Disability DIScussion – Remote Access/ibility

Session Feedback 2020

Table of Contents

Introduction

This report was compiled by the Equity and Inclusion Office, AccessMac Program, following a Disability DIScussion for McMaster students with disabilities and cohosted by MSU Maccess, surrounding the topic of Remote Accessibility and the sudden shift to online learning and engagement spaces resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The following compilation of feedback comprises a number of main themes and concerns documented by and on behalf of McMaster students with disabilities, some of these themes including: barriers to accessing course content and lectures, use of technology, attitudinal barriers resulting from the shift to online learning, and isolation from social connections. This feedback is written in shorthand / bulleted form, in order to assist the reader in quick navigation of the document, but please do

follow up with Kate Brown, Accessibility Program Manager, at access@mcmaster.ca if more context is needed for any given point or section.

Reasons and goals for generating this short report include:

- Supporting members of the McMaster community (Instructional staff and faculty; teaching assistants and instructional support staff) in understanding the changed teaching and learning needs and priorities from disability communities of students at McMaster resulting from the sudden movement to online learning environments;
- Sharing this feedback with McMaster accessibility and disability services to help improve and inform accessibility and disability programming and support, including Student Accessibility Services, the AccessMac Program in the Office of Equity and Inclusion, and MSU Maccess.

Compiled Student Feedback Breakdown of Themes, Feedback and Recommendations

Educational Experiences

This section deals specifically with students' experiences navigating their education / in the (virtual/online) classroom. It aims more specifically to determine evolving accessibility needs, concerns, and areas of improvement, as well as students' experiences of inclusion, safety, and comfort within the classroom. A few of the most salient themes that emerge in this section include: the need for shifted practices and supports in engaging with and delivering course content exclusively online; utilizing consistent / centralized teaching and learning platforms to minimize the need to continuously engage with new and potentially unfamiliar software; and the importance of availability and flexibility when it comes to students' evolving accessibility needs.

Online Course Content Engagement and Delivery - Barriers

- **Course structuring and communication ahead of classes beginning**

- o E.g. Several students noted for Spring, 2020 online courses that they noticed more content being added to their online courses that did not seem able to be realistically completed. Some students speculated that perhaps this was an engagement strategy on the instructor side, but that this was having the opposite effect (making courses more inaccessible and less engaging)
- o E.g. Issues noted in not sending lecture content ahead of time per accommodations (for document and material conversion, for example)
- o E.g. Barriers also noted in providing the same amount of time to take tests, not accounting for distractions in the home environment
    - One student noted a particular instance where the time provided for the assessment was quite fair (12 hour time period), but that the assessment itself was designed to take between 10-12 hours to complete – the assignment time period was held for the majority of the class between 6:30pm-6:30am)
- It was noted several times that having all course materials and services suddenly moved online has been especially anxiety inducing and sensory overloading, as students are now having to use their computers for multiple platforms and functionalities (work, school, socialization, etc.)
    - o *"Having everything online can be anxiety inducing because there is so much going on at once. I feel like there is a sensory overload. At first my computer was mostly used for just OneNote and Avenue and some other websites. Now it has everything and that is hard. At this point, even going on social media is stressful."* *– Anonymous*

- **Confrontation of course content being in (at times) entirely new and unfamiliar/inaccessible formats**
    - o E.g. Student(s) switching from writing tests on paper that was originally provided by the University now not having access to this paper-only format; needing to

obtain hardware to adapt to printing own materials (in this case, one of the student's accommodation was to be able to write examinations on paper)

- o E.g. Not being able to access certain digital formats and platofmr which are difficult / impossible to navigate (no captions, not screen-reader friendly, etc.)
    - Among these concerns, students **fear that not having materials posted or converted in time may get worse as the Fall term approaches**

- **Technology usage / Requirements**
    - o Despite the changes to learning environments, students have reported having both positive and negative changes to their overall educational experiences
        - Some of the benefits associated with moving to online learning included:
            - Being able to learn at your own pace by pausing recorded lectures to catch up and take notes
    - o **Some of the negative changes have included:**
        - **Concerns involving the use of live lectures for a variety of reasons**, including:
            - The difficulty in viewing what the professor is showing
            - Having to split between screens to take notes (necessary for some assistive technologies)
            - Screen reader users missing out on what the professor is sharing in live lectures because they are either going back and forth between what is being said and what their screen reader is saying, or because their screen readers cannot perceive what is on the screen
        - There seemed to be a consensus around the difficulty that comes with using video chat for tutorial groups
            - Students reported that it was hard to determine the social cues of other classmates that would typically be present during in-person conversations / classes

