



UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' COUNCIL POSITION PAPER ON **STUDENT ACCESSIBILITY**



Legislative History

Approved by Council 2023

To be reviewed by Council in its 2025-2026 sitting

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The University of Western Ontario is located on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Lunaapeewak and Attawandaron peoples, who have long-standing relationships to the land and region of southwestern Ontario and the City of London. The local First Nation communities of this area include Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Oneida Nation of the Thames, and Munsee Delaware Nation. In the region, there are eleven First Nation communities and a growing Indigenous urban population. Western University values the significant historical and contemporary contributions of local and regional First Nations and all of the Original peoples of Turtle Island (North America).

To learn more about these Indigenous communities and how you can best be an ally, please refer to the London & Middlesex Indigenous Culture Card. For more information about land acknowledgments, please refer to the article “Rethinking the Practice and Performance of Indigenous Land Acknowledgment” by Robinson et al. A land acknowledgment is an important step in recognizing colonial history but should by no means be the full extent to which we acknowledge and support indigenous communities.



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INTRODUCTION

The University Students' Council (USC) commissioned and ratified this paper on student accessibility as part of their 2022-2023 year. The authors began by consulting with students and reviewing existing survey data, and then used this information to build a set of recommendations that, if implemented, would improve the accessibility of Western's education for students both with and without disabilities.

Students agree that The Center for Teaching and Learning's focus on Universal Design for Learning principles creates positive change in the classroom. The USC encourages Western to continue this work through more targeted initiatives, including creating a transparent set of accommodations to be used in the classroom for the benefit of all students.

Students report that accessing academic accommodations can be a confusing and stressful experience. In order to mitigate this concern, the USC recommends decreasing the ratio of academic counsellors to students, and to provide more direct engagement for first year students so that they understand the process of requesting an accommodation early in their time at Western.

The physical environment at Western can pose a barrier to some students, and the USC requests an accessibility audit to better understand the realities for those students. For neurodivergent students, sensory friendly spaces would be a benefit and could be considered as part of the audit process.

Finally, as society's understanding of neurodivergence continues to grow, it would be beneficial to ensure that staff and faculty at Western continue to develop their own understanding of neurodivergence and ways to accommodate the needs of neurodivergent students.

While the recommendations in this paper are largely aimed at supporting students with disabilities, principles of Universal Design can benefit all students, creating a strong foundation of academic excellence and a supportive learning environment.



STUDENT CONSULTATIONS

To develop this report, the University Students' Council's Accessibility Committee was consulted to provide a student perspective concerning the challenges that students with disabilities face at Western University. This committee is made up of 20+ student volunteers, who are passionate about advocacy for students with disabilities at Western. Information from this committee was compared against our research and other data sets, and helped inform the recommendations presented in this paper. Additionally, feedback from the *USC Accessibility Survey Preliminary Results* was used to help create these recommendations, which was conducted in the 2020-2021 academic year.

LIMITATIONS

It's important to note that the recommendations proposed in this report are based on student consultations from the Accessibility Committee as well as the *USC Accessibility Survey Preliminary Results* from 2022-2023. Accessibility concerns are constantly evolving and thus this report is a flexible document that may change given new developments regarding students with disabilities at Western University.



RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1

Academic Policy on Accessibility

Principle: Students should receive an accessible, barrier-free education.

Concern: The quality of a students' accommodation is contingent on their ability to self-advocate.

Recommendation: Western University should fully implement universal design for learning so that students are not reliant on accommodations in order to successfully navigate post secondary education.

Recommendation: Western should create a terms of reference outlining professors' requirements to include accessible instruction methods in their classroom (example: live closed captioning).

With 60% of students at Western University identifying as a student with a disability, it is imperative that the university's academic policy supports their needs. Students should be able to thrive academically in a barrier-free and accessible environment. This reality, however, is not achieved by Western University's Policy on Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities.

One challenge students with disabilities in the Western community face is receiving standard accommodations from professors. Although some students have their accommodations formally listed on their file, some professors use their own discretion when providing accommodations. This process also requires students to disclose their disability with their professors to access support, which can be both uncomfortable, personal, and unnecessary. One neurodivergent student talked about their experience with professors in class and shared that they struggle with receiving the accommodations they have on file in relation to class attendance and assignment deadlines. The student shared that, "the biggest barrier to this is professors' understanding of Accessibility at Western and their willingness to comply with the needs I have registered. They typically treat me as if I am lying about my disability or that I shouldn't be able to access the accommodations I have registered for because not all students have them. There is a very outdated bias on what disability is and means throughout faculty members, and there needs to be better training for staff and faculty."¹ By focusing attention on providing additional training to professors, Western can create more accepting, knowledgeable, and supportive

¹ "USC Accessibility Survey." Google Forms. Google. Accessed April 3, 2023.
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1WfpVXAhPeV2wZNPVaUg1XnL7t5CsU3_gKXBaaZPhZQ/edit#responses.



experiences when students disclose their neurodivergence, while increasing faculties' understanding of their unique needs and student experiences. This is something we strongly suggest Western explore to better support equity work on campus.

