University Policy for Student Digital Equity

Summary
As digital technology and digital practices are increasingly important elements of learning, teaching, research and knowledge-based work, it is imperative to create an inclusive digital environment in higher education. The University is committed to ensuring that all students have equitable access to digital teaching, learning and assessment; we have therefore identified mechanisms to address challenges in the following key areas: • Access to suitable devices and connectivity • Access to study environments and library collections • Accessibility of online sessions and materials to students with disabilities or any additional needs.

Scope - This document applies to:
This policy applies to students on campus-based courses at all levels of study: Foundation, UG, PGT and PGR. It does not apply to students on online courses.

Applies to academic year:	2024/25

Document Control

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- Access to suitable devices and connectivity
- Access to study environments and library collections
- Accessibility of online sessions and materials to students with disabilities or any additional needs.

Access to suitable devices and connectivity

Undergraduate and postgraduate taught students

No student should be impeded from accessing their teaching or self-directed learning because they cannot afford a [suitable device](#) or [reliable connectivity](#). Incoming students in receipt of funding awards will be made aware that, if they do not already have a suitable device, financial help is available to cover the cost of a laptop from our [Digital Support Fund](#). Existing students may also need such help if their devices are broken or too old to run the programmes they need for their study and assessment.

For both new and continuing students, those in receipt of means-tested or targeted awards will not need to demonstrate further financial hardship in order to access help. Other students would need to demonstrate financial need in line with normal funding office processes.

Students who are temporarily without a suitable laptop may be able to obtain a loan laptop from IT Services for a period of up to one month, to give them time to get their laptop fixed or apply for funding for a new one.

Postgraduate research students

Postgraduate research students on campus are provided with a laptop (or desktop if there is specific need) plus access to other hardware, peripherals and software. If PGR students are unable to meet the cost of connectivity, support is available through the Digital Support Fund. PGR students are not eligible for home equipment provision.

Anticipating connectivity challenges

41% of students surveyed in November-December 2023 reported experiencing wifi connectivity issues on campus which affected their learning, and 39% experienced such issues off campus. Additionally, 30% of students said that mobile data costs made it difficult to use digital technologies in their learning. For this reason it is important for unit teams to provide some flexibility in how or when students access online sessions and materials, to enable students to work around any connectivity issues.

Access to library collections, skills and study spaces

Key course texts and additional resources to support wider study, projects and research interests will be made available online to ensure ease and equity of access to the extent possible within budgets and licence restrictions.

The Academic Engagement team formed of Subject Librarians and Teaching & Learning Librarians will provide training and support to assist in the use of these resources. The Library Support service will provide alternative formats and ensure accessibility of course material to those with additional needs. The Study Skills team will provide online learning resources which are open access, and individual tutorials and group workshops will be provided online, to allow greater access for those who cannot attend in person.

A proportion of study spaces will be bookable, with others available on a drop-in basis, and the balance between these will be flexed according to the time of year and associated study space needs. An Accessible Technology Room is located in the Arts & Social Sciences Library offering specialist assistive technology.

A laptop loan service is available in the following locations: Arts & Social Sciences, Wills Memorial and Medical libraries. Laptops borrowed are for use in those libraries only.

Accessibility of online and blended learning to disabled students

Use of online and blended teaching, and digital resources, presents a range of potential challenges as well as benefits to our disabled students; the definition of disability is wider than is commonly understood and may include conditions many might not consider a disability. The University aims to make its teaching accessible to all students in two main ways: by providing accessible websites and resources in anticipation of need, and by making reasonable adjustments where specific needs are identified.

Anticipatory provision of accessible teaching and online resources

The University has a legal requirement that its online websites and materials must meet approved accessibility standards, which includes provision of captions on recorded audio and video material. Key tools and services should include accessibility statements, outlining the level of web accessibility that tool aims to achieve. Guidance on producing accessible teaching and resources is available from the Digital Education Office, and the templates in Blackboard Original and Blackboard Ultra will help all staff produce accessible courses. Accessibility and usability will be a particular focus of our roll-out of Blackboard Ultra. Automatically generated captions are added by default on audio and video materials in Replay. The Blackboard Ally tool helps to check accessibility of resources, provides tips for authors to improve accessibility, and provides materials in alternative formats.

