

Stakeholder Summary

New study examines how COVID-19 pandemic has amplified challenges for students with disabilities and offers recommendations for improving accessible remote learning

The sudden shift to remote learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has important implications for accessibility in postsecondary education. A new study from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) finds that, on average, more students with disabilities reported experiencing challenges once their education moved entirely online than students without disabilities. While many of these challenges for learning are not new, the study shows that they have been amplified by the pandemic.

These challenges included uncertainty about course expectations and how to access support; difficulty focusing, staying on top of readings and assignments, and issues understanding course material; inadequate access to accommodations and accessible material; difficulty communicating and building or sustaining relationships; inequitable access to, and problematic assumptions about, technology and internet; and inaccessible assessments. Additionally, the study shows students who may not have previously identified as having an accessibility need have recently found themselves facing challenges and are now in need of support or accommodations.

To help address these challenges, the report offers several recommendations for improving accessible learning beginning in the fall 2020 semester. These include:

- Incorporating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in all courses
- Empowering students to make choices that suit their needs
- Enabling transferable skill development
- Creating certainty where you can
- Sharing information about how to access services and accommodations remotely
- Finding ways to facilitate engagement and meaningful interaction
- Checking in with students
- Recording synchronous lectures and being mindful that chat tools can be distracting
- Protecting immunocompromised students when in-person courses resume
- Practicing empathy

Some of the students engaged in the research identified positive changes that took place in response to the pandemic and they are optimistic these will continue into the fall 2020 semester and beyond. Students highlighted the increased flexibility and choice, fewer physical, sensory, and for some, social barriers, anonymity navigating accommodations and services and innovative, inclusive pedagogy as bright spots of the shift to remote learning.

The study is based on a student survey administered by Academica Group between May and June of 2020 to postsecondary students who were enrolled in courses during the winter 2020 semester.

Approximately 200 of the 623 respondents have a self-reported disability. The survey asked students how their recent remote learning experiences compared, positively or negatively, to their pre-pandemic in-person and online learning experiences. HEQCO also surveyed over 70 disability support staff at Ontario colleges and universities in July 2020, and interviewed more than 30 student representatives, instructors and staff between May and July of 2020.

Improving the Accessibility of Remote Higher Education: Lessons from the pandemic and recommendations was written by Jackie Pichette, Sarah Brumwell and Jessica Rizk, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.