Section 5.3 of the current policy stipulates that “where a student who has been granted an accommodation is not satisfied with the manner in which the accommodation is being implemented in a course, the student shall discuss the matter with the academic staff responsible for that course.” However, 22.58% of Western students responded that a course instructor has refused to provide an accommodation to which they were entitled in the classroom.² This puts the onus on the student to self-advocate to their course instructor to receive an improved accommodation, which means that a student’s ability to advocate for themselves is now tied to the quality of the accommodation they receive. The policy fails to recognize that not all students feel comfortable openly disclosing their disability to a course instructor. Furthermore, some students may not have the capacity to self-advocate.

Given the limited resources available within Accessible Education, it’s important that students are able to access a centralised resource centre to receive assistance in the interim. A possible solution to this issue is the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Universal Design for Learning (or UDL) encourages equal opportunity for students to succeed, by allowing students flexibility in their learning and engagement with class materials.³ A UDL approach offers greater flexibility in the ways students are able to engage with course material which is valued by students with diverse learning styles. UDL solutions in the classroom increase the accessibility of teaching materials such as providing audio descriptions, captions, and subtitles in recorded lecture videos. Additionally, course instructors can implement solutions for accommodated students that may benefit the general student population as a whole. For instance, including closed-captions in recorded lecture videos benefits students with accommodations as well as students without disabilities.

² Shanker Aranyah. USC Accessibility Education Survey Preliminary Results. University Students’ Council, 2021.

³ North Vancouver School District, “Universal Design for Learning,” North Vancouver School District – Inclusive Education, 2022.



RECOMMENDATION 2

Accessibility of Services (Academic Counsellors, Careers & Experience)

Principle: Students should be able to access academic accommodations in a timely manner.

Principle: Students with disabilities should receive financial aid to access proper treatment.

Principle: Students should be aware of how to access accessibility services.

Concern: Western University's accessibility policies are not supported by a sufficient amount of resources, creating barriers to accessibility such as long wait times.

Concern: Western University does not offer university-affiliated scholarships for students with accessibility needs.

Concern: Many students are unaware of how to access Western University's accommodation services.

Recommendation: Western University should decrease the ratio of academic counsellors to students to 1 counsellor to 500 students.

Recommendation: Western University should invest in and create scholarships and bursaries for students with accessibility needs, enabling students to pay for their accessibility-related needs.

Recommendation: Western University should increase the accessibility of accommodation services by developing a targeted event with academic counsellors during orientation week, campus-wide marketing campaigns, and a designated accommodation page on OWL.

Western University offers a diverse array of services on-campus that are intended to help students academically and professionally. For instance, Academic Counsellors as well as Careers & Experience are commonly used resources that are provided by the university to help students at no additional cost. Given that Western's student body is expected to increase well above 30,000 students in the coming years, Western may not have sufficient accommodation-related services to meet student demand. Since an ideal ratio of students to school counsellors is 1:250, Western should take measures to reduce current ratios by hiring additional Academic Counsellors.⁴

<https://www.sd44.ca/sites/inclusiveed/EducationalPlanning/Programming/universaldesignforlearning/Pages/default.aspx#/=>.

⁴ Kearney, Caitlin, Patrick Akos, Thurston Domina, and Zachariah Young. 2021. "Student To School Counselor Ratios: A Meta Analytic Review of the Evidence." *Journal of Counseling & Development* 99 (4): 418-28. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12394>.



A key concern raised by students with accessibility needs was the long wait times associated with connecting with an Academic Counselor, impairing their ability to receive academic accommodations in a timely manner. The delay associated with university resources reduces the trust students have in Western's ability to meet their accessibility needs, reducing engagement in classes and the overall quality of their academic experience. To resolve this resource issue, Western should invest in hiring additional Academic Counsellors to sufficiently meet the needs of students to a ratio of 1 counsellor per 500 students. This will enable students to meet with counsellors faster, receive better support, and improve the efficiency of the accommodations process.

