FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 24, 2020 – The Confederation of University Faculty Associations of BC and its 5,500 faculty, academic librarians, and other academic professionals commend federal, provincial, and municipal governments on moving swiftly to secure protections for the most vulnerable members of our society affected by COVID-19. Supports like rental subsidies, protections from evictions, freezes on rental increases, federal financial supports, provincial supports and expanded access to employment insurance through the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). All together, these will form the safety net that is so critical in the coming weeks and months to ease the burden of global pandemic.

The Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training provides additional targeted supports to students' living allowances and mental health resources, which will go a long way in ensuring they can continue in their programs. More supports may be needed to encourage students to go to university or continue in their education as online learning changes the experience of post-secondary environments.

CUFA BC further commends the work of BC’s five research and doctoral universities as they grapple with unprecedented challenges facing academe. In consultation with their faculty associations, and in the spirit of shared and collegial governance, the administrations of the University of Northern British Columbia, University of British Columbia, University of Victoria, Simon Fraser University, and Royal Roads University have undertaken important steps to secure their institutions and protect faculty, students, and staff as they move to online teaching, adjust course offerings, and accommodate massive disruptions in research. Working together we have taken steps to extend the timelines for tenure and promotion, accommodate disrupted sabbaticals and research programmes, ease the conditions for sick leave and compassionate leave, and adjust evaluations as they relate to student evaluations of teaching.

As the pandemic continues to affect all levels of society so too do gaps emerge.

We are most concerned about the COVID-19 crisis and the immediate and long-term implications on the marginalized members of our ranks: contract faculty. Contract faculty comprise a significant proportion of the faculty within BC’s research and doctoral universities. Under normal circumstances, contract faculty find themselves in precarious situations with little or no job security and often on serial contracts that lack benefits and meaningful pay.

The nature of serial contracts for faculty is challenging enough, but under the extreme circumstances of global pandemic, precarity means that many contract faculty are facing crises of housing and food insecurity at a time of employment uncertainty. There are concerns that contracts may not be renewed or will be revoked entirely if student enrolments falter in the face of COVID-related instructional changes. In addition, faculty will have to teach online with minimal supports in place to facilitate such a transition; this will be difficult for all faculty, but will have a disproportionate effect on contract faculty.

Online teaching platforms are necessary and welcome opportunities for universities to continue the essential services of post-secondary education. Moving online, however, brings with it a suite of logistical and technological challenges. First, not all courses are easily remodelled for online modalities. Second, for those that can transition, online platforms further exacerbate the existing inequities of contract faculty who may not have the resources to support such a transition. Contract faculty will have a harder time meeting the demands of online teaching without supports in place such as compensation for additional
time and energy to transition online, necessary technology and internet access, and even sick leave provisions that allow them to care for themselves and loved ones as needed.

BC’s faculty report growing concerns over the long-term consequences on teaching and research as universities themselves face uncertainties about the status of summer and fall semesters. Uncertainty exists because of prolonged, necessary measures of social distancing as well as potential enrollment consequences from limited national and international travel. Add to this the reality that not all research and teaching can be performed online and there emerges a delicate balance of decisions to be made.

CUFA BC and its 5,500 faculty members are confident that university administrations and faculty associations will be able to meet the challenges they face so long as they are supported by community and governments. BC faculty call on the provincial government to monitor and support workers of all stripes, including vulnerable contract faculty.

Now is the time for strong investments in BC’s post-secondary institutions to ensure that all British Columbians come through this global health crisis prepared for the new reality that we will face in post-pandemic world. CUFA BC institutions should be seen as a key partner in this response to COVID-19.

**Recommendations**

To ensure a strong recovery from the disruption of the pandemic, CUFA BC recommends the following:

1. Governments must ensure stability across the sector by continuing financial supports to post-secondary institutions at the same or greater levels than what were in place before the pandemic.
2. University administrations and government continue to work with the faculty associations in conversation, issue identification, development of responsive policies through collaboration and expert engagement.
3. Governments should continue to rely on academic experts in policy and decision-making, like Dr. Bonnie Henry and other faculty from medicine, epidemiology, economics, social sciences, and humanities. The research taking place at these institutions continues to address the most pressing social, economic, cultural, and environmental challenges facing society.
4. Governments and institutions should consider increasing teaching and research assistant funding to support graduate students and faculty.
5. Government and institutions need to protect vulnerable faculty:
   a. Offer financial supports for the added time and energy required to move to online teaching, in particular by offering financial supports for much needed technological infrastructure and upgrades.
   b. Consider extending contracts that are imminently concluding.
   c. Consider reassigning duties from teaching to research for individuals whose courses would otherwise be canceled or postponed.
   d. Offer fair sick leave and compassionate leave provisions.
   e. Offer additional flexibility for faculty with suppressed immunity or underlying conditions.
   f. Recognize and accommodate the particular constraints facing faculty with children at home and eldercare responsibilities.

CUFA BC represents over 5,500 faculty members, librarians, instructors, lecturers, and contract faculty at the five research and doctoral universities in British Columbia (University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, University of Victoria, Royal Roads University and University of Northern British Columbia).

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