



December 15, 2021

Professor Alan Richardson
President
UBC Faculty Association
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Sent via email: alan.richardson@ubc.ca

Dear Alan,

RE: Your letter of December 13, 2021

Thank you for your letter dated December 13, 2021. As you indicate, the uncertainty around the spread of the Omicron variant is concerning for our community, particularly as we observe other communities that are dealing with outbreaks of this new variant. While I will attempt to answer the questions you have posed with the best information we have today, we know that nothing is certain at this point, and we will need to remain flexible and respond to situations as they may arise in the new year.

At this point, UBC is not seeing a spike in cases that present a risk to the health of our students, faculty and staff. Our situation is different from the universities that have shifted their exams to online. We are in close contact with public health experts, the Office of the Provincial Health Officer, as well as the medical health officers in the Vancouver Coastal Health and Interior Health region, and according to these experts, it is currently safe for UBC to hold in-person exams on both campuses, given the control measures that are in place.

Dr. Bonnie Henry, Provincial Health Officer, and her team are monitoring the post-secondary education sector closely. That being said, the university continues to work closely with Vancouver Coastal Health, Interior Health, and the Provincial Health Office to monitor the situation and we will adjust our approach when required.

If we receive direction from public health experts to change our approach or introduce new control measures, we will of course advise our community immediately.

To respond to your first question, at the current time, there is no reason to think that circumstances will prevent courses going ahead as planned in January. That said, there is much we don't know about the trajectory of Omicron, and it is too early to speculate what the picture will look like on the 10th of January. As Dr. Henry advised, there is considerable uncertainty about how the Omicron variant will affect cases and hospitalization rates in BC. An outstanding question is how virulent the variant is compared to other variants. There is consensus that it spreads faster than Delta, but how much more is unknown. We have demonstrated, that with the use of masks and our high rates of vaccination, to date, there has been no forward transmission of the virus in our classrooms or our offices and other settings.



The most significant risk for people remains being in social settings where no preventive measures are in place.

At the current time, it would be prudent for faculty to be planning a continuation of the various approaches they have utilized to support students who have needed to be absent from class for a period of time this term. This will be important for continuity of learning for these students if rising case numbers lead to more absences from courses, which we should continue to encourage if students are unwell or display symptoms, even if these symptoms are relatively mild. In addition, academic units have already completed similar contingency planning to address faculty absences from class for a period of time, for the same reasons.

Regarding your second question about the use of medical masks, UBC will continue to require the use of face coverings at UBC Vancouver and UBC Okanagan. All faculty, staff, students and visitors are required to wear non-medical masks or medical-grade masks in all indoor public areas as “a barrier and help stop the spread of droplets from a person’s mouth and nose when talking, laughing, yelling, singing, coughing, or sneezing” as per guidance from the BC Centre for Disease Control. Unless a specific work or learning space requires a medical grade mask, either mask type is acceptable for accessing UBC spaces. In particular, medical-grade masks are required for UBC faculty, students, staff and visitors accessing UBC sites located within healthcare settings. Outside of this requirement, mask type continues to be a personal decision at this time to limit potential financial hardships arising out of need to purchase medical-grade equipment to access education.

As to your third question, regarding rapid antigen testing, appointment spaces for the Rapid Testing Clinic are presently open to UBC-affiliated asymptomatic individuals who have declared they are Unvaccinated, Partially Vaccinated, or Do Not Want to Disclose. This aligns with the current program structure, whereby an exemption (from rapid testing) is granted to an individual only if they are Fully Vaccinated.

Recent discussions with our Medical Health Officer indicated that he is supportive of opening up the Rapid Testing Clinic for Fully Vaccinated students in UBC residences for a short term (UBCV – December 15-22, 2021; January 4-7, 2022 and UBCO – December 15-17, 2021; January 4-7, 2022) over the slower exam and holiday break periods. The clinical team will monitor the attendance during this pilot to determine whether the clinic would likely have the operational capacity during WT2 to accommodate asymptomatic fully vaccinated as individuals rapid testing for their own state of health, in addition to those testing for program compliance.

Starting in January we will be offering PCR testing on the Vancouver campus for symptomatic students, faculty and staff. These measures will add a layer of protection and reassurance to our existing Rapid Testing Program against potential transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Santa J. Ono'.

Santa J. Ono
President and Vice-Chancellor