Regarding financial aid resources for students with disabilities, Western currently encourages students to apply for the OSAP Bursary for Students with Disabilities (BSWD) and the Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment (CSG-DSE). However, these government grants are not Western-affiliated, increasing demand and competition for these financial aid resources. To ensure that students with disabilities are able to afford a post-secondary education, Western should prioritise finding a donor to create a bursary for students with disability who are experiencing financial hardship. This will supplement government grants where necessary and demonstrate Western's commitment to equity goals as a post secondary institution. In order to have a diverse campus and community, Western should be supporting retention of students, including those with disabilities.

Lastly, a recurring issue raised by students was the confusion associated with Western's current accommodation process. Rather, students must contact Accessible Education to meet with an Academic counsellor which can involve long wait times. Comparatively, Dalhousie University has an academic support website that clearly outlines the types of accommodations the university offers (e.g. accessible parking, alternative testing conditions, class recordings, etc.) and the process for requesting an accommodation. Greater transparency and awareness about Western's accommodation process will help students better advocate for their accessibility needs with their Academic Counsellor.

Greater awareness about how to access Western's accommodation services can be achieved digitally and through in-person programming. From a digital perspective, Western University should add an academic resources page on the new LMS website that's available to all students. The page will direct students to the appropriate steps to access an academic accommodation and simplify the process, increasing the accessibility of the academic accommodation process. Additionally, Western University can develop targeted in-person programming that is integrated into students' academic experience. Possible recommendations include a mandatory orientation week workshop for first-year students and campus-wide awareness campaigns on social media.



RECOMMENDATION 3

Accessible Environments (Physical Disabilities)

Principle: Students with physical disabilities still struggle to get around buildings on campus.

Principle: Classes at Western should make in class accommodations for students with long-term disabilities.

Principle: Western students should not need to disclose their disability to their professor to receive accommodations or support.

Concern: Not all of Western's spaces accommodate physical accessibility.

Concern: There are inconsistencies between professors and students' understanding on who is responsible for developing accommodations.

Recommendation: Western University should complete an updated accessibility audit to ensure all spaces can be accessed by those with a physically impairing disability.

Recommendation: Students with physical disabilities should have access to recorded lecture content.

Recommendation: Professors should provide students with lecture notes/transcripts if a student(s) does not volunteer as a note taker in a course.

Despite Western University's commitment to supporting students on campus, consultations revealed that students with long-term and physical disabilities do not feel supported and included within campus spaces.

Many students with physical disabilities have concerns regarding the accessibility of campus environments. Many spaces on campus are either inaccessible or do not operate properly for students with disabilities such as a lack of elevators or ramps, and the improper functioning of automatic door buttons. The accessible barriers associated with learning environments on campus make it challenging for students to thrive academically. To resolve these concerns, we recommend that Western University conducts additional audits of campus spaces to ensure that all learning environments are accessible to those with physical disabilities.

In addition to the physical barriers of accessing spaces on campus, some students' physical limitations are exacerbated by unexpected circumstances. In the case that a student with a disability cannot attend a lecture, students should be able to access recorded lecture content. In the same light, if a student does not volunteer to be a note taker in a course, the professor should accommodate for this process, and provide the students with lecture notes or transcripts to ease access for the student.



This ensures that every student is able to have access to course content regardless of their ability to attend the class in person while recognizing that people with physical disabilities may have fluctuating abilities to be present in these spaces.

Many students with long-term disabilities also noted that there are many inconsistencies between students and professors when it comes to making accommodations. Many students felt that they needed to disclose information regarding their disability to their professor despite having a file through accessible education. There were also multiple students who noted that their professor publicly called out their disability in front of their class when requesting a note saying ‘x person’ needed one because they have ‘x disability.’ This information should stay confidential between the professor and student, and the student should not be required to share significant personal information with their professor or their peers. To accommodate these challenges, professors should be respectful of students’ privacy while doing their best to make their classroom environments accommodating for all students. This could be through providing lecture notes, or live-closed captioning during presentations and videos to ensure all students feel welcomed, comfortable, and able to learn.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Western Accessibility Services for Neurodivergent Students

Principle: Neurodivergent students should have access to specific support.

Principle: Western students should not need a formal medical diagnosis (falling under the umbrella of neurodivergence) to access accessibility support.

Principle: Western students should be able to quickly meet with accessibility to support to address their needs.

Concern: Western does not have dedicated support services or people for students who are neurodivergent.

Concern: Western requires students to provide a formal medical diagnosis.

Concern: Medical diagnoses for disabilities both short and long term can be expensive and challenging to access.

Concern: Some students receive diagnoses too late in their degrees to access Accessible Education for accommodations.

