

Open letter on health and safety from workers at RMIT

This letter to senior management was initiated by NTEU members at RMIT in mid July. Reproduced here by NTEU Fightback with permission, after removing all names. We think it's a decent example of an open letter, as a way of making health and safety issues a topic of collective discussion and applying pressure on management.

We discuss this document, along with more general points about organising and law regarding health and safety, in *Organising is a matter of life and death: A brief guide to health and safety organising and law, July 20*, also available on the resources page of the NTEU Fightback [website](#).

Open Letter To:

Interim DVC & Vice President DSC, Director Planning & Resources, and DSC College Office Executive,

We appreciate that much work has gone into the current plans for return to campus. However, we are writing to you, as concerned staff and NTEU members, to raise several issues around the procedures and protocols regarding working conditions for staff and students in the semester 2 return to campus.

We advise that you have not implemented an adequate consultation process with affected staff as per Section 34 of the OHS Act 2004.

To our knowledge, the following OHS committees, newly formed in 2019, have never met nor has the official membership formally been established.

Committee 1: A&UD; Art; Design; F&T; M&C; VDSC (meet monthly)

Committee 2: Education; GUSS; PEG; PVC Office (meet quarterly)

We need these committees to be immediately activated and properly functioning. This is particularly critical because of the increased risk posed by the pandemic and now in the light of the latest lockdown in Metropolitan Melbourne. Failure to properly consult with affected staff can attract hefty fines for organisations. Once these committees are activated, we would like to consult on the following issues that are emerging across the DSC College:

- Inconsistent equipment guidelines
- Confusing expectations regarding first aid training and monitoring of others
- Inconsistent communication and lack of College-wide briefings
- Accessing working from home options without retribution
- Conflicting cultures of practice from multiple line managers

- Expectations and availability of PPE and OH&S signage
- Unacceptable and unsupervised afterhours access for learner directed hours
- Developing an informed plan for future lockdowns
- Risks associated with indoor gatherings

Furthermore, aside from the clear health risks of exposure to COVID-19, there are very real mental health concerns for staff feeling compelled to return to campus before they feel safe and in control of their work environment.

As committed and passionate educators we are all very keen to get back to what we love about our work, but this must be done safely and appropriately with sufficient safeguards in place. Staff performing duties on campus need to have agency in how they are engaging with those duties and spaces.

We remind you that low job control, poor support, poor organisational justice, low role clarity and poor workplace relationships are workplace hazards that, according to WorkSafe Australia, can lead to mental injury at work. It is important to make sure appropriate people are responsible where their expertise is most valuable. We do not want a repeat of the hotel quarantine situation.

We look forward to your swift response.

Your sincerely,

Details of required actions; from staff due to return to campus in semester 2:

The focus of this document is more on the area of technical workshops, loans stores and lab teaching, this is because technicians are returning to campus first and most imminently. We'd like to stress that these concerns relate also to academic and professional staff. The following provides the key concern and a required solution:

Lack of consultation

1a- While some of us feel we have been adequately consulted and have relationships with line managers conducive to responding to our concerns, many of us don't. In some instances there has been no consultation with workers in these spaces when formulating these procedures. The lack of consultation and the lack of proper communication of these decisions is creating an environment of fear and anxiety. It seems too many RTC documents and approvals have been done by people who never work in the spaces concerned.

1b- The workers in each facility must be consulted and have final sign off for risk mitigation controls on procedures and the timescales of any return to campus and this being made possible without fear of retribution. Technicians in spaces are to assess and decide room capacities themselves, too many capacity caps have been decided by people working from floorplans who do not work in the spaces

involved. We insist on having the individual power to shut down our work area and reassess the safety protocols at any time.

Inconsistent Equipment Guidelines

2a- There's significantly inconsistent guidelines for the handling of equipment, materials, books, machinery, hardware and AV Equipment. Some workshops have all equipment being shared. The length of quarantine of equipment varies from 24 hours to one week. There seems to be no scientific support to the safety of these shorter timeframes.

