MAKE EDUCATION ACCESSIBLE AT POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

INTRODUCTION

Our education system is failing to cultivate an accessible learning environment for its students. This inaccessibility persists despite claiming to have values of equity and inclusivity within post-secondary academic institutions across BC. The rigid nature of postsecondary education – such as in-person-only lectures, inflexible attendance policies, inappropriate and ineffective accommodations, and lack of inclusive teaching supports – disproportionately affects vulnerable populations across campuses. Amongst the most affected groups are disabled[1] students, neurodivergent[2] students, parenting students, international students and low-income students.

The CUSC-CCREU reports that 31% of Canadian first-year university students self-identified as having a disability (2022). This figure is likely underestimated as it doesn't account for those who chose not to disclose their disability status. Despite this, many BC-based colleges and universities have not yet initiated concrete steps to address the barriers faced by disabled students. The Access4All campaign aims to mitigate these barriers, promote genuine equity, and bridge the accessibility gap in post-secondary education.

Accessible learning formats benefit a wide variety of students. For example, lecture recordings are shown to support disabled students' learning (Nightingale et al., 2019) and help to "attenuate the challenging aspects of lecture environments" (Hall & Ivaldi, 2017). Students with disabilities report preferring the greater control granted by online lectures

(Kotera et al., 2019). A systematic literature review of 71 journal articles found that students, regardless of disability status, "almost unanimously voice their support in favour of lecture capture" (Banerjee, 2021). In particular, students with English as an additional language are likely to find recorded lectures extremely valuable (Leadbeater et al., 2013). Students currently struggling through the BC housing crisis would likely benefit from these accessible learning formats[3]. The implementation of hybrid, mixed and online courses benefit not only disabled students, but other subpopulations such as international students and students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In order to ensure true accessibility in classrooms, lecture recordings should be implemented in combination with Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL is a widely-accepted and empirically-backed approach to education, emphasising the importance of fostering multiple forms of engagement and facilitating learning on an individual level (CAST, 2018). This approach has been shown to aid in the education of students while also demonstrating long-term positive outcomes for educators (Xie & Rice, 2021). Despite this, the full implementation of UDL at BC post-secondary institutions is few and far between.

The response by BC post-secondary institutions to the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that adaptations to the delivery of education for the well-being, health, and safety of all students is achievable (Ono, 2020; Cassels, 2020; Petter, 2020). This has proved that creating and implementing accessible learning methods and materials is a feasible and worthwhile process. However, the BC government's and post-secondary institutions' strict adherence to in-person courses is counter-productive and erases recent progress towards accessible education (Kang, 2021). We call on BC post-secondary institutions to prioritize accessible learning formats: it is a necessary step towards inclusivity and equitable access to higher education.

OUR AIMS

1. Accessible Course Formats
   a. Promoting online, hybrid, and multi-access course options
   b. Integrating UDL into faculty curricula
   c. Increasing technological and TA support for professors
   d. Hosting faculty training opportunities for accessible learning formats
2. Disability-Friendly Policy
   a. Creation of a Disability Task Force[4]
   b. Allowing flexible attendance
   c. Improving the disability accommodation process for students

DEFINITIONS

Accessibility Fund. A new budget item to finance, where necessary, the implementation of alternative solutions to UDL-informed Online, Hybrid or Multi-access attendance options to reduce academic consequences to a student's absence.

Accommodation for Students with Disabilities. Institution-specific policies and guidelines used in arranging and assigning accommodations to students with disabilities.

Institutions. Any Canadian post-secondary institution and the governing bodies within such institutions.

Hybrid. The course activity has a mixture of mandatory in-person and online activities as designed by the instructor.

Multi-Access. The course activity gives students the choice to attend either in person or online, as designed by the instructor.

Online. The course activity is fully online and does not require any in-person attendance to complete.

Policy Development Committee. A group of community shareholders who develop proposed amendments for an Institution-specific policy and prepare a draft proposal in which its recommendations will be implemented.

Punitive Attendance Policies. Any academic policy or procedure based on in-person participation or attendance that negatively affects a student's overall grade. This includes regulations implemented by the department and within faculty-specific circumstances.