Recommendation: Western should hire specific Neurodivergent support persons through Western’s Accessibility Services, or explore creating Neurodivergent Accessibility Services.



Recommendation: Western should explore programming and initiatives targeted towards neurodivergent students, whether or not they present documentation, to facilitate transitioning to a University setting.

Recommendation: Western should increase the amount of student support staff at Western's Accessibility services, to shorten wait times for students.

Recommendation: Western Accessibility Services should connect with Affiliate (Huron, Brescia, Kings, Ivey) Academic Advisors, to assist in streamlining a process.

Western's campus has a plethora of various support services built to aid in student well-being and success. Many various groups of students feel supported by the services Western offers, but one group in particular has expressed concerns in not feeling supported, accommodated, or recognized individually on campus. Neurodivergent students would greatly benefit from specific "Neurodivergent Accessibility Support Services" staffed by individuals who are trained to work specifically with those who identify as neurodiverse. The communication these students receive, and the accommodations they seek, may be different than those with other disabilities and therefore, their support must look different too. Additionally, environment changes and working at a set pace can be challenging for those who are neurodiverse. Having drop in opportunities or faster response times for support meetings is essential to aid in decreasing the stress many neurodivergent students face in last minute circumstances. This could include a stressor induced by a triggering sensory environment, deadline or plan changes, or even changes in social situations. To mitigate these challenges, Western should explore hiring more support staff available for bookable appointments with short wait times, or create drop in support, allowing students to have short, last minute appointments with their advisors.

The formal triage system to access Accessible Education is also confusing to many students. Countless students feel lost when they enter university without a diagnosis and receive one part way through, leaving them wondering where, who, and how can they access accommodations. Likewise, Affiliate Students and Huron, Brescia, Kings, and Ivey, all struggle to know how and where to access Accessible Education supports and many affiliate students noted that even their Academic Advisors do not know a concrete process on where to send students looking for accommodations. In order to better support all Western students, including those at affiliates, a formal policy or triage system should be better communicated to students at large, along with affiliate advisors, so they can best support neurodivergent students.

For many students, going through the current formal process and receiving medical documentation to access Accessibility Supports and accommodations can be expensive, and inaccessible, with unrealistic timelines. Many students struggle with affordability which contributes towards the accessibility of neurodivergent students receiving a formal diagnosis and medical documentation. The University of Calgary has Neurodivergent Support Advising separate from their Accessibility Services



and they allow their students to access these supports and programming through self identification rather than a medical diagnosis.⁵ This addresses both the needs and complexity of those who identify with neurodivergence, while removing barriers to access support. Additionally, students who identify as neurodivergent greatly benefit from accessing transition based programming. The University of Calgary has created a summer orientation program called Neurodiversity Immersive Campus Experience (NICE).⁶ “NICE Week is a free UCalgary initiative to help incoming first-year undergraduate students who self-identify as neurodiverse. From Aug. 2 – 5, 2022, this experience provides students with a supportive environment in their transition from high school to university.”⁷ This type of orientation amongst other successful supports is noted to greatly help neurodivergent students adjust to the changes of university life. Toronto Metropolitan University also hosts conversations, workshops, conferences and events aimed towards talking about Neurodivergence, disabilities, and diversity.⁸ These events create spaces for neurodiverse students to feel welcomed on campus, while offering students, staff, and faculty opportunities to engage in additional education, training, and ability to support these students. Another initiative to explore is a neurodivergent mentorship program, wherein upper year neurodivergent students meet with lower year neurodivergent students to discuss the tips and tricks they have used to navigate being a Western student.

Overall, no two neurodiverse students share the same experiences and need the same accommodations. Everyone’s experience is unique, and therefore, must be supported and advised on a case by case basis, by professionals who are trained to formally offer neurodiverse students support. These types of services and initiatives will aim to continue making Western a more inclusive institution while allowing all students to feel welcomed and supported in our community.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Accessible Environments for Neurodivergent Students

Principle: Western should have campus spaces that accommodate the sensory barriers neurodivergent students face.

Principle: Classes at Western should make in class accommodations for students with neurodivergence.

5 “Neurodiversity Support Advising.” n.d. University of Calgary. Accessed April 3, 2023. <https://www.ucalgary.ca/wellness-services/services/neurodiversity-support-advising>.

6 “Neurodiversity Immersive Campus Experience (NICE).” n.d. University of Calgary. Accessed April 3, 2023. <https://ucalgary.ca/wellness-services/services/neurodiversity-support-advising/NICE-week>.

