Ford government is [claiming](#), "To avoid future lockdowns and protect hospitals, Ontario is maintaining this cautious approach. This includes not expanding capacity limits in any setting at this time." The outright contradiction from the provincial government and the disingenuous policies proposed less than a week before classes resume shows that safety is not at the forefront. It remains unclear why post-secondary institutions do not have to follow the axiomatic recommendations of public and occupational health authorities, and have an exemption that undermines the scientific consensus. This baffling decision creates real and unnecessary risk for students, faculty and staff, and creates the environment for post-secondary institutions to be super spreader locations. The Ontario government's own Science Table [highlighted](#) in their September 1, 2021, project report that there is a need to, "reducing indoor density, maintaining physical distancing, limiting large gatherings," as the Delta Variant will, "affect all age groups with the potential to exceed ICU capacity," and, "more than twice as transmissible than the original SARS-CoV-2 virus." The provincial government must, at a minimum, reverse its decision on capacity limit exemptions and re-introduce a two (2) metre physical distancing standard.

*"Many students are looking forward to the return back to campus but are extremely concerned about their health and safety. After more than a year of online learning, students are struggling with their workload, their mental health and now have the added fear of catching COVID-19 on campus. The province and institutions must do better to prepare a safer return to campus for both students and workers," says Kayla Weiler, National Executive Representative, Canadian Federation of Students Ontario.*

The Ministry's framework only 'strongly encourages' post-secondary institutions to prioritise the inspection and maintenance of their Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC) systems and filters. Once again, the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff is discretionary. The framework ignores checklists developed by public health experts, like the [Health and Safety Checklist for University Re-opening](#) developed by the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the



University of Toronto. These checklists indicate clear directives on improving ventilation and filtration, which the framework merely gestures at. Needed investment in infrastructure improvements also remain absent. Further, we encourage the government to mandate comprehensive aerosol transmission risk assessments in all campus buildings and ensure those assessments are publicly available. Once again, we ask the provincial government to consult sector stakeholders (including student groups, faculty, and staff) and take guidance from Joint Health and Safety Committees which have been largely excluded by administrations of post-secondary institutions. Student voices, in particular, have been excluded from institution and government reopening plans. The voices, experiences and wellbeing of Ontario students and workers need to be a priority when addressing the challenges of reopening institutions safely.

“The plans to return to campus have been recklessly determined without worker or student input. Workers have been left behind especially during previous outbreaks of COVID-19 on campus, and workers fear the semester ahead without proper health and safety actions being taken before students return to campus,” highlights - David Simao, University Sector Chair for OUWCC

The Federation [recently expressed](#) serious concern for how international students will be affected by the current framework. While many of the parameters for returning international students fall under federal regulations, we call on the provincial government and post-secondary administrations to assist international students. Institutions need to meet and exceed their responsibilities under their approved COVID-19 Readiness Plan. We are disappointed that the Postsecondary Education Health Measures Framework for Fall 2021 has no concrete supports for international students beyond asking institutions to have staff help for international students, “who are not covered by the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) with information and support on how to obtain health insurance to minimize barriers to accessing health care (e.g., PSE institution health plans or plans similar to OHIP).”

Student mental health continues to be largely ignored and the lack of mental health services both on and off campus is alarming. While the ministry highlights that “the mental health and wellness of students, faculty and staff are of critical importance and should be prioritized,” there are no new services or funding being offered beyond platitudes that mental health is important. Students need real commitments. Increased and dedicated funding for culturally responsive mental health services is needed if students are to return to campus. Workers on university campuses are not only exposed to the same environmental conditions as students, but many will be tasked with working in residences where individuals with COVID-19 may be quarantined. The government must make a commitment to supporting worker mental health as well.

Students across the province have also expressed additional concerns. There are concerns that the quality of education under this plan will be negatively affected with many institutions implementing a hybrid delivery model of instruction. Students, faculty, teaching assistants, and



staff cannot be expected to succeed and achieve under a hybrid model without additional resources.

“It is dilatory and disgraceful that the Ministry has not listened nor even consulted with Ontario’s workers and students about the return to campus. This rushed plan announced one week prior to the start of the Fall semester is reckless and leaves behind the needs of students and workers,” explains *Kayla Weiler, National Executive Representative, Canadian Federation of Students Ontario.*

There is clear evidence that Covid-19 and its variants can quickly spread through our communities. Ontario’s own Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Kieran Moore expects case numbers to surge again this fall and modelling data from the science table predicts a rise in cases as the colder weather moves people indoors. As COVID-19 cases rise and Ontario enters the fourth wave, safety needs to be the top priority. The government’s Postsecondary Education Health Measures Framework for Fall 2021 fails to meet the protections that all students, faculty, and staff deserve.

*The Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario is the largest student organization in Ontario, representing over 350,000 college and university students.*

*The Ontario University Workers Coordinating Committee (OUWCC), a part of CUPE Ontario, represents over 30,000 contract academic workers (teaching assistants, graders, tutors, invigilators, sessional lecturers), clerical, trades, food service, and support workers at 18 campuses across the province.*

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