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December 22, 2021

Dear Post-Secondary Institution Presidents:

I am grateful for the close cooperation and communication between Public Health and post-secondary institutions, which has effectively limited the risk of COVID-19 to students, faculty and staff on campus and supported ongoing post-secondary operations during the fall academic term.

With the recent emergence of a new, more transmissible variant, it is important that we apply our understanding of where and how this virus is and is not transmitted to maintain an appropriate public health response. We will continue to implement introduce effective preventive measures and will do our best to avoid ineffective measures that may cause significant disruption and adversely affect health and wellbeing.

At this time, public health experts in B.C. strongly recommend continuation of on-campus instruction for post-secondary institutions in January 2022. Public health continues to monitor Covid-19 to ensure that safety measures are informed by evolving evidence. In the event that the recommendations need to change, the PHO will discuss with post-secondary institutions immediately. However given the importance of maintaining in person and on campus education of post secondary students, Public Health Leadership will work with post secondary institutions to provide guidance, support and assistance to ensure that students are able to continue learning in place.

Rationale:

- To date, our experience with all variants of concern reflects similar patterns of risk: high risk settings being homes and unstructured or informal social settings; and low risk settings being educational settings, including large classrooms, and workplaces with safety measures in place.
- Based on our experience in B.C. and internationally, educational settings are low-risk for COVID-19 transmission. Transmission in educational settings on campus continues to be uncommon. When a post-secondary student or employee has been diagnosed with COVID-19, the exposure is typically found to be associated with a social setting; they have not generated forward transmission in the classroom or office environment. The

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high level of responsible behaviour in post-secondary communities (almost all are vaccinated and mask wearing compliance is high) helps to prevent forward transmission.

- With every variant, including the Omicron variant, transmission has been observed to occur in households and unstructured social settings. There is no evidence that moving to online post-secondary instruction will decrease such interactions, noting that students would spend fewer hours in structured settings, which have a lower risk for transmission.
- Since structured educational settings do not amplify transmission, a move to online instruction is not an effective means of reducing COVID-19 among students, faculty, and staff, or in the wider community.
- The previous move to online post-secondary education in 2020 and 2021 was associated with [significant negative consequences for post-secondary students](#), who reported significantly poorer and worsening mental health and greater negative economic impacts than other British Columbians.
- The recommendations of public health and Orders of the Provincial Health Officer are based on careful and ongoing assessment of the factors that increase risk and the interventions that are known to effectively reduce risk.
- It is becoming increasingly clear that the virus will become endemic and continue to circulate in our community. New variants will continue to emerge and we will need to monitor the impact on the population and deploy necessary prevention measures as appropriate.

With new variants, our preventive approach should remain consistent with evidence-based approaches to control endemic diseases. Moving to online instruction can be harmful as it is not an effective means of reducing transmission, may result in increased time in higher risk settings, and be detrimental to the mental health and wellbeing of students.

Recommendations:

- Maintain in-person instruction on post secondary campuses and ensure students continue to have in-person access to their instructors.
- Vaccines are the most effective way to reduce the risk of COVID-19 on campus. Everyone eligible is strongly encouraged to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. It is noteworthy that the post-secondary community has heeded the call and is amongst the most vaccinated populations in the world.
- The prevention measures detailed in the [Return-to-Campus Guidelines](#) and the respective institutional safety plans have been very effective at preventing COVID-19 in a wide variety of post-secondary settings across B.C. and are expected to support a successful return to campus in January. Prior to implementing measures in addition to those outlined below, please consult with your local Medical Health Officer.
- Decreases in structured gatherings such as in-person instruction can be accompanied by increases in unstructured or informal gatherings where risk of transmission is higher.

- Non-educational post-secondary gatherings are events that bring staff and students together outside of regular educational activities. In times of higher transmission, these activities may be cancelled or postponed in consultation with the local Medical Health Officer.
- If in-person non-educational gatherings must be limited, seek virtual alternatives whenever possible, and continue to comply with the [PHO Order for Gatherings and Events](#).
- Please ensure that students are aware of recommendations for daily self-assessment and testing and have information about testing options.
- Institutions should continue to work with their local Medical Health Officers to identify and respond to outbreaks.
- Follow regional public health recommendations and provincial public health orders. When recommendations and Orders change, please review your campus safety guidance, and update as necessary.

Again, public health will continue to monitor COVID-19 and remain actively engaged with post-secondary institutions to make new recommendations, if and when they become necessary. I thank you for your leadership and commitment to the health and wellbeing of your campus communities.

Sincerely,



Bonnie Henry
MD, MPH, FRCPC
Provincial Health Officer

Cc Honourable Anne Kang, Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Training
Shannon Baskerville, Deputy Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Training
Max Blouw, President Research Universities' Council of BC
Ruth Wittenberg President, BC Association of Institutes and Universities
Colin Ewart, President BC Colleges
Honourable Adrian Dix, Minister of Health
Stephen Brown, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health
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Chief Medical Officer, First Nations Health Authority
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