

Organising for safety in the Omicron wave

A document from NTEU Fightback, 31 Jan 2022

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This is a longer version of an email sent to the NTEU Fightback list on 31 January 2022. Please forward this resource to other sympathetic university workers who may not be on our distribution list. You can sign up to the list on our [website](#).

1. Fighting like our lives, and health, depend on it

Twelve hundred dead in January. Hospitals like a scene from hell. A burden of serious, sometimes crippling illness for (it seems) one in ten infected. Omicron is the biggest crisis of the pandemic to date in Australia.

In the midst of this disaster, inflicted by the “living with Covid” brigade, led by the *Financial Review*, and cheered on by management at many universities, what specific safety measures should we be demanding, and organising to win, in 2022?

As some of the largest workplaces in modern cities, it matters whether universities are vectors for mass infection or buffers against transmission. It’s a crucial question for us, our fellow workers, our students and the wider community.

2. USyd – how to not ensure safety

The virus is spread through aerosols. Not opinion: fact. Recognised by [SafeWork Australia](#), by a huge number of [experts](#) in the [field](#) and even (belatedly) by the slow-moving [World Health Organisation](#).

So it’s absolutely shocking that this, the most important fact about the spread of Covid, seems to not be recognised in practice by management at Sydney Uni, for example. Management’s Covid safety checklists for teaching spaces and offices run to 1,500 words – yet only two of the four checklists even mention ventilation. Here is the entire content about improving ventilation, one of the most crucial way of stopping the uncontrolled spread of the virus:

*Opportunities to optimise air flow have been considered in naturally ventilated venues (e.g. opening windows or doors). **Not applicable to mechanically ventilated or air-conditioned spaces.***

Yep. Worth reading again. The richest university in the country says only that “opportunities to optimise air flow” should be “considered” – not even actually implemented – before classes resume, and explicitly **not** in the thousands of rooms in modern buildings which rely on air conditioning.

The other sections of the checklist are barely any better. There’s plenty on wiping down surfaces and washing hands – the cheapest and [arguably](#) least effective way to counter the spread of the virus – but very little of substance that would actually stop people from crowding together and breathing each other’s aerosols. Here’s a typical item from the checklist for offices:

The use of meeting rooms and other small auxiliary rooms have been considered and will be adapted to facilitate 1.5 m separation where possible.

Note – formal capacity limits will not be set or signposted.

If you’re looking for an example of how to allow mass spread of the virus, while doing some minimal “performance” of [the most ineffective](#) supposed safety measures, like providing some spray and wipe for staff to do their own “sanitising” of surfaces, this is it.

3. What should we be demanding for Covid safety?

The NTEU national office emailed all NTEU members early this week on the urgent situation confronting us all:

Omicron poses significant health and safety risks to workers across the whole economy, including in higher education, and we are calling for action NOW. We are seeing infection, serious illness and death such as we have never seen before and the strain on all of us as a community is apparent.

The national email states that employers must, in consultation with unions, health and safety reps and employees, develop detailed risk assessment and mitigation plans.

So what should be in these plans? National office suggests four specific measures. All of them are worthwhile as a starting point, so we’ll expand on its list with a few thoughts of our own – for discussion and action in workplaces around the country.

1. Workers who are required to work on campus must be supplied with N95 or equivalent masks.

We agree, and think this should be extended to students. Cloth masks are simply not up to scratch in preventing the spread of Omicron. Surgical masks are much better and N95 or P2 masks, even without fit testing, are significantly better still. Distribution of these masks should be accompanied by an education campaign explaining how their use is crucial – and their use should be required in all indoor spaces.

2. Buildings must be appropriately ventilated with occupancy limits.

Yep. Along with vaccination, ventilation is one of the most crucial measures that can reduce the spread of Covid.