Students with Disabilities. Any post-secondary student who experiences (1) a significant and persistent mobility, sensory, learning, or other physical or mental health impairment, (2) functional restrictions or limitations of their ability to perform the range of life's activities; and (3) may experience attitudinal and/or environmental barriers that hamper their full and self‑directed participation in post-secondary activities.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

We call upon the BC Government and Post-Secondary Institutions to act upon the following nine (9) recommendations:

1. That Institutions ensure all required classes, labs and tutorials in all faculties are offered with UDL-informed Online[5], Hybrid, or Multi-access course sections. In circumstances where achieving such options are completely impractical or interfere

with essential learning outcomes of the course, alternative solutions should be implemented by the instructor in collaboration with their department, funded by a central, institutional Accessibility Fund, to reduce academic consequences to a student's absence. We call on provincial and federal legislatures to alter legal mandates where necessary to facilitate this recommendation.

2. That Institutions provide ample support for professors and teaching assistants navigating these modes of delivery, including but not limited to providing technical support and teaching assistant support; and supporting the intellectual property rights of faculty members when implementing these modes of delivery.

3. That Institutions require graduate students' oversight body (i.e., College of Graduate Studies/Faculty of Graduate Studies) to provide guidance to, and clear policy for, graduate students and graduate student supervisors outlining their options for accessible learning and research, including providing financial support for graduate students to access necessary accommodations.

4. That Institutions join the Access4All campaign in lobbying their respective governments for continuous funding to support Students with Disabilities, including additional support for Online, Hybrid and Multi-access courses.

5. That Institutions supports faculty who choose to teach online courses instead of in-person, and to give priority to disabled faculty to teach online courses. Additionally, Institutions must clearly state which professors are recording their lectures and the mode of lecture delivery on their respective student service platforms and in the class syllabi for all courses in all departments.

6. That Institutions reinstate or introduce training for appropriate lecture capture technology, host annual UDL faculty workshops, and adequately compensate professors and teaching assistants for attending. In addition, these changes must be documented with benchmarks and yearly progress reports.

7. That Punitive Attendance Policies be eliminated unless completely impractical and/or are essential to learning outcomes of the course[6]. In those circumstances, alternative solutions should be implemented to reduce academic consequences to a student's absence, such as the use of UDL learning approaches, which center on engagement rather than in-person presence.

8. That Institutions announce a public strategic plan with concrete steps and objectives in order to dismantle ableist structures at their establishments and commit to implementing systemic changes to support disabled students and faculty, such as:
   a. the creation of a 'Disability Task Force', led by and for the disability community.

   b. a full policy consultation of their respective policies on Accommodation for Students with Disabilities by 2025, with disabled students or members from relevant campus disability collectives making up a large majority (80% at the minimum) of the Policy Development Committee; and commit to implementing the aforementioned committee's recommendations.

 9. That Institutions provide free face masks at building entrances or at designated pick-up points and commit to applying for funding to secure adequate PPE for their campus communities.

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APPENDIX

1. We acknowledge that the disability community encompasses diverse beliefs and practices in terms of language and identity, such as using person-centered ("person with a disability") or identity-first language ("disabled person"). Due to this fact, we have chosen to use both interchangeably in order to represent as many facets of the community as possible.
2. Learn more about 'Neurodivergence' [here](#).

3. Current economic conditions have put a significant strain on students' ability to live on or near campuses. In a survey comprising 18,513 students across Canada, results found that student renters generally pay a higher rent than all other renter households. This gap is most prevalent in Ontario and British Columbia, where it reaches almost +57% (or $722) and +31% (or $400), respectively. This highlights the financial impact of housing costs on students, especially those in BC (Gherbi-Rahal et al., 2022). This housing affordability crisis in BC has led to low enrolment numbers at universities such as UVic, VIU and Camosun College. In turn, this has led to widespread budget cuts across almost all departments and services (Linsley, 2023). Increased access to online, hybrid and mixed-learning formats within universities or colleges can lead to increased enrolment rates, since some students may not otherwise be able to attend university or college. Access4All benefits academic institutions financially. But most importantly, it increases disabled and non-disabled student satisfaction and creates accessible campuses.

4. See Disability Affinity Group on their work for a UBC 'Disability Task Force' here.

5. See article for examples on successful UDL implementation in online learning environments here.

6. Attendance policies indirectly target vulnerable populations including, but not limited to, disabled students (Birdwell & Bayley, 2022), nontraditional students, and parenting students, many of whom cannot regularly attend in-person classes. Attendance policies may additionally lead to students and faculty risking exposure to illness, as students who are ill are more likely to come to class to avoid losing marks, putting others at risk. Furthermore, research suggests that attendance policies do not improve either course performance or attendance itself (Rendleman, 2017).