

March 11, 2020

OPEN LETTER TO UNIVERSITY LEADERS

Dear colleagues,

We write to you as concerned scientists, and citizens. As you know, COVID-19, the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, is rapidly spreading in most parts of the world. We're in the beginning of a pandemic. Because the population has no natural immunity to this virus, and because we currently have no vaccines to prevent its transmission, epidemiological models and our experience with earlier pandemics strongly suggest that large parts of the population could be infected - unless strong action is taken.

As university leaders, you are responsible for your amazing community of students, scientists, and staff. Your campus is likely highly international, and generally a wonderful place of many close interactions along which knowledge and ideas can spread. Unfortunately, however, close physical interactions are also what SARS-CoV-2 uses to transmit itself from one person to the others.

By now, you have undoubtedly heard of the need to "flatten the curve" - that is, to hamper the growth of new cases as much as possible, for as long as possible. This is important for two main reasons. The first reason is that the fewer number of new cases we see, the less burden there will be on your healthcare systems. The second reason is that any delay in this epidemic provides valuable time during which treatments and / or vaccines can be developed and tested.

Any epidemiological intervention has tradeoffs, and nobody likes to interrupt the normal day-to-day operations. But universities are in a particular situation in that knowledge can also be exchanged digitally. Thus, even though a temporary move to online classes may bring some inconveniences, the overall costs are relatively low. On the other side, however, the epidemiological consequences of not assembling hundreds and thousands of people can potentially prevent transmissions on your campuses, and thus save lives. Most of your community members are young and healthy, and the health consequences of COVID-19 will be minimal for them. But all of our concern should be for the elderly, and those already ill. It is the duty of all of us to make sure there are as few cases as possible in order to minimize their exposure.

We understand that you are in constant consultation with your local health authorities. We don't mean to interfere with this process. We simply want to provide you with an epidemiological perspective. The data are very clear – many countries in Europe and in other parts of the world currently show exponential growth in COVID-19 cases. Without action, and given the immunological considerations stated above, this growth will continue until a considerable proportion of the population will have been infected. And with any exponential growth, it is better to act early than late, as the situation will get more and more concerning by the day.

We thus urge you to take action now, and limit or prevent dense assembly on your campuses. We recognize that you may already have implemented some measures, and we of course understand that these decisions are not taken lightly. But time is of the essence. As you have probably heard, your colleagues in some of the world's most known universities have already taken such action. Rather than expressing any concrete recommendations here, we invite you to talk to them and consult their (typically publicly available) action plans in order to develop plans adjusted to your unique situation.

We also urge you to consider additional actions for those groups in your communities that cannot readily fall back on existing alternatives and infrastructures.

We thank you for your attention, and we wish you and your communities much strength in the challenging times ahead. Nature has given us a challenge – science and smart policy can tackle it.

With very best wishes,

Signed:

Prof. Marcel Salathé, EPFL, Geneva, Switzerland

PD Dr. Christian L. Althaus, University of Bern, Switzerland

Prof. Jacques Fellay, EPFL, CHUV & UNIL, Lausanne, Switzerland

Prof. Richard Neher, University of Basel, Switzerland

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For a full list of signatures please see:

<https://github.com/COVID-universities/open-letter>