The crucial battle will be over the meaning of “appropriate ventilation” and what the occupancy limits should be. Most universities are trying to fob union branches off with vague reassurances – this is simply not good enough. Some specifics we should be demanding:

- Monitoring of CO2 in all shared workspaces, to give an indication of whether ventilation is sufficient. [SafeWork Australia](#) recommends keeping CO2 to 800 parts per million or less.
- Detailed audits to be provided to HSRs and the union of all work spaces to see if they meet [Australian Standard 1668.2](#) (Mechanical Ventilation), which prescribes ten litres of fresh air per person per second. This is a *minimum* standard in Australia, the UK, and Europe: higher is obviously better.
- Use of [HEPA air filters](#) in all classrooms and shared workspaces – starting with those that don’t meet the ventilation standards above. Victoria and NSW have started rolling these devices out in schools. Some jurisdictions (for instance Chicago, New York and many German cities) mandate an air filter unit in every single classroom. We should be pursuing this as well.

A word on ventilation audits. Obviously there are (or at least, should be) ventilation audits which give detailed written information to HSRs, the union branch and workers, about air flow in litres of fresh air per person per second, air change rates (as per Vic WorkSafe guidance), CO2 levels and so forth.

And then there are “ventilation audits” like the recently revised PR jobs released by the [NSW Education Department](#), which is clearly in the category of totally-made-up-by-management stuff as highlighted by [Covid Safe Schools](#) activist [Natalie Beak](#):

← Thread



Natalie Beak
@NattyBeaks



@NSWEducation have updated their Ventilation Audits & solved capacity problems by "finding more windows". If you compare them, you'll see that room capacities have tripled in some cases & are even less than 1per 1sqm. 76 kids now allowed in one classroom! This 'audit' is a farce.

OLD:

Sick Bay - (10.44 SQM)	● Student Space (4)
Clerical Office - (12.14 SQM)	● Office (3)
Duplicating Workroom - (34.38 SQM)	● Office (8)
Movement - (44.96 SQM)	Not Applicable
Practical Activities - 1hb - (32.61 SQM)	● Student Space (15)
Home Base - (63.58 SQM) - Teaching Space: 1	● Student Space (29)
Withdrawal Space - 1hb - (11.72 SQM)	● Student Space (5)
Home Base - (63.87 SQM) - Teaching Space: 1	● Student Space (29)

NEW:

Sick Bay - (10.44 SQM)	● Student Space (22)
Clerical Office - (12.14 SQM)	● Office (3)
Duplicating Workroom - (34.38 SQM)	● Office (8)
Movement - (44.96 SQM)	Not Applicable
Practical Activities - 1hb - (32.61 SQM)	● Student Space (62)
Home Base - (63.58 SQM) - Teaching Space: 1	● Student Space (88)
Withdrawal Space - 1hb - (11.72 SQM)	● Student Space (16)
Home Base - (63.87 SQM) - Teaching Space: 1	● Student Space (76)

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Somewhere in between are processes like the current audit of classrooms being [conducted at ANU](#). It seems like there is a lot of work "in progress for applicable systems".

But it's less than clear what's involved with a "CO2 setpoint change" (perhaps modifying systems which detect human presence by monitoring CO2 in order to switch on and off, in order to facilitate continuous operation?); or whether "pre and post purge" is a full exchange of air between classes, or between days, or something else; and whether the mere fact of "operable windows" means that the teaching space gets a pass grade for ventilation, regardless of how effective the "operable windows" are in actually exchanging stale, potentially aerosol-laden air with fresh air.

The moral of the tale: don't be fobbed off. Ask the obvious questions. Insist on getting information that will let you assess air flow rates (as per [AS1668.2](#)), air exchange rate (as per Victorian Health Department [guidance](#)), and/or CO2 levels (as per [SafeWork Australia](#)). Buy some CO2 monitors and start to use them. And keep pushing for HEPA filters in any and all shared spaces, starting with the least-ventilated and working out from there.

Keeping us safe by improving air quality will cost money, that management will not want to spend. So we're not going to get it just by asking nicely.