- **Having to complete extra accessibility labour on top of the work that is already expected to do as per course requirements, including:**
    - E.g. Learning new online platforms specifically for accessibility
    - E.g. Reformatting one's own online learning materials for accessibility, where accommodations cannot keep up as quickly as needed / where students can more quickly work on this within their own realm of control (textbooks, PowerPoints, PDFs)
    - E.g. Taking time to navigate various platforms to understand how quiz functionality and course engagement will work with a variety of assistive technologies; barriers within platforms sometimes making this especially time consuming

- **Noted differences in course and assessment pacing and environmental control (barriers to taking time for accessibility-related breaks, implementing accessibility strategies, etc.)**
    - E.g**.** All educational materials are now online, making it harder to include visual breaks for tests and assignments
    - E.g. Ability to return to sections in assessments, where for time-based reasons or barriers within the teaching and learning platform itself, students cannot re-check answers / submissions
        - *"In-person exams have always allowed us to return to questions and this always helped. Sometimes I blank out during tests due to anxiety and I have to move on to save time. I think my grades will suffer if I'm in a course that won't let me return to questions." – Anonymous*

- **(Forecasted) return to in-person classroom contexts**
    - Some students expressed concerns about being assigned to pilot in-person classes (a trial for moving some classes onto campus again) in Winter, 2020 and

were seeking assurances that they could opt out of these in-person contexts for disability-related reasons ahead of the winter semester.

- Online components to these in-person trials will be offered, but some students with disabilities voiced concern about students with disabilities not being given priority to access online vs. in-person versions of the course (and whether online components would disadvantage them compared to in-person class components)

(Broad) Suggestions for to Remediate / Address the Above Barriers

- Remind instructors that it is particularly essential to provide course material/slides ahead of time within an online learning context
- Address adding extra work for online learning to overcompensate for not being in physical spaces / concern that students will not be as engaged while learning online
- Address some of the systemic / platform-specific technological barriers that are arising / will arise during course engagements and assessment (e.g. allow students to skip questions and return to them before submitting the test on Avenue), instead of blocking this functionality)
- Remind instructors that SAS accommodations for extra time are still valid, even when providing more time for assessments within an online platform, and that broadly. Students (generally) may need extra time to complete assessment to account for a variety of environmental factors:
  - Distractions in the home environment
  - Bad internet speed / connection
  - More difficult to access previous strategies for coping / creating disability and accessibility support strategies
- Suggestions that instructors use a centralized software(s) that will be used for all courses / or even just all of their courses

- o This will eliminate the need for using and learning multiple platforms for different classes / learning multiple platforms and technologies within the same course
- o *"I like Echo 360 as well. It sort of feels like I'm in a lecture with that and it also has an automated transcript feature which decreases the amount of pauses I have to make while taking notes." – Anonymous*

- Students highlight the importance in using captions for recording lectures, **particularly Echo360 was identified as being a great tool that needs to be used more often as it makes students feel as if they are in the lecture and it comes with automated transcript features**

- There was a consensus that giving students the options to **either** join the live lecture or watch the pre-recorded lecture would be most beneficial

- The OSAP technology grant was suggested for students with disabilities who may require new hardware for their courses in Fall, 2020

Tutorials and Co-operative Experiences - Barriers

- **Tutorials**
  - o Individuals who play the role(s) of student and TA are relieved to learn about options providing the TA control over their tutorial environments, including being able to create and assign breakout rooms and groups. It is anticipated by some that Avenue to Learn will play a significant part in tutorials going forward.
  - o There is a concern, however, that accessibility issues will arise where it becomes challenging for students to participate in asynchronous tutorials due to technological difficulties, Avenue to Learn challenges, computer quality, etc.
- **Co-ops and Placements**
  - o Many opportunities that were originally available and required for programs are now being cancelled and/or posing problems for accessibility
    - ▪ E.g. field school has been cancelled for upper year Anthropology classes
    - ▪ E.g. placements cancelled / postponed in Social Work

- o **Students who are required to complete placements and co-ops are:**
  - Concerned about how they will manage juggling both at the same time
  - Worried that by completing placements online that there will be a loss of skill building opportunities and real-life applications
  - Concerned for their physical well-being, especially if they are immune compromised, if they are required to complete placements in-person
  - How will students make up this time if they are not able to participate this fall? How will students access accommodations / accessibility support if they are carrying out co-op/placement online?

(Broad) Suggestions to Remediate / Address the Above Barriers

- Discussion board to be used for online tutorials; students being asked to post a segment and to reply to others
  - o This creates a more comfortable and accessible environment for students who experience anxiety when unmuting and speaking in an online environment
    - Additionally, provides opportunity for asynchronous participation
  - o In some ways, provides a more accessible avenue to participation in comparison to an in-person classroom setting
- An option to attend the live tutorials or complete an alternative discussion/activity to still get participation marks
- **Students were not able to think of recommendations to help address barriers in participating in and completing co-ops / placements for the upcoming Fall semester**

Systemic and Attitudinal Ableism within the Digital Classroom

- With the change to online learning environments, there have been noted improvements to previous accessibility barriers, as more McMaster instructors are seeking to learn how to be more accessible in their courses, as well as demonstrating increasing flexibility and understanding toward students' accommodation needs.

