

Restarting the Economy: What workers in the post-secondary education sector need to know

Revised July 14, 2020

The closure of college and university campuses across the country began taking place along a similar timeline as elementary and high schools in their respective provincial jurisdictions. Workers in the sector have been impacted differently depending on their function within the institutions.

Despite the campus closures, many classes at institutions for the winter and summer semesters continued virtually. Thus, some academic staff have continued to provide class instruction if their classes were not cancelled. However, the extent of virtual education occurring at each institution has varied depending on the technological capacity and the nature of academic programs and classes.

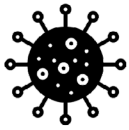
Research activity and other supportive operations (e.g. labs, workshops, student support centres, maintenance, administrative, etc.) have been operationally restricted during the pandemic. Some impacted staff have been able to work from home, some have continued working on site (e.g. maintenance staff to keep facilities running), while others have been temporarily laid off.

Regardless, worker health and safety, and proper protective precautions remain a priority for those currently working onsite and will have to be a critical precondition for any return to on-campus activities.

What post-secondary education workers can expect when returning to work

At this point, post-secondary institutions have struggled with knowing whether public health officials will deem it safe for students to return to the classroom in September or whether international travel bans will be lifted in time for international students to be on campuses.

Institutions have been releasing their tentative plans for the fall semester, with most announcing initial (but not necessarily detailed) plans to either go fully online or employ a blended delivery model of online and in-person options for classes and labs. Each individual institution will have their own operational plans, so there will not be complete uniformity within the sector.



The shift toward more online classes (whether it is in the short-term or long-term) will certainly change the operational structure of post-secondary institutions. With less students and workers on campuses, the union will need to determine the impact on non-academic support staff in particular – research, administrative, maintenance, food services, residence services, to name a few.

With regard to on-campus operations this fall, unions and campus Joint Health and Safety Committees (JHSC) must be integrally involved in return-to-work and operational planning. Union representation and JHSC inclusion are essential for ensuring workers' voices are heard and best practices are followed for protecting the health and safety of campus communities.

What post-secondary education workers should expect from their Employers

Employers have a responsibility and obligation to ensure that workers' health and safety are protected upon a return to on-campus activity.

The union should expect the following from college and university employers:

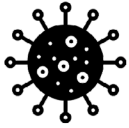
- Implementing a return-to-work protocol that is tailored to the specific campus workplaces through union and JHSC input.
- Ensuring that employees are properly trained and provided accessible information on COVID-19 related hazards, hygienic practices, sanitization, proper PPE use, etc.
- Ensuring that all workers have access to personal protective equipment (PPE) where necessary.
- Establishing increased cleanliness standards and protocols that are going to be needed when students and workers return to campus.
- Regularly communicating with students about the transition to on-campus activity and expectations related to health and safety practices on campus.
- Ensuring the maintenance of health care benefits, including drug coverage, for workers on prolonged layoff.
- Examining all currently outsourced food and custodial services in an effort to bring them in-house – this would help ensure that cleanliness and health and safety processes are properly adhered to, while ensuring that all employees are valued members of the campus community.

What post-secondary education workers need from Government

In addition to their role in the pandemic response and re-opening of the economy, provincial governments play an important role in the funding and operations of post-secondary institutions, while the federal government can implement various supportive measures.

The union has a number of policy demands for governments:

- There should be federal-provincial dialogue with the aim to expand the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) to include public institutions.



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- Allow workers on layoff to have access to Supplemental Unemployment Benefit (SUB) payments while receiving the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) / EI.
- Continued provincial funding support so that workers can continue to do their jobs and prepare for the return of students on campuses (including increases cleanliness standards) and the continuation of academic, research and other activity.
- The provincial government must establish baseline standards on cleanliness on campuses, in order to provide a safe, clean learning environment for the campus community as containment measures lift.
- There must be a responsive provincial body for workers to report unsafe working conditions or possible COVID-19 infections, and has the authority to suspend workplace operations and investigate matters.
- Post-secondary education policy should not direct a strong path toward “online learning” without understanding the current context – consideration must be given to the fact that this mode of education delivery cannot be a cheaper substitute for in-person instruction.

Additional Resources

Unifor has launched a hub for member information about the pandemic at unifor.org/COVID19 and encourages members to check the site regularly for updates.

Subscribe to Unilink, the union’s weekly national newsletter at unifor.org/subscribe and download the Unifor mobile app on your smartphone.