

Canada

One professor fired, others face discipline as universities enforce soon-to-expire vaccine mandates

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The province has told universities they no longer need to have [COVID-19](#) vaccination policies — but at least one university is still terminating employees who were not compliant.

The University of Waterloo fired at least one professor this week and, along with McMaster University, is still proceeding with disciplinary action against employees for not being vaccinated.

Meanwhile, Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Guelph placed non-compliant staff and faculty on unpaid leaves of absence and once proof of vaccination is no longer required, the former plans to invite employees

back to work, while the latter says cases will be individually assessed

As Ontario eases public health restrictions — this week it lifted mandatory [masking requirements](#) in most public spaces — universities are navigating what to do about their own policies and those impacted by them.

“Publicly assisted universities and colleges in Ontario are separate legal entities responsible for developing policies and procedures to govern their institution’s academic and administrative matters,” said James Tinajero, spokesperson for the Ministry of Colleges and Universities. That includes implementing health and safety measures on their campuses, he said.

“Given this, the minister does not direct or intervene in institution decisions related to their vaccination policies.”

Before the school year began, Ontario’s universities implemented mandatory vaccination policies requiring students, staff and faculty on campus to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, unless they were exempt. At some schools, action against those who didn’t follow the rules amounted to unpaid leave, while at others it led to termination.

In recent weeks, the province relaxed restrictions as part of its reopening plan and on March 1, the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health said post-secondary institutions no longer need to have vaccination policies. But universities and colleges opted to maintain their vaccination and masking policies until at least the end of the current winter term to minimize uncertainty and disruption for students and staff.

In recent days, schools such as the [University of Waterloo](#), [Wilfrid Laurier University](#), [McMaster University](#), and the [University of Guelph](#) have indicated they will pause masking and vaccination requirements on May 1 for the spring/summer session. Meanwhile, schools such as Queen’s University, the University of Toronto, Western University, Ryerson University and York University have not announced changes.

The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations — the voice of 17,000 university faculty and academic librarians — says it’s concerned

decisions about health and safety on campus continue to be made without proper consultation with faculty.

“Decisions about what happens beyond May 1, when universities have signalled that many safeguards will be lifted, must be made with the guidance of local public health authorities and the involvement of institutional joint health and safety committees,” said Sue Wurtele, president of OCUFA.

As first reported by the [Waterloo Region Record](#), the University of Waterloo this week fired Michael Palmer, a chemistry professor who has worked there for more than two decades, because he chose not to get vaccinated. The Record also noted it was aware of at least two other professors, and one lecturer, facing termination.

Although the province revoked its instruction to universities, and its own rules on vaccination will change in a month’s time, the University of Waterloo says it’s important to continue ongoing disciplinary action.

“If an employee has been insubordinate repeatedly, it doesn’t matter if the situation changes. That was their behaviour at a particular point in time,” university President and Vice-Chancellor Vivek Goel told the Star.

“If you’re not able to use discipline to enforce your workplace rules, it puts you in a challenging position in the future when you have some other situation where you need to have employees follow certain rules ... We gave people lots of notice, over months of communications that this was going to be our requirement in our workplace. And at the time, those individuals did not comply.”

Goel noted that some people have already been terminated from the university, so it would not be appropriate to suddenly change the process for some because of timing.

A university spokesperson would not disclose how many staff and faculty are still facing a disciplinary process for not being vaccinated, but said it’s a handful. The process involves a series of escalating suspensions, beginning

with paid leave, then unpaid leave, and then termination. As of March 24, Waterloo had terminated 49 staff and faculty for not being vaccinated. It has approved medical and creed-based accommodations for 123 students and 47 employees.

Meanwhile at McMaster, as of March 25, less than 50 regular full- and part-time employees had been terminated for violating the vaccination policy. There is still one employee facing disciplinary action for not complying with the vaccine mandate.

At Laurier and the University of Guelph, no one was fired for non-compliance, but they were put on an unpaid leave of absence. Laurier says those with active contracts will be invited back to work in-person on May 1. Meanwhile at Guelph, the roughly 40 non-compliant employees have been told their situations will be addressed individually by their supervisors.

York University says its policy states that employees who are required on campus, and are not compliant with the university's vaccination mandate, "may be placed on full or partial unpaid leave of absence."

When asked if any on a leave of absence would be called back to work, a spokesperson said, York is "carefully reviewing evolving government and public health guidance as part of our decision-making for the summer term and beyond."

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