



Interior Health

September 20, 2021

Dear UBCO Board of Governors,

Thank you for inviting me to participate in a discussion about return to campus at UBCO. First of all I would like to acknowledge that returning to campus can be stressful for students and staff after 18 months of remote learning. As I have shared with you in the past, evidence both internationally and from BC suggests that restrictive measures introduced during the pandemic have had unintended consequences for our populations, particularly for youth and young adults. We have seen that lockdowns, educational disruption, and social isolation have led to poorer mental health, loneliness, and financial stress. [This is why a full return to on-campus instruction for post-secondary institutions should remain a priority.](#) Allowing students and staff to return to closer-to-normal learning, recreational, and social activities is essential for their wellbeing and for pandemic recovery.

We have come a long way in our understanding of how COVID-19 spreads. [Our experience with K-12 schools and post-secondary institutions that were in session during the 2020/2021 academic year demonstrates that educational settings are low-risk for COVID-19 transmission.](#) Even before vaccination, a broad range of sectors operated during the pandemic with the types of prevention measures that are now recommended for post-secondary institutions. Most transmission of COVID-19 occurs in households or at informal social gatherings, where we have corresponding risk mitigation strategies in place. These include Interior Health-specific orders that limit the number of event attendees, and the recent Provincial Health Officer requiring individuals to be fully vaccinated to access many non-essential recreational services. The [Return to Campus Public Health Guidance](#) provides specific guidance to prevent and mitigate risk of COVID-19 transmission in the post secondary setting.

At your request, I have enclosed snapshots from the BCCDC's [BC COVID-19 Data](#) with current COVID-19 epidemiology and immunization rates in Central Okanagan. [It is important to note that UBC reports that a very high proportion of its students and staff are immunized with two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.](#) This, combined with other public health measures such as physical distancing and protective barriers, lowers the overall risk of infection to everyone on campus. We know that being fully vaccinated lowers the risk of serious illness and hospitalization significantly, and for that reason it is imperative that we continue to encourage all eligible people in our communities to be immunized against COVID-19. As a health

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authority, we are particularly focused on providing access to vulnerable populations, in ways that help them feel comfortable and safe receiving the vaccine.

As you deliberate on your next steps and policies, it is important to consider the ongoing supports in place for individuals excluded from in-person learning and related activities as a result of their vaccination status. Given our awareness of the social and mental health benefits that are part of the education experience, ensuring continued connectivity, engagement and resources aligned to personal wellbeing is critical. On an ongoing basis, it will also be relevant to consider how we collectively encourage and welcome people from all backgrounds and beliefs to participate in post-secondary education, and not let our current public dialogue on vaccination be a deterrent to participating in the university experience.

Scientific communities agree that COVID-19 will likely continue to circulate for years to come. Isolated cases and small clusters among households and social networks will continue to occur, and as such COVID-19 prevention efforts must be balanced with recovery efforts. Interior Health will continue to support UBCO with contact tracing, exposure notifications and isolation if required. In specific situations, unvaccinated individuals who are identified as contacts in an exposure situation may be required to stay home and to isolate for a period of time to avoid the risk of further spread.

Thank you for your continued support. Together we can promote a supportive, inclusive environment which will allow students and staff thrive this academic year.

Please don't hesitate to reach out with questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Silvina Mema', written over a horizontal line.

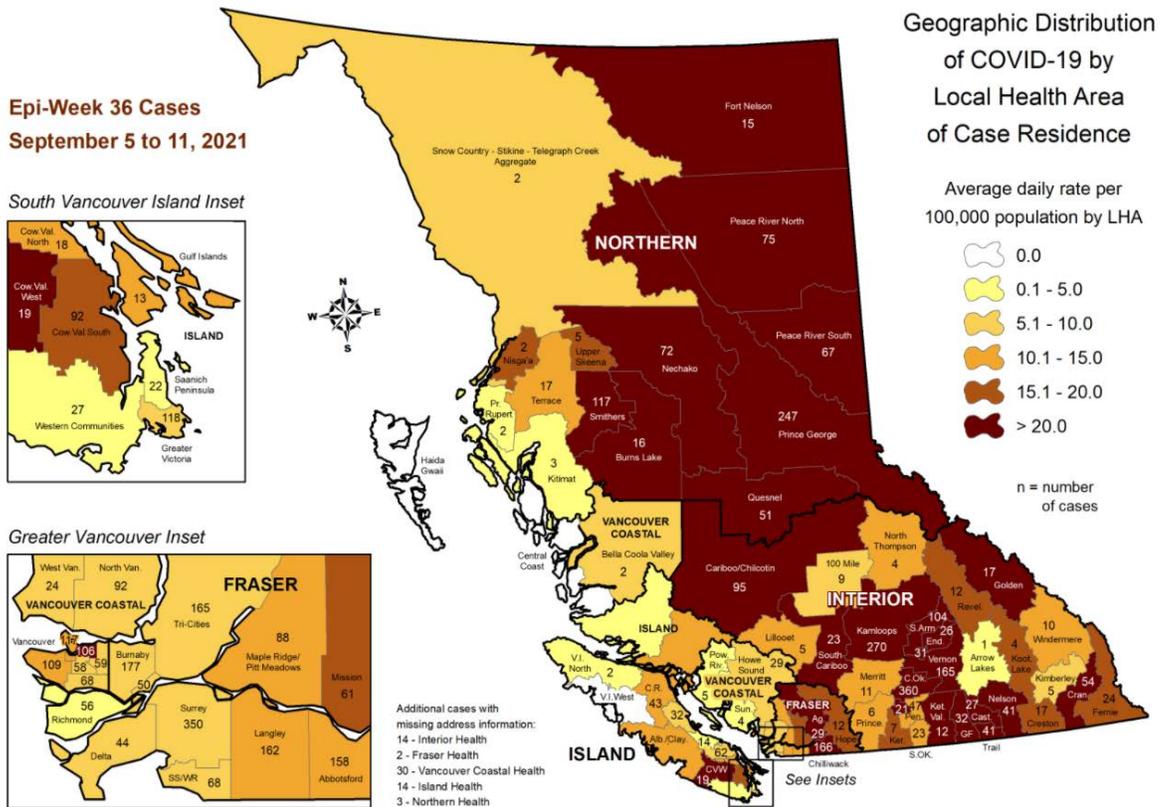
Silvina Mema, MD MSc FRCPC
Medical Health Officer

SM/sz

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COVID-19 Epidemiology in Central Okanagan (COK)

Figure 1: Average daily rate of COVID-19 in COK is >20 cases per 100,000 population. There were 360 new cases diagnosed between September 5 to 11, 2021.



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Figure 3: As of September 14, 2021, 82% of individuals >12 years of age had received one dose of COVID-19 vaccine in COK.



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Figure 4: As of September 14, 2021, 74% of individuals >12 years of age had received two doses of COVID-19 vaccine in COK.



Source BC COVID-19 Data: <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/data>

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