3. Employers must supply rapid antigen tests to employees who are required to work on campus.

This is important, to pick up and isolate as many positive cases as possible – but it's also important to realise the limits of rapid antigen tests. ATAGI has approved units for sale in Australia which have a "false negative" rate of up to 20%. A false negative is most likely early in the infection, when viral load is rising rapidly. So although using rapid tests as screeners will pick up many positive cases, they have to be used frequently, and alongside other safety measures.

School staff and students in Victoria and NSW are being advised to use a rapid test twice weekly. Given the unreliability of the tests, more frequent use (ideally daily) would give a much higher level of safety for everyone on campus.

4. Any worker whose work can be performed from home must be allowed to work away from campus.

This is a crucial measure, both for the individual and because limiting movement is a powerful way of limiting the spread of the virus.

Universities should also ensure that students and staff with symptoms feel safe to stay home and isolate and test. ie, make sure remote/flexible learning and working options are available to all. This will be a huge amount of work if it is to be taken seriously and would have to be accompanied by limits on individuals' workloads.

This raises the issue of remote work (and remote teaching) in general. We think it's reckless to mandate a return to in-person classes with the extremely high rate of transmission in most states at the moment. We've got some notes on this below.

As well as the four measures above proposed by NTEU national office, there are other crucial Covid safety measures which should be discussed and debated in every union branch, and raised with management. We'll list some of the issues here to kick start a discussion.

5. When is it safe to return to campus?

Is it OK to run tutorials when it's virtually guaranteed there will be a positive case in each group of a couple of dozen people? Is it OK to spend an hour in a lecture theatre of 200 people with eight positive cases? If you

work on a counter where a hundred students or staff pass through each day, is it fine that four of those people are Covid positive, for every day of your working week?

We think the answer is no. We think it's sickening – literally – to expect workers with such jobs to work in-person while cases are so high.

These figures are not fanciful. January 16 marked the official peak of the Omicron surge (so far) in New South Wales, with [342,838 “current” cases](#) on that date. Given the total breakdown of Test Trace Isolate and Quarantine procedures, perhaps the cases were double this number – maybe more. Plenty of these cases would be in isolation, but at least as many wouldn't be – those unaware they are carrying an infection, or who fail to test or isolate due to economic pressures or the collapse (and government winding back) of TTIQ.

But on the official figures, about 4% of the entire population of NSW – one in 23 people – was positive on January 16. On 25 January NSW was down to “only” 209,326 active cases – still 1 in 39 of the state's population. The figure in Victoria is 1 in 36.

Add to that scenario the failure to take ventilation seriously, the failure to universally supply and adopt high quality masks, the various layers of inadequacy around vaccination, and we think it's a no brainer: there is no way that anyone should be required to go to work indoors with case numbers like that, especially if there are remote alternatives available.

Exactly what a “safe” threshold is, or a “safe enough” threshold, should be a matter of discussion. If we assume that for every person counted as an “active case” and isolating there is another person who is positive but in the community, a rate of official “active cases” of 1 in 1000 in the population would translate into a dozen people wandering around positive on any given day, on a campus of 12,000 people. NSW passed this metric of one “active case” per thousand population [on 17 December](#), when the state recorded 2,190 new cases to bring total “active” cases above 8,000.

We wouldn't endorse this as “safe” for a disease which is often debilitating and potentially fatal for thousands. But it's a level that at least makes it plausible that regular testing (either rapid testing or pooled PCR testing) would pick these cases up quickly.

That's not the case for another possible metric, of 1 in a 100 of the entire population being an official “active” case. In NSW this milestone was passed on December 31, when 21,138 new cases brought NSW to a total “active” caseload of 89,140. Settling for this metric for a return to “normal” work – assuming that this official number would correspond with the same number positive but not isolating – would mean that instead of 12 cases strolling around positive at our hypothetical 12,000 person campus, we'd have 120 on any given day. Unless TTIQ was exceptional – and it won't be – this means a high level of risk for students and staff, every day.

We're for a detailed and wide-ranging debate on exactly what approach the union should take to this question, both in this current surge and in future ones.

