



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
DALLA LANA SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

29 June 2020

Dear President Gertler, Vice-President & Provost Regehr, and Vice-President, Human Resources & Equity Hannah-Moffat:

As faculty members at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, we write to express our concerns regarding the University of Toronto's measures to protect the health and safety of all workers, essential and non-essential, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Urgent action is needed to: (1) ensure adequate workplace health and safety measures by consulting with relevant groups prior to the University's reopening process; (2) provide employment security to workers currently facing precarity, including highly racialized and feminized low-wage workers; and (3) provide gender-equitable work-at-home policies related to childcare and elder care. The U of T is a world leader in public health with extensive expertise among its faculty. Moreover, the Dalla Lana School of Public Health has one of three Canadian graduate training programs in Occupational Hygiene, and the only one in Ontario. This faculty expertise is contributing to national and international responses to COVID-19, yet it has only scantily been consulted to shape internal U of T COVID-19-related policies. The U of T still has the opportunity to model a justice-informed COVID-19 response, marshaling this expertise, to ensure the health and well-being of U of T workers.

Many U of T workers, and their unions, have expressed concern that the University has to date not adequately informed, let alone consulted with, the 50 joint health and safety committees (JHSCs) about health and safety protections for on-site workers. There is a lack of clarity on how the (shifting) public health recommendations are being implemented on campus, what personal protective equipment is needed and will be provided, and how physical distancing will be enforced, nor has there been a clear message on which positions are eligible to work on-site versus at home. Since the JHSCs were not informed about or involved in these decision making processes, worker representatives were unable to communicate with, or share the concerns of, their members. This is a missed opportunity on the part of University administration to engage those who are most familiar with workplace conditions and the day-to-day operations of the University.

Going forward, unions, faculty and employee associations, and front-line management must have a meaningful role in both University re-opening plans and in development of ongoing remote work policies. Each of these groups should be consulted before decisions are taken and information is disseminated. Ideally input, as well as feedback once plans are developed, should be channeled through the University's existing JHSCs, or, at minimum, a selection of JHSCs from all 3 campuses. With their extensive knowledge about their respective work areas, JHSCs play a crucial role in communicating with and educating members about health and safety and will be key to monitoring back-to-work plans. Given the U of T community's size, diverse activities, and reopening challenges, the University administration would be wise to utilize the heretofore untapped resource of JHSCs to ensure that reopening plans are reasonable and achievable, and to make the entire U of T community aware of hazards in the workplace and the steps being taken to keep everyone safe.

Amid a crisis, it is also imperative that the University's actions protect employment security for staff members. Just as Canada's leading and wealthiest university should be consulting its workers around health and safety plans, it cannot justify furloughing or laying off employees amid the pandemic. Indeed, temporary layoffs, which extend to dozens of USW workers, most CUPE casual workers, nearly all subcontracted food service workers on the UTSC campus as well as other staff, such as parking attendants, contradict the articulated values of the University. These values emphasize "vigilant protection for individual human rights, and a resolute commitment to the principles of equal opportunity, equity and justice." A period of severe economic and social uncertainty is no time to lay off staff, especially subcontracted food and service workers, a population that is highly racialized and feminized and that typically earns minimum (or barely above minimum) wages. These workers deserve employment security, not least because of precarity's lasting negative consequences for both physical and mental health.

Further, the University must recognize, and act to redress, the disproportionate gendered burden of home schooling/daycare, and of elder care responsibilities, for employees working at home. To date, the University has had no systematic policy for staff/faculty dealing with these obligations amid remote work expectations. There is growing evidence to suggest that COVID-19 closures and related caregiving responsibilities are placing an undue and gendered burden that affects academic productivity and negatively impacts the mental health of the primary caregiver. The assumption that the weight of remote work is uniform across University employees and that the needs of those facing challenges maintaining full-time work responsibility under pandemic conditions can be resolved through individual accommodations is short-sighted. Not only do case-by-case solutions place the responsibility of asking for accommodation on already burdened individual faculty/staff, potentially putting them in a vulnerable position, this approach is highly inequitable, leading to more support for some than for others.

To address these work and health inequities through justice-based solutions, we urge the Administration to act swiftly on three fronts:

- 1) For the benefit of the entire U of T community, we appeal to the Administration to meaningfully engage relevant groups and leverage University expertise to provide guidance on University operations during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the reopening plan:
  - a. Enact clear internal policies and guidelines that protect workers to the greatest extent possible
  - b. Increase the frequency of JHSC meetings to ensure that worker perspectives are considered in decision making as it pertains to operations during both lockdown and reopening
  - c. Establish a joint pandemic response committee with representatives from unions, faculty and employee associations, and administration to ensure clear and effective communication with all University of Toronto constituencies as per the University Policy on Crisis and Routine Emergency Preparedness and Response
  - d. Engage with faculty thought leaders in occupational and environmental health at all stages of development and implementation of University operations guidance as it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic;

2) For U of T staff facing employment precarity, we ask that the University live up to its reputation as Toronto's best employer and retain these staff members on the payroll, which would represent a tiny proportion of the University's budget/endowment;

3) For staff and faculty who are working at home even as they have had to assume what are highly gendered responsibilities for care and schooling of children (while schools, daycares, before/after school programs, and summer camps remain closed or sparsely and unsafely reopened) and/or those with elder care responsibilities, we ask that a consultative committee, with staff and faculty representation, as well as involvement of the Family Care Office, be created to establish universal, generous, and equitable policies to accommodate the situation/needs of working caregivers.

Fostering a healthy work environment is an essential responsibility of any employer, none more than Canada's leading university. We hope that you will demonstrate leadership befitting of the U of T's perennial ranking and reputation as one of Canada's best employers and address these concerns fully and in a timely fashion.

Yours sincerely,

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