2b- A clear and scientifically backed standard procedure for the handling of any items either shared or loaned. A rule of minimum contact with returned equipment, a minimum 72 hour quarantine before the equipment is cleaned and reloaned or reused. Any staff member has the provision to lengthen this time, but there must be a universal minimum taking into account the particular risk of each item. If demonstrating equipment to either students or to other staff for training purposes cannot be done safely to the technicians satisfaction, it cannot happen.

Mandatory First Aid and Monitoring Others

3a- Some staff have been directed to obtain mandatory First Aid training. This will effectively mean that these workers are being asked to be responsible for things that are way outside their normal remit. Some of these staff are not comfortable in taking on the responsibility and legal liability of first aid training. Many students and some staff are ignoring the guidelines. Some of us have been directed to report these incidents. While sometimes this is appropriate and the maintenance of a safe workspace is within our duties, it is not the role of staff to be policing students or each other. Reporting on other staff raises complications with morale and sustaining positive work relationships. We are also being asked to monitor and track students and how long they are in spaces. Some areas are telling students they are responsible for cleaning their own equipment and while it's important students learn best practices in this area, this poses a risk to other students because there's no way of insuring it has been done properly.

3b- Not compelling any unwilling staff to undergo first aid training. Have sufficient security staff on site whose role first aid already involves. Employing well trained external staff to monitor and keep records of which students are in spaces and advising on social distancing. And monitoring controls that have been implemented.

Inconsistent Communication

4a- Inconsistent or non-existent communication from managers about student numbers, return to campus timelines and intended uses of spaces. The message keeps shifting which is creating anxiety.

4b- Clear and regular communications from the college and HR that is consistent across different schools and workgroups.

Working from Home Flexibility

5a- There has been an inconsistency in messaging around staff being able to voluntarily work from home. Initially staff were told it was up to them if they didn't feel safe returning to work, but are now being compelled to return to campus. This is particularly perplexing at times when there's postcode hotspots or the current Melbourne metropolitan lockdown, for those in areas under higher lockdown restrictions. This is creating a double standard that discriminates against staff in workshop environments.

5b- All academic and professional staff can elect to work from home under their own conscience without fear of retribution.

Multiple Line Management

6a- Some workshops and support staff service different schools and cohorts and essentially have conflicting line management. In the current environment it is untenable and impossible to maintain consistent safety in shared spaces.

6b- Student facing staff that maintain shared facilities have a single line of management. Technicians in spaces to do schedules, to eliminate conflicting requests.

PPE and Signage

7a- There's been inconsistent messaging about the supply of PPE equipment, such as Masks, Gloves and Sanitiser for staff. There are irregularities in the quality of some of the PPE already onsite because different areas scabbled to purchase items and bought whatever was available. These concerns also include oversight of signage, social distancing taping, signs line marking, stickers on floors for direction of travel. Some areas have had their credit cards frozen which leads to a 3-4 week turn around with purchase orders, where staff need PPE immediately.

7b- Centralized, approved and consistent PPE supplies and protocols with signage and information. In the meantime, reinstate frozen credit cards for emergency PPE.

Unsupervised Afterhours Access

8a- Some areas involved in self-directed learning have been approved for afterhours access to students. This poses great risks in the way that these spaces can be monitored.

8b- Restricting access to when there are responsible staff members onsite. Unsupervised students in studios is untenable in the current environment.

Preparation for Future Lockdowns

9a- The first shutdown on the 23rd March happened so quickly that many staff were insufficiently equipped to work from home.

9b- Prioritising a plan for another shutdown so all staff have what they need to optimally work from home.

Risks of Indoor Gatherings

10a- The new developments in the literature have found that aerosols have a much more significant role in the spread of COVID-19 and that groups gathered indoors that are practicing good hygiene and social distancing are still at risk of infection. There has also not been clear communications on how access will be coordinated into buildings and whether normal swipe access will be operational.

10b- Reassessing the approvals for activated spaces. Putting limits on the number of students interacting by creating groups of students that only interact with those in their group. Minimising movement between spaces by assigning staff to one space and ensure line managers don't present a risk of contamination between staff groups by limiting movement between locations. We need clear communications regarding access to buildings.