But our bottom line is, case numbers are way too high at this point to be forcing people back on to campus. At the very least, we should be demanding that every significant metric (case numbers, PCR positivity rates,

hospitalisations and deaths) should be falling week on week for a few weeks – rather than surging, or running at anything like the current high levels – before a full return to campus is even considered. And we know that case numbers will be boosted governments’ insistence on the return to classroom teaching in schools.

6. Test, trace, isolate and quarantine

TTIQ was meant to be a crucial part of “managing” Covid – but it’s in a state of total collapse. In recent months, authorities have dropped isolation times for close contacts from 14 days to 10, and then to 7. From November, led by Victoria, they abolished the whole idea of “close contacts” in anything but the home. So you can work at close quarters with a person – even for eight hours in an unventilated broom closet – and not be required to isolate if that person returns a positive test.

From there, it was only a short step to the most recent reckless move approved by national cabinet, abolishing the requirement to isolate at all, even if your housemate is positive. It’s this last move which has finally provoked some outraged reactions from the union movement.

This poses a serious problem in public health terms – and raises the question of what standard of TTIQ we should be pushing for in our workplaces.

Victorian state authorities classify people who spend 15 minutes face to face with a positive case, or two hours in a classroom, as a “workplace or education contact”, who are “strongly recommended” to use daily rapid tests for five days. We think this is too low a standard for such a transmissible and serious virus: one hour in a classroom with a positive case is easily enough for transmission to occur, and should trigger period of isolation.

If we want to keep a lid on cases, restoring a ten day isolation period ([not five days](#)), with a negative test result before return to the workplace, should be a minimum standard.

In addition, we need union oversight of all contact tracing efforts following positive cases. Information on all positive cases on campus (numbers, location, exposure time and date) have to be made public and shared directly with the union and with health and safety reps. All staff and students present in a building with a positive case should be notified.

7. Vaccines

All students and staff should be required to get a third vaccine dose before they return to campus. Victoria has already set a date for all school staff to have their third dose of vaccine. We think this is justified on campuses as well.

8. Covid leave

There has to be paid leave for all staff including casuals for

- A positive case
- "Close contact" (ie household, family positive or workplace case)
- Suspension of work due to Covid

9. Legal minimums

Ensure density limits are adhered to on campus and in offices through training, messaging, signage and leadership. Most states require Covid marshals to monitor compliance with Covid safety standards, and Checkin marshals (a separate role) to ensure that people use the checkin codes to assist with contact notification and tracing.

10. Limit shared workspaces

Reorganising work spaces to avoid crowding together would be another logical step to limit transmission.

In summary, this is quite a log of claims on safety!! We're under no illusion that every one of these claims will be universally popular. But we think they all deserve discussion – and union branches should move aggressively to pursue a raft of these claims, in our opinion, before a return to campus.

4. Not mild, not over, not inevitable: puncturing the myths on Omicron

We're old-fashioned enough to stick to the belief that the aim is, for as few people to catch Covid as possible. Each infection is a roll of the dice in terms of the effects on the [brain](#), other organs and the [immune system](#). Even with the dramatic fall in the death rate over the past year due to vaccination and treatments, Omicron will kill [many times more](#) people than the flu. "Mild" is a [misleading term](#) for individuals, both short and [long term](#), and for the social impact of Omicron.

And no, there's nothing about the virus "going endemic", whatever that is [meant to mean](#), which would [necessarily](#) make [future variants](#) any less [dangerous](#).

All of this is good reason to take Covid very, very seriously. None of it is a reason to give up. Raina MacIntyre and Brendan Crabb argue that it's stopping sustained community transmission is definitely [achievable](#). It will be hard work keeping a serious contest over Covid safety going amid a sea of cases and the brutal triumph of "living with Covid". But the lives and health of many people – those immediately around us and many who we've never met – depend on doing exactly that.

5. Resources for organising on Covid safety

Here's a useful compilation of resources on ventilation, rules and regs, and organising for safety:

<https://bit.ly/3DfcryT>

The UK's University and College Union's [Omicron checklist](#) from mid January is useful, and the World Health Network's [guidance for universities](#) is also worth checking out.

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