

University students with disabilities, accessibility, and the “return to normal”

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Although many Canadian university students are eager for the [in-person elements of the university experience](#) that they missed during the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, what might we overlook in the rush to “return to normal”?

The [pandemic forced universities to re-evaluate their delivery of classes](#) and other services, including incorporating new technologies for remote teaching and building in flexibility to respond to an unpredictable situation that could impact students and instructors in a variety of ways.

After two years of innovation, if the main lesson universities take away from the on-going pandemic is that students miss being on campus, we are at risk of squandering investments made in new skills, technology, and insights that are of broad value.

Because disability is likely to be more rather than less common as we move forward -- given that we are in the midst of a [mass disabling event](#) -- our research team wondered what students with disabilities could tell us about what makes university classes, services, and environments more and less accessible to them, and in that broader context, what pandemic modifications they would like to see continued. Their insights highlight pandemic modifications and practices that can benefit a wide range of students.

Our case study

As part of Western University’s [Undergraduate Summer Research Internship](#) program, during summer 2022 three student researchers and two Anthropology professors, all with close personal connections to disabilities, co-designed and carried out research to better understand the accessibility experiences and insights of students who identify as having a disability at Western. While the research took place at Western, the findings are more broadly relevant – as one student stated clearly, accessibility at “Western is better than other universities I’ve attended.”

Our aim was to gather information about the impact – both positive and negative – of everyday practices and decisions of instructors and others at the university. We looked for insights from students with a range of disabilities, to generate resources to share with relevant groups on campus.

Our recruitment email was sent out to all students on campus, with the request that only students who identify as having a disability participate. Eighty survey responses were received, and 16 students asked for an interview because they had more information to share. Both the

survey and interviews included open-ended questions so that students could themselves identify practices that enhanced or hindered accessibility in their specific circumstances. We sought not to secure a representative sample, but rather to gain insight into some disabled students' lived experiences.

For context, in [Western's 2021-22 Equity Census](#) (to which not all responded), almost 10% of student respondents indicated they have a disability. This seems low, given that across the country one quarter of university students graduating in 2021 reported having a disability, on the [2021 Graduating Student Survey from the Canadian University Survey Consortium](#). In 2017, [Statistics Canada](#) found that 22% of the Canadian population aged 15 years and over had one or more disabilities.

[Who participated in our research?](#)

Every Faculty on campus is represented among our survey responses, with 60% coming from undergraduate students and 40% from graduate students. Among the respondents, about 75% have a diagnosed disability, while the remainder have both diagnosed and undiagnosed disabilities (about 20%) or do not have a diagnosis (about 5%). This may partially explain the finding that about a third of our respondents are not registered with the Accessible Education office. As one student noted, a formal diagnosis of their disability costs about \$3,000, while another said the waitlist to see a specialist to get a diagnosis for their condition is 2.5 years.

Many survey respondents have multiple disabilities. While non-disabled people may think first of physical disabilities (like mobility impairment) or sensory disabilities (like hearing or vision impairment) when they hear "disability," physical/functional disabilities and sensory ones were respectively only 19% and 11% of the disabilities that affect those who answered our survey. More students identified mental health conditions (almost 35% of conditions identified) and cognitive or learning disabilities (just over 35%).

This helps contextualize one of our most striking results. In response to the question of whether their disability is visible or non-apparent (invisible), only 2 of 80 respondents indicated that their disability is visible, while another 17 have both visible and non-apparent disabilities. The remaining 61 consider their disability to be non-apparent. As one student explained, "Due to the way I present myself to others and the ways in which I manage my disabilities, it often appears as though I do not have any disabilities unless I am experiencing acute symptoms. This can result in a need to explain my disabilities." Another added: "It seems like I have to qualify my struggles more often and justify a need for support to a degree that seems unwarranted."

[Most accessible teaching practices](#)

Survey respondents were asked to rate 14 teaching practices for their importance in deepening accessibility. While responses varied, there were clear accessibility "winners" among the practices listed. Many of them were precisely those whose use was expanded during the pandemic, and indeed several were identified elsewhere on the survey as pandemic adjustments students hope will be retained.

The top-rated practices, in order, were:

1. [Flexible assignment deadlines](#)
2. [Captioning of videos](#)
3. Lecture slides posted in advance to facilitate note taking
4. [Course documents/readings formatted for accessibility](#)
5. Breaks during in-person classes

Next ranked practices that contributed to accessibility make an interesting pair:

6. Availability of asynchronous online classes; followed immediately by
7. Availability of in-person classes

This highlights that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution for disabled students. Synchronous (real-time) remote delivery fell well below the above two options, for reasons including: discomfort with having to turn on cameras, lack of captioning, and inability to replay lectures to confirm understanding (easily resolved by recording and captioning these sessions).

Students – especially those subject to symptom flare-ups – were grateful when they could choose between in-person and recorded options depending on how they felt on a given day (easily instituted by simply pressing ‘record audio’ when a PowerPoint presentation was started). They also valued being able to look back over recorded sessions even if they attended in person. Some needed the possibility of speeding up or slowing down the recording to match their own processing speeds. Access to these options for all students de-densifies the classroom, an advantage during a pandemic.

[Access fatigue](#)

“Access fatigue” is the exhaustion that comes from constantly having to explain your accessibility needs and ask for help to meet them.

In our survey, 19.5% of students said they “always” experience this, and another 19.5% experience this fatigue at least once a week. A further 22% experience it once or twice a month, bringing these responses together up to over 60%.

In other words, disabled students are paying something like a “[crip tax](#),” but in time and energy (sometimes money, too). This is likely increased by the large number of students who “don’t look” disabled.

Students reported having to negotiate their accessibility needs repeatedly and to disclose private information (sometimes even to classmates) – and this is despite the additional flexibility provided during the pandemic. We can reasonably expect this fatigue to increase as we “return to normal,” if that means eliminating some of the flexibility baked in to course design and delivery for all students during COVID-19.

Final thoughts

Our findings align with [another recent Ontario study about safe return to campus](#), which highlighted that “Disabled students have told us that over the pandemic, they experienced access to university education in ways that did not exist pre-pandemic through virtual access, lectures being recorded and deadlines being more flexible.”

“The pandemic’s disruption show[ed] how much academia could learn from the disability community,” as [disabled scholar Ashley Shew argued in the journal Nature in May 2020](#). Like [curb cuts that improve life for a wide range of people](#), we hope that insights shared with us by students with a range of disabilities and experiences on campus will help contribute to a more accessible and welcoming environment for all students.

Let’s use the pandemic experience to be better, more equitable, and more inclusive, now that we have gained so many new skills in how to do so.