

## **Disabilities, accessibility and the student learning experience**

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While the pandemic has disproportionately affected students with disabilities, it has also revealed the flaws around accessibility and inclusivity across the higher education sector. This critical insight has prompted the University to work towards better support system for students with disabilities both during and post pandemic.

For the average student, the anticipation of starting university brings many new emotions; the promise of nightlife, societies, and groups to join and new friends to meet and grow with, seemingly the only obstacles are overcoming nerves and negotiating the challenge of entering a new environment. No student should come to university and feel that they will have to compromise on some of these experiences due to inaccessibility or fear of being discounted or engaged with differently because of their disability, yet this is the reality of many students who identify as disabled.

It's easy to take things for granted and not consider the experience and expectations of students with disabilities. When disabled students are overlooked it can complicate their lives, making it more difficult to navigate and engage with their learning. This becomes a greater issue when student services are under growing pressures and higher demands. In such instances, this can cause further distress and exclusion for students with disabilities with some left feeling dejected or that their disability is viewed as too difficult to be included.

Despite the number of students identifying as disabled rising rapidly, the number of students registered with Disability services has increased by over 3000 in the last 4 years, these services encounter logical constraints leading to longer waiting lists than desirable. This can also impact student perceptions of these services, making them hesitant to register.

While these issues have existed for several years, the arrival of a pandemic added to them. Many services were put on hold and some disabled students needed to shield at home. Under mounting time pressures to confirm teaching plans and mixed messaging from the government, inevitably some support services were overlooked. Decisions around policies on closed captioning and fair alternative exam arrangements were impacted by the situation.

Academics can be hesitant to use closed captioning in their live lectures for many reasons, but typically because they are not perfectly accurate leading to confusion for students, especially around specialist terminology. This then poses the question; how we obtain a level playing field so that students who need captioning can follow their lectures, as well as other students being able to take accurate notes without being distracted by them. Nevertheless, online lectures cannot be inclusive until closed captioning is used across the university, meaning this conversation needs to be prioritised in the ongoing negotiations between the Bristol SU and the university surrounding online learning.

Another issue is the use of breakout rooms and general pacing, combined with bad internet stability. Students that suffer with anxiety and/or learning disabilities may need more time to process information, as well as feeling too pressured to engage when put into small groups or too overwhelmed to engage in larger breakout groups and in turn creating further feelings of anxiety. While all students are affected by internet instability, for students with learning difficulties it is a greater issue as many already struggle to keep up with the pace of lectures and lagging can cause them to feel overwhelmed and confused, leaving them little time to keep up with notes as they are being relayed and therefore falling behind on work.

These issues are easier to resolve when the importance of lecturers and personal tutors reading a disabled students DSS (Disability Support Summary) is conveyed and in turn students needs are considered and catered to prior to the lectures taking place. However, this is an issue that existed even before teaching moved online and has been heightened by the pandemic, showing that while these issues have been worsened as a result of teaching moving online, some issues that presented themselves prior have now been given the opportunity to be reflected on as the online teaching has remained under close surveillance by the university and they have introduced focus groups in order to troubleshoot issues with said teaching, in turn working on longstanding issues.

Finally, the introduction of online assessments has presented its own issues. Many students with disabilities require rest breaks during assessments for various reasons, from preventing seizures to needing longer to process the questions. However, with examinations now being taken online students couldn't take their usual rest breaks as there was no option to stop the timer.

It is vital that the Disabled Students' Network and the students we represent are considered when introducing policies at the university as we are one of the main liberation groups that are directly affected by teaching and examinations moving online due to the pandemic. It is important to note that if policies are not inclusive and accessible it has a direct effect on the university career of students who identify as disabled as well as their future in employment and further education.

It is in the university's best interest to support disabled students as they are an asset to every environment and must be considered without being praised purely because of their success 'in spite' of their disability. Moreover, a more positive approach to introducing progressive policies for disabled students is to highlight that they are being introduced for disabled students and because they want to encourage more disabled students to be involved. This shows disabled students that they are being considered and properly represented which improves moral and engagement.

For any liberation group it is important to see people that represent your community in places of authority and if the university continue their work with Bristol SU liberation groups and students everyone will thrive.