COVID-19 Remote Learning Accessibility Audit

The Disability Action Group, McMaster School of Social Work

The following is an accessibility audit of remote learning practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. We document accessibility barriers and concerns experienced by students with disabilities in the McMaster School of Social Work during the transition to remote learning at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, we include recommendations by disabled students on appropriate and equitable ways of addressing these concerns. This document references accessibility concerns within both social work courses and placements / practicums. It is our hope that this accessibility audit may assist faculties, departments, and course instructors in developing remote learning opportunities that prioritize accessibility and disability inclusion.

The Disability Action Group (DAG) commends the decision of McMaster University and the McMaster School of Social Work to end in-person classes and exams to slow down the spread of COVID-19. However, we recognize that moving course material online creates new accessibility concerns for students, especially students with disabilities.

We acknowledge this situation has created challenges for course instructors, who have been given very little time to move course materials online. In such a short timeframe, it is difficult to anticipate every barrier that may arise.

The Disability Action Group has compiled a list of barriers and recommendations based upon our experiences for the department and course instructors to take into consideration. In the midst of a global health pandemic that places many disabled students at high risk, it is important to recognize that it is not possible for us to continue engaging in coursework as if it were "business as usual," as students are experiencing rapidly shifting priorities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the decision to move course material online has radically changed the context in which we learn, creating new accessibility barriers and challenges.

Accessibility Barriers & Concerns

- We are experiencing a **shift in priorities:**
  - Taking care of children
  - Taking care of ourselves
  - Taking care of friends, family, community members
  - Financial insecurity and risk of homelessness
  - Our priorities have shifted from school to survival
- **Increased pressure on students** to coordinate changes in school, placement, and work
- **Challenges with online course content:**
  - Online lectures can be difficult to engage with for those of us who experience difficulties with concentrating or sensory processing
  - Some students may not have access to unlimited, high speed internet
  - Additional assignments to replace lecture creates additional work for students, especially for those of whom this format may be more difficult and time consuming than engaging in class
  - Communications over video conferencing, phone call, or email may be anxiety-provoking
  - A lack of regular communication from teachers and TAs causes distress and confusion on how to move forward with final assignments
  - Minimal communication from teachers and TAs prevents students from knowing where they stand academically in the class
- **Increased mental health, physical health, and disability symptoms** as a result of:
  - Anxiety from COVID-19, financial security, etc.
  - Social isolation
  - Lack of structure, which can create difficulties in completing work and increase mental health symptoms
  - Inability to practice accessible self-care tools to maintain wellness (ex. exercise, swimming, attending medical appointments, social contact, etc.)
  - Added stress, which can cause disability flare ups and impact cognitive processing
- **Other changes that are affecting our lives:**
  - Many of our workplaces have switched to remote work, creating new challenges
  - Many of our workplaces have closed, leaving us in a place of financial insecurity
  - Some of us may be working increased hours, to manage increased demand and cover for other workers who are sick (for example, those working in grocery stores or other essential workers)
  - Students are having to pack up their residence (or student house) and move back home on short notice
  - We may be living in spaces that are unsafe, unsupportive, or lack dedicated areas for us to be free of distractions

Recommendations

- During this time, instructors must understand that **it is impossible to consider school in isolation with other parts of our life**. Our priorities are changing daily, and we may have more to do during this time. Having to complete courses, placement, and work remotely creates a lack of structure that makes it difficult to keep different parts of our life separate.
- **Provide flexible deadlines to all students**, regardless of registration with SAS. As students are juggling multiple priorities at this time, it is important to note these extensions may need to be past the end of the class (students may need to request an incomplete).
- **Provide flexible timelines for completing placements**. We commend the decision by the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE) and the McMaster School of Social Work to deem any placement finished where students have completed over 75% of the required hours. However, some students may be under 75% complete, and it will be difficult to complete these remaining hours within the typical timeframe, especially during a global pandemic. We recommend course instructors work with students individually to determine when they will be able to complete these hours. Additionally, the CASWE has declared that any student under 60% of their required hours will be considered not to have completed field placement requirements – raising concerns for students who may have began their placements late, or for those who are completing fewer hours per week due to disability.
- **Extend the deadline for final grade submissions** to allow students more time to submit assignments without having to request an incomplete (especially students expecting to graduate this spring).
- **Minimize barriers and communicate your flexibility** and willingness to offer extensions and accommodations to students in a transparent manner. For example, you can offer extensions and incompletes without requiring registration with Student Accessibility Services (SAS).
- Provide options for **alternative assignments.**
- **Acknowledge that many students are doing "social work"** in their everyday lives in response to COVID-19 (advocacy, mutual aid, community care, etc.), and provide opportunities for students to reflect on these experiences within course assignments.
- We encourage instructors to **reweight grades** instead of assigning additional work, whenever possible.
- **Provide extensions on outstanding assignments** for all students, acknolwedging the increased stress caused by rapid changes in work, school, and placement, and the time spent coordinating these changes.
- **Do not require students to attend class remotely during specific times** or participate in coursework (assignments, quizzes, etc.) within a short timeframe. Students may no longer be available during regular class time as a result of emerging priorities such as childcare. If you deem live meetings to be essential to course requirements, offer students several time frames, or work with them to schedule individual meetings.

- **Offer flexibility for online tests**, by allowing students several days to complete them. As it is impossible to know which days students will be available to dedicate toward your course, **we recommend providing a 7-day window for all online tests.**
- **Provide multiple options for communication** with you, such as Zoom, Skype, email, or phone, so that students may communicate with you in the ways which cause minimal barriers for them.
- **Respond to students in a timely manner.** We understand that instructors and TAs are also navigating rapidly shifting priorities and emerging needs due to the pandemic. However, if students do not hear back from instructors within a week, it causes distress and confusion on how to move forward with outstanding work.
- **Limit the amount of communication from students you require** to 1 time per week. Having to contact several professors several times a week can quickly become overwhelming, and methods of communication (email, phone, Zoom) can be anxiety-provoking.
- **Provide multiple options for participation**. For example, students could receive participation grades for Avenue discussion board posts, emails to you with short reflections, or video calls. This will allow students to demonstrate their ongoing participation in class in the ways which are more accessible for them.
- **Limit the number of videos** students are required to watch. Video files are very large and use up a great deal of bandwidth, and students may not have access to unlimited internet at home. Use other formats when possible.
- **Ensure online course materials are compliant with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)** and McMaster Accessibility Policies. As a reminder: "*any video added to a McMaster website after 2014 or being used in a class, presentation, public talk, or online course MUST be properly closed captioned*". For more information on digital media accessibility requirements and suggestions at McMaster, please visit the [McMaster Accessibility Hub](#).
- **Be patient and kind** – all of us are doing our best right now.