

Dear Members,

As you may have heard, McMaster University announced its return-to-campus measures in a [January 5th letter](#) from President David Farrar and Provost Susan Tighe. The return-to-work plan states the following:

Our plan to have all classes delivered virtually for the week of January 10th, with the exception of some clinical programs, remains in place. We will incrementally offer more hands-on learning to our students in alignment with the latest government and public health measures.

Beginning January 17 – Undergraduate labs, studios, clinical and other high priority hands-on learning and experiential activities will be in person, with limited exceptions.

Beginning January 31 – All level-one undergraduate courses will be in person giving students who have had limited opportunity to interact and spend time on campus the opportunity to adjust. All graduate courses offered at the Ron Joyce Centre will also begin on January 31.

Beginning February 7 – All in-person classes begin for all students (undergraduate and graduate).

This is in stark contrast to Mohawk College, which [announced](#) that all classes in the Winter 2022 semester will be delivered in a remote or virtual format. As Mohawk College noted, “the ongoing spread of the Omicron COVID-19 variant has created uncertainty” for the community and a clear decision at the beginning of the semester “will allow students to plan ahead with certainty.” We would also add that a clear and early decision provides certainty for teaching staff, who cannot be expected to pivot from one format to another on a whim and require sufficient time to move to remote delivery.

While we believe that a focus on in-person delivery is pedagogically sound and in the best interest of staff and students alike, doing so at the risk of staff and students is dangerous. Ontario has had [one of its deadliest pandemic months in January](#) and the situation is [only expected to worsen](#). Universities have already been exempted from distancing and capacity limits in teaching and learning spaces, meaning that rooms have the potential to be just as over-crowded as they were pre-pandemic.

While dangerous and almost uncontrollable hazards such as Omicron exist, the Employer should limit hazards to workers and students by minimizing on-campus activities where safer alternatives exist. When

workers and students are required to be on campus, safety standards that go above and beyond minimum standards should be in effect. Workers who are not willing to face the risk should be offered virtual appointments.

To return to in-person work, we require a stronger health and safety plan which mitigates risk for both workers and students. This includes:

- Mandatory N95, KN95 or KF94 masks provided by McMaster. McMaster, which boasted a surplus of [\\$232 million](#) last year, should be providing these to all staff and students that it expects to be on campus and should not be downloading those costs on staff and students who have already faced financial hardship during the pandemic;
- The provision of freely available and accessible rapid tests for all staff and students to ensure maximum safety when coming to campus;
- Proper distancing and capacity limits that are stronger than the bare minimum that the provincial government has permitted;
- A reporting and tracing system of all confirmed COVID cases on campus, that includes actively reaching out to staff and students (via email, Mosaic, or Avenue) about known cases and their location, rather than posting an update online;
- Easy access for students and staff to the view following information for each room on campus:
 - The dimensions of the room (length/width/height in ft).
 - HVAC design flow rate (in cfm) and measured flow rate (cfm).
 - Proportion of outdoor air supply in %.
 - Total air turnovers per hour (ACH).
 - MERV rating of the filters installed.
 - Whether any supplemental portable air filters are installed.
 - Whether or not CO2 monitors are installed in the room or available to staff to measure CO2 levels in our classrooms.
 - Clear instructions on the operation of HEPA Filter Units and Air Purification Units (e.g., guidance on keeping units on, whom to call when units break down, etc.)
- The low-barrier option to continue work virtually or immediately return to virtual work if aspects of this stronger health and safety plan are not sufficiently met or the worker feels the risk is too high for the duration of the pandemic;
- Transparency in the factors, measurements, and scientific assessments used to determine re-opening measures;

- Fair compensation to instructors for the added work of delivering their courses in a hybrid format when large numbers of students are inevitably unable to participate in in-person learning, as well as any additional support the added work might warrant, including additional paid training, TA support, etc.; and
- Paid sick days for a full isolation period of an employee or a member of their household, even if this is more than what is contained within a collective agreement.

A return-to-school will have disproportionate impacts on members of the McMaster community. A [petition being circulated](#) by a group of students rightly notes, in part, that *“Qualifications for accommodations must be eliminated. It is unacceptable that disabled, Black, Indigenous, people of colour, elderly, and immunocompromised people be sacrificed in favour of return to the status quo. We must carry forward the lessons learned throughout this pandemic to create a more inclusive university that puts commitment to innovation and excellence into concrete action.”*

The petition maintains that *“thoughtful and innovative integration of in-person and off-campus components is necessary and we urge ongoing development while making the provision of existing online tools such as Zoom for “live” classes throughout the Winter term the very basic minimum.”* We agree, but this can only be achieved if adequate support is provided to instructional staff, especially those staff who are precariously employed.

Returning to in-person instruction in the midst of a pandemic is irresponsible and jeopardizes the safety of the McMaster community as a whole. While workers would like to return to in-person work, it cannot be done by ignoring the toll of this ongoing pandemic on front-line workers and by not doing all we can to decrease the spread. If the Employer continues to insist on a physical return to campus, it can only be done with the effective safety and inclusionary measures we have articulated above.

We ask you to please share this letter with friends and colleagues and to forward your concerns to David Farrar, McMaster’s President and Vice-Chancellor, at president@mcmaster.ca , or by phone: (905) 525-9140, ext. 24340.

In solidarity,

Your CUPE 3906 Executive Committee