Tailored support for disabled students

Disabled students may be entitled to support with purchasing any assistive hardware or software which is required for a disability-related need. They can request reasonable adjustments to teaching and assessment to ensure that disabled students can fully participate in education and other benefits, facilities and services provided for all students. Disabled students who require personal recordings or captions of lectures should request specialist support through Disability Services. The Library can also make learning resources available in alternative formats.

Students can contact Disability Services or their School Disability Coordinator for further information.

Student digital capabilities

In order to thrive in a blended learning environment, students need capabilities in digital learning, communication, participation, creation, problem solving and innovation, and strong information and data literacies. They will also increasingly need to make judgements about when and how to use artificial intelligence.

To support all students in developing the skills and confidence they need to engage effectively with the online aspects of their teaching and study from the start of term, we are offering Digitally Ready, a digital induction, before formal teaching starts. This includes familiarisation with the types of activity and tools they are likely to come across in their teaching, as well as with the collaborative participation and/or interaction with peer learning which will help them thrive in blended environments. This will be available as a resource for all students to refer to throughout the teaching year. Returning students will also have access to a resource to help them refresh and upskill on the tools which they will need for engaging with teaching, study and collaboration.

The development of digital skills in using discipline-specific software will be embedded into the relevant academic units.

Study skills support will be provided to students in a range of flexible online and blended formats. Study Skills resources include an online guide to Using AI at University.

Equitable and respectful online behaviours

Interactions online often feel different to participants from face to face /in person interactions, and without visual and body language cues, there is more potential for misunderstanding. Students must behave in accordance with the Staying safe online guidelines and should report any behaviour which they feel breaches the guidelines.

Staff and students have a responsibility to work together to ensure that online sessions and discussions, whether live or asynchronous, are inclusive and that all students are encouraged to contribute equitably and their contributions are respected. Staff development for teaching staff includes consideration of inclusion in teaching, and awareness and challenging of any unconscious biases. Training on the design of online and blended materials includes consideration of accessibility and inclusive design. The digital induction will support students in developing constructive, respectful and inclusive online behaviours.

Assessment

It is particularly important to ensure that students have equity in the preparation, creation and submission of assessed work. All of the areas above may impact on digital equity in assessment: including lack of a suitable laptop or connectivity, accessibility issues or need for reasonable adjustments and alternative exam arrangements, and lack of familiarity with the digital environment and tools used in the assessment.

Schools should seek to mitigate the risk of inequity as far as possible, liaising with IT Services, Digital Education Office, and Disability Services as appropriate. Guidance is available on good practice in the design and management of digital exams. It is important to ensure that students have opportunities to practice and check that assessment formats work for them prior to a summative assessment. For centrally managed exams these are built into the Blackboard packages. Spaces suitable for taking online exams will be provided on-campus at appropriate points of the academic year. Students who are concerned that they may be disadvantaged by any assessment should contact their school in the first instance to make them aware of their circumstances.

Digital wellbeing

Increased use of technologies and digital services can have an impact – both positive and negative – on people's mental, physical, social and emotional health. The University's Curriculum Framework emphasises the importance of active, collaborative learning, in order to build belonging and mitigate the risk of students feeling isolated. Digital resources to support wellbeing are provided for students. A consideration of digital wellbeing is embedded in Digitally Ready, to support students to develop awareness of, and manage, the positive and negative impacts of technology on their own wellbeing. All programmes/schools will also be encouraged to agree ground rules with students for positive and inclusive digital participation at the start of formal teaching.

The University will continue to carry out consultation and co-design activities with students to understand the student digital experience, identify issues which are impacting on students, and co-design solutions.