

SUPPORTING ACCESSIBLE LEARNING ONLINE

This guide outlines some of the key issues to consider to ensure that learning is accessible, even when it is quickly moved from face-to-face to online delivery.

In a rapid move to online, you need to remember to still make learning accessible. There may be things you do already that will support this, but make sure you check in with your students to ask what support they need to be able to access or engage online. Your students may feel anxious about how this will affect their studies, keeping accessibility advice in mind together with making sure you stay in touch with your students is key.

For some students whilst face-to-face learning may be accessible, online may be less so, therefore it's important to check. Building in accessibility from the start of your online support is helpful and in many cases is straight-forward to do. Many of the things that will support students with disabilities will also benefit students who do not have disabilities too. Guidance and support on this are available from LTES and the disability service.

MANAGING CHANGE

A time of change can be an anxious time for anyone, but more so if you rely on particular support to be able to access or engage in learning, have existing anxieties or find change particularly difficult for any reason. A change from face-to-face provision to online support may be particularly challenging as it can feel isolating or less human.

- 1. Be clear about the change.** Explain what is happening, when it will happen and how it will affect students. If a change will affect the support that is available, then explain this and look at the alternatives that are needed and available.
- 2. Ask what support students need.** Students may or may not have declared a disability when they started the course, however with a move to online their needs may change, so check if anyone needs support to access or engage online.
- 3. Stay human.** Keep to your usual style and make it clear when you're available to speak to people (in groups or individually). Be reassuring and stay in touch regularly to ensure students know that you're still engaged.

USING DIGITAL MEDIA

When using digital media e.g. images, video, audio, ensure that you have provided alternative formats or made the media accessible. This includes:

- 1. Provide image descriptions and alt-text for all images and videos.**
- 2. Create captions and/or transcripts for all videos / voice over PowerPoint / screencasts.** If you record on Teams, it will generate an automatic transcript. If you're using Collaborate Ultra then apps such as Otter.ai or Thisten can create transcripts from audio. Be aware that automatic transcripts don't always pick up correctly what you've said so it's important to check them for accuracy before sharing.
- 3. Share documents in editable format if possible.** Allowing your students to adapt and change documents to make it suitable for them, for example changing font sizes or the background colour of a document, gives them freedom to adapt to their needs.

- 4. Enable PDFs with OCR** (Optical Character Recognition) for screen reader access.
- 5. Check for accessibility.** For screen reader accessibility use a tool such as Webaim. To check accessibility of colour combinations use a Contrast Checker. If you are creating a document in Word, use the accessibility checker to help you. **Go to File > Inspect Document > Check for accessibility.**
- 6. Make documents easy to print.** Reading online can create cognitive fatigue or cause migraines for some students, so make it easy to print documents and clearly mark which are printable.

TEACHING VIA WEBINAR

Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, the webinar tool used by Heriot-Watt University, has several built-in features for accessibility. These include screen-reader options, global keyboard shortcuts and personalisation of audio settings. It is useful to make the webinar room available to students in advance so that they can check that they can access it and familiarise themselves with the tools and personalisation of settings.

When teaching in a webinar there are things that you can do to improve accessibility.

- 1. Design your slides to be accessible.** Use an accessible sans-serif font such as Calibri or Arial minimum size 12 or 14 point, keep things simple and don't overcrowd the slide. Don't use colour to convey meaning and ensure a good contrast.
- 2. Provide readings, slides or handouts well in advance.** This can help students to follow and engage more effectively in the learning, and it allows them to adapt materials to suit their needs.
- 3. Don't rely on students reading your slides.** Read it out so that students who find reading English quickly difficult can follow. Similarly, if you get questions in the chat read these out too before responding.
- 4. Give students time to reply.** Silence online can feel awkward, but students may need extra time to think about what's been said so leave time to reply. Remembering that some may be navigating the session through keyboard or voice commands, rather than just clicking a button.

TEACHING ON DISCUSSION BOARDS

Asynchronous discussion via discussion boards on Vision (the VLE) can be a useful way to foster a sense of community and enhance student ability to engage with the learning. You can post threads which students respond to in their own time, talking to each other as well as to you. Providing flexibility in this activity can enable students to contribute when they are able to. It can also provide students with space to think about and review their contribution, which can be helpful to students who may have issues with language, reading or writing or maybe feel overwhelmed if they have not had time to digest the material. Remember that some students may not have English as their first language, may be contributing via speech-to-text software, or may be cognitively fatigued from being online so much, so spelling and grammar errors may occur, be kind about this.

ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

Assessments can be stressful at the best of times; this is even more the case if you rely on having support or adaptation to access the assessment. If moving online, consider issues such as how students will access and engage with the assessment, additional time for reading or completing assessments. Also think about how you provide feedback and check that all students can access and engage with it.

SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE

The disability service can provide support and the learning technology support team can offer guidance on how specific tools can be used to meet different needs.

If you or your students have any queries or concerns you and they can contact the Disability and Wellbeing Services as follows:

Disability Service: disability@hw.ac.uk

Wellbeing Service: studentwellbeing@hw.ac.uk

Most importantly, though, keep speaking to your students to ensure they feel supported.

FURTHER RESOURCES

AbilityNet (2020) **Factsheets** <https://abilitynet.org.uk/free-resources/abilitynet-factsheets>

Blackboard (2018) **Collaborate Ultra Accessibility** <https://help.blackboard.com/Collaborate/Ultra/Administrator/Accessibility>

CAST (2018). **Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2.** <http://udlguidelines.cast.org>

Hamraie, A. (2020) **Accessible teaching in the time of Covid 19** <https://www.mapping-access.com/blog-1/2020/3/10/accessible-teaching-in-the-time-of-covid-19>

JISC (2020) **How online resources can ensure continuity of learning during enforced absence** <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/ensuring-continuity-of-learning-during-enforced-absence/online-resources>

LexDis (nd) **Accessible Technology For Learning** <https://www.lexdis.org.uk>

Martin, N. (2019) **Implementing Inclusive Teaching and Learning in UK Higher Education – Utilising Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a Route to Excellence** <https://www.srhe.ac.uk/downloads/reports-2017/Nicola-Martin-SRHE-Research-Report.pdf>

Scottish Accessible Information Forum (2013) **Electronic Accessibility** <http://www.saifscotland.org.uk/information-and-advice/electronic-accessibility/#sthash.INqNOohi.dpbs>

UK Government (2018) **Do's and don'ts of designing for accessibility** <https://accessibility.blog.gov.uk/2016/09/02/dos-and-donts-on-designing-for-accessibility>

University of Sussex (2020) **Digital Accessibility – Create** <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/tel/accessibility/accessibility-create>



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