

A summary of the decision to suspend vaccination requirement and instead to facilitate COVID-19 vaccination for staff and students

Made by Professor Deborah Terry AO, UQ Vice-Chancellor and President on 13 April 2022

On 20 December 2021, I made a decision that required staff, students and most others attending UQ locations to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

To support the requirement, UQ developed a COVID-19 vaccination procedure, and committed to reviewing the risk assessment by the end of March 2022.

At the time the initial risk assessment was prepared, the COVID-19 situation was significantly different. COVID-19 vaccination rates and infection rates in Queensland were low. Delta was the dominant variant and the Omicron variant was just emerging.

The situation now is very different, Omicron is the dominant variant. Queensland's population is now more than 91.9% fully vaccinated (two COVID-19 vaccines) and 62.5% have had a third dose. Severe illness from COVID-19 is much lower than forecast. State and Federal Governments have systematically reduced restrictions on the community, including the recent decision by the Queensland Government to remove the requirement to be vaccinated to attend a range of locations including restaurants and cafes, galleries, libraries and museums from 14 April 2022.

It is anticipated that further easing of restrictions will allow the virus to circulate, albeit amongst a highly vaccinated population.

It is also anticipated that within the next six months there will be an emergence of another variant that dominates Omicron. In addition, there has been virtually no influenza (flu) season in Queensland for the past two years and a more severe than usual flu season is predicted this year.

The Expert Advisory Group identified a significant reduction in vaccine effectiveness against transmissibility and hospitalisation for the Delta and Omicron variants, unless boosters are received.

In addition, a population that is 'up-to-date' vaccinated (two vaccinations plus additional booster vaccinations) would be well placed to combat the possible emergence of a new variant.

The Federal and State Governments, and the community more generally, are learning to live with COVID-19.

I have now been asked to consider a revised risk assessment, that considers the risks of COVID-19 in this context. I have also considered advice from the Expert Advisory Group.

Because boosters extend the effectiveness of the vaccinations, the revised risk assessment identifies booster vaccinations as an additional control that can be introduced to further reduce the risk of transmission of, and the prevalence of serious illness or death from, COVID-19 at UQ locations.

Based on current evidence, the benefits of vaccination far outweigh the risks of vaccination, particularly in times of high community transmission and in older age groups.

Close to 97% of continuing and fixed term staff and 97% of students are now fully vaccinated (having had two doses). I am confident that with encouragement and support, the large majority of staff and students will continue to receive their booster vaccinations as they become due.

The current vaccination requirement at UQ required people to receive two vaccinations to be considered fully vaccinated.

It is apparent that with Omicron, two vaccinations are not sufficient at reducing transmission and hospitalisations, and that a booster is required. As the vaccination requirement was focused on two doses of the vaccine, given that vaccine efficacy wanes over time, suspending the requirement will not make a substantive difference to transmission rates.

Given the lifting of restrictions by State and Federal Governments, to mandate boosters would place UQ significantly out of step with current government directions and restrictions now in place. I think a more balanced approach is for UQ to treat COVID-19 vaccinations in the same way as it does with flu vaccinations.

In making my decision, I have considered feedback from consultation about the revised risk assessment and the proposal to suspend the vaccination requirement with Health and Safety Representatives and Consultative Committees, the Joint Consultative Committee (including the NTEU) and the UQU.

It is clear to me that some in our community support the suspension of the vaccination requirement, whilst others do not, remaining anxious about their health and that of vulnerable people from the prospect of unvaccinated people again attending campus.

I consider that a decision to suspend the vaccination requirement is compatible with human rights.

In conclusion, after consideration of all the material before me, I have decided to suspend the requirement that all staff, students and most others must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 to attend UQ locations. Instead, UQ will actively promote the benefits of being 'up-to-date' with their vaccinations (including receiving booster vaccinations) and will strongly encourage, educate and facilitate staff and students to receive their COVID-19 vaccinations when they are due.

To support this decision, the existing vaccination procedure will be suspended from 3 May 2022. If UQ's operating environment changes again, the procedure could be reinstated if required.

Other additional control measures proposed in the revised risk assessment about encouraging flu vaccinations and improved ventilation measures will also be adopted. UQ will also continue to implement its other existing control measures.

I note that there may be activities where UQ may still require staff or students to have 'up-to-date' vaccinations, such as for international travel. Any such activities will be assessed on a case-by-case basis and will be based on inherent risks of those activities.

This proposed suspension of the vaccination requirement would not affect the requirements for individuals subject to Public Health Directions who will still be required to comply with any applicable vaccination directions or requirements.

I understand that some in our community will be anxious about my decision to suspend the vaccination requirement. I want to assure you that other control measures remain in place and that support with the transition will be provided for staff and students - particularly for the vulnerable members of our community.

This decision will take effect on **3 May 2022**.