7 Ibid.

8 “Diverse Students = Diverse Approaches, a Conversation about Neurodiversity.” n.d. Toronto Metropolitan University. Accessed April 3, 2023. <https://www.torontomu.ca/accessibility/news-events/2019/11/diverse-students-diverse-approaches-a-conversation-about-neurodiversity>.



Principle: Western students should not need to disclose their disability to their professor to receive accommodations or support.

Concern: Western has committed to not being a virtual university, which prevents neurodivergent students from accessing recorded lecture content.

Concern: Students need to contact professors on a one-to-one basis to receive accommodations.

Concern: Western does not have a dedicated sensory room.

Recommendation: Western should have at least one dedicated sensory room for neurodivergent students.

Recommendation: Western should dedicate multiple spaces to become sensory friendly spaces for neurodivergent students.

Recommendation: Western should provide additional training to professors on neurodivergence, accommodations, language, and disclosure support.

Currently, on Western's campus, many environments do not support the unique challenges and sensory barriers neurodivergent students experience while completing their degree. This is because "Neurodevelopmental disorders (NDD) can affect emotions, learning ability and memory," meaning that some neurodivergent students require extra resources and support to ensure an equitable learning experience.⁹ These resources and support should also be extended to the student without feeling the need to disclose personal information regarding their neurodivergence to their professors.

Additionally, Western has committed to not being an online university but the reality of the pandemic is that it aided many neurodivergent students in learning better through online or hybrid learning formats. Permanent access to learning or re-learning with recorded lecture content at their own pace was a helpful tool: "Neurodiverse students found lectures to be an "essential" tool for their studies and used lecture recordings to address issues in note-taking and content comprehension. However, inconsistencies in the availability, quality and accessibility of recordings are hindering neurodiverse students from fully exploiting this resource."¹⁰ Moving back in person, we should take these lessons into consideration in order to better support neurodivergent students by offering them recorded lecture content, or lecture notes, and transcripts to better support their learning and success.

9 "Trends Shaping Education Spotlight 12 - OECD." Accessed April 3, 2023. <https://www.oecd.org/education/ceri/Spotlight12-Neurodiversity.pdf>.

10 "Neurodiversity and Lecture Capture Report Is Now Available." LSE Eden Centre Learning Technology Team, November 21, 2013. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lti/2013/11/21/neurodiversity-and-lecture-capture-report-is-now-available/>.



Western's campus can be a busy, loud, and overwhelming place for any student and there are few places on campus that students escape to for quiet to step away from the hustle and bustle. Beyond the challenge that many neurotypical students face with the many distractions on campus, countless neurodivergent students struggle with sensory issues. These types of responses appear different in each neurodivergent person and "while some people might experience under-responsiveness to certain stimuli like hunger and pain, others might experience feelings of over-responsiveness. This can translate into a sensory avoidance of anything from loud noises to bright lights and even certain kinds of material."¹¹ University campuses are busy places, and these environments can create many triggers for neurodiverse students. Without accommodating campus environments, neurodivergent students are unable to feel fully supported or the potential to be successful in the pursuit of their education. In order to best support neurodivergent student success Western should create more sensory friendly classroom environments and sensory rooms on campus for neurodivergent students to access.

The University of Calgary is doing an exemplary job at supporting neurodivergence. It is the first Canadian post-secondary institution to create a multi-sensory room, intended to be "an environment where an individual can go and be in full control of their sensory input. They can manipulate their environment to be sure that everything they are experiencing is under their control."¹² Additionally, the University of Calgary has a Sensory Centre in their Student Success Building. This space is intended for students who prefer to work in environments with reduced noise and lighting and or attend workshops in small group formats.¹³ Western should aim to create a similar space on campus for students as many students requested this type of space throughout the consultation process. These rooms act as sensory and physically safe spaces for neurodivergent students, where they can go for a break, to study, or connect with other students.

Overall, Western should grant students access to these resources to ensure neurodiverse students thrive in learning environments, while also granting access to the resources, spaces, and supports they require. Inclusive education benefits neurodivergent students directly, but also destigmatizes perceptions of neurodiverse peers, while creating an environment where all students are supported and can thrive.

11 Ray, Emily. "How Universities Are Adapting to Neurodiverse Students Schorlarcy." Schorlarcy, March 8, 2023. <https://www.scholarcy.com/how-universities-are-adapting-to-support-neurodiverse-students/>.

12 "Sensory-Friendly at the Student Success Centre." News, October 1, 2021. <https://ucalgary.ca/news/sensory-friendly-student-success-centre>.

13 "Accessibility: Home." University of Calgary, February 16, 2023. <https://ucalgary.ca/student-services/access>.





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