- **However, strong concerns have been communicated regarding embedded / systemic ableism within the institution coming to the forefront during COVID-19**
  - Administration needing to do better, (e.g. Echo360 has been around since 2012 but one student experienced it only 1 time during their in-person academic career, having been a McMaster student since 2012)
  - Students fear that the move to online learning environments will jeopardize their grades and existing accommodations
  - Despite the change to online learning environments, some students feel that professors are expecting the same quality and amount of work from their students

"I've found it hard to adjust because my executive function is shot and I don't have access to previous strategies (e.g., a space outside my bedroom with an actual desk) and so I'm working a lot more slowly. I wish that in addition to more time, the administration would consider less bureaucracy around (e.g.,) leaves of absence and extensions/Incompletes." – Anonymous

(Broad) Suggestions to Remediate / Address the Above Barriers

- Requiring email responses from staff members within in a reasonable amount of time (mainly applying to SAS accommodation support, but in general, when emailing the institution about accessibility / accommodation concerns)
- Requesting that instructors and administrators employ flexible & additional time allocations for individuals seeking support / accommodations for course work (many people are experiencing impacted mental health from the pandemic & it makes it more difficult to get work done, especially when compounded by existing / additional accessibility barriers)
- Administration to consider less bureaucracy around (e.g.,) leaves of absence, extensions/incompletes, and accommodations processes – impacts can be extreme for some and result in quickly falling behind in courses (sometimes, even before the course has begun).

Experiences Engaging with Community

This section aims to explore students' experiences with accessibility and inclusion within the McMaster Community, outside of educational contexts. With the move to online learning environments this fall term, many students will be working, studying, volunteering, socializing and attending classes in the same space (their home / on their devices). It is important to consider the non-academic impacts that this change will have on students' access to the McMaster community. A number of concerns were raised in this section including: the effort that will be required to make connections with other students, importance in making use of mentorship programs, and a potential shift in identity-related dynamics for those who identify as having invisible versus visible disabilities with the potential "erasure" of certain disabilities when engaging in online spaces.

Increasing Isolation in the Absence of In-Person Social Connections

- There are small factors that made it easier for students to make social connections while being on campus
  - Students are now having to actively go searching for opportunities to meet people from their program and in their courses, adding an extra layer of stress to the university life
  - If one is not actively "making an effort" to go out and make connections (within online social / study groups), then they will not happen

  "…if we aren't making those connections they are not happening. I am just worried that since there is a lack of those meaningful connections happening within students, we will have to figure out course material completely independently. Plus, the added layer of anxiety to reach out is very stressful…." – Anonymous

Potential Erasure of Disability Identity

- Shift of dynamics in moving to online settings, **easier to not have to identify as a person with a disability** (where previously, one may have been consistently "outed" as disabled because their disability was more evident)
    - This sense of loss of disability identity was noted as feeling both positive and negative
    - While individual disabilities are being shrouded by "technology washing" (being able to turn off a camera, a microphone, only be seen from the shoulders up), there is also a heightened awareness of audio impairment, sensory overload, etc. by instructors (i.e. where disability can become less visible, accessibility awareness seems to be heightened)
    - Digital accessibility is mainly focused on sensory impairment, **whereas some with cognitive disabilities, post-concussion syndrome, and mental health disabilities as it relates to engaging with courses feel their needs may be falling to the wayside**

    "I very much appreciate the disability community at Mac, in terms of social inclusion, and I'm lucky to have an existing network here, but I don't feel particularly supported at the departmental/faculty/administrative level right now." – Anonymous

Suggestions for Remediation (Broadly Captured)

- Mentorship programs were noted as being particularly helpful. Examples currently running at McMaster include:
    - [Student Accessibility Services (SAS)](#) has been running Zoom homework sessions
    - [MSU Pride Community Centre (PCC)](#) is starting a new mentorship program where you get matched with an upper year student
    - [Archway,](#) a new program that has launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, connects every incoming first-year undergraduate with a student

mentor and professional coach to assist them in their first year at McMaster by introducing them to other first-years and connecting them to themed community groups

Report Summary and Conclusion

This short report has aimed to compile feedback and suggestions for solutions from students with disabilities attending a Disability DIScussion, held on July 27th, 2020. The information herein will be shared with relevant University stakeholders, as well as discussion participants themselves. This discussion took place prior to the start of the fall term and therefore questions and concerns will likely shift and evolve as the semester begins and progresses – the AccessMac Program and MSU Maccess plan to hold another such Disability DIScussion in October, 2020 to understand how by midterms students with disabilities are being / have been impacted by Remote Teaching and Learning contexts.