Feedback on Dalhousie’s Accessibility Plan

Working Group Feedback

Meeting Time: 02-26-2021, 2pm

Present: DSU President (Chair), KSU VP External, DSU Equity & Accessibility Office Rep, KSU VP Communications elect, Cece (King’s Member at Large), Ben (Student Senator), DSU Council Students with Disabilities Representative.

Absent: DSU Council BoG Rep #2, DSU Council Residence Students Representative (regrets).

Minutes

The DSU President began with a land acknowledgement and equity statement then opened the floor for introductions and discussion on priorities, key issues, or other ideas that should be considered in the Dalhousie Accessibility Plan.

**DSU Students with Disabilities Rep:**

- What does accessibility on campus look like in a post-Covid context?
  - Ex. Students with hearing or visual impairments are especially impacted by certain health protection measures (ex. partitions, masks).
- How do we address the needs of students who are still recovering from feelings of isolation and mental health issues?

**Cece:**

- We also need to consider the issues in online learning, many e-textbooks don’t have text-to-speech options.
- Online learning also results in lost sense of community, we can’t be together on campus. Lost study spaces also impact student community and cause access issues for students without sufficient alternatives for study space.

**Ben:**

- We should remember that the final draft of this plan won’t come out until 2022, so we also need to think about how ‘normal’ circumstances impact access.
- Carleton University is a Canadian and world leader in access and founded the Canadian Accessibility Network; Dalhousie is not a collaborator.

**King’s SU VP External:**

- The Accessibility Center on campus could be impacted by Covid-19 and the return to campus.
  - How do we prioritize between all the potential access requests when we come back? People who are uncomfortable returning, people who are at risk, those with new accessibility needs?
Is/could there be a process for triaging accommodation requests? Are we differentiating between foundational and acute issues? The KSU has brought up these questions/ideas before and hasn’t had a response.

- Another issue is that the onus falls on students to reapply for academic accommodations every year. Why can’t we keep these on record?

**DSU Equity & Accessibility Office Rep:**

- The University once told students who had access issues related to being on campus that distance learning options were too complicated, we now know this isn’t true.
- Would it be possible to have attendance requirements modified since we now have so much evidence that mandating attendance isn’t a great practice? Especially since there may be an increase of valid concerns about re-entry to university life and campus after Covid-19.

**Cece:**

- Could we have advocates for students that come to the Accessibility Office with them? Advocating for yourself can be difficult.
- The Accessibility Office isn’t welcoming and the processes aren’t accessible. There need to be multiple ways to achieve one goal or have flexibility in each process, so everyone has access.
- The Hammond Building feels cold and is reminiscent of a mental institution.
- The Accessibility Office doesn’t always take medical records seriously – they’ve denied accommodations recommended by medical specialists and refuse to have conversations about their decisions.

**King’s SU VP Elect:**

- Students often must get angry to get the help they need.
- Volunteer student note takers for classes where there’s a student with accommodations aren’t a guarantee - those accommodations are based off a hope that someone will volunteer and provide good quality notes.
  - These students don’t get paid properly.
  - Would it be possible for professors to annotate their slides?

**DSU Equity & Accessibility Office Rep:**

- Is there an advocacy group on campus that can work with students who need support getting their accommodations?
- Dalhousie also needs to begin recognizing self-diagnoses – they’re accepted and respected in communities built by and for people with disabilities and not all students can afford the very expensive testing to get a formal diagnosis.

**Ben:**

- Carleton’s center for student accommodations only requires one registration from students
- Dalhousie would need to undergo a significant cultural shift, the current culture is quite adversarial to students who need accommodations, and these students make up a significant portion of the student population
Cece:
- The ability to self-advocate is one that comes from, and with privilege
- There needs to be better organization around exam accommodations, the Accessibility Office and staff make students feel like a burden
- Proctors need better training on how to deal with student needs and any issues that arise
- The spaces where students with accommodations write their exams also have to be accessible.

DSU Students with Disabilities Rep:
- Could there be/is there a society on campus that already advocates for students with disabilities or educates on accessibility?

King’s SU VP Elect:
- Students often have to go to accommodations meetings together, so they are listened to
- Some students don’t remember having to re-register for their accommodations this year – are there differences in how students are being treated?

DSU Equity & Accessibility Office Rep:
- The website is so bad, pages for separate units need to be standardized because they are so hard to navigate

Ben:
- Even students without access needs think the website is bad; the Carleton website is an example of a good website.

DSU President:
Is there anything we like about what Dalhousie has done to support students with access needs?
- The contrast on the webpages and Dalhousie logo is good (Black- dark yellow- white)

DSU Equity & Accessibility Office Rep:
- A few years ago Dalhousie started putting more gender neutral, accessible washrooms around campus – not sure if they’re making more but those are nice

Cece:
- The placement of the Accessibility Office in the Killam is good – it’s in a central space on campus
- The Hammond Building is a good idea, it’s nice to have a dedicated building, it was just poorly designed
- Professors at Dalhousie are generally understanding
- The Life Sciences Center sucks

King’s SU VP External:
- Compared to King’s which has a lot of stairs and tight spaces, Dalhousie is more physically accessible
- Dalhousie could do something similar to what King’s is doing in identifying ‘accessible pathways’ through signage around buildings that aren’t as accessible,

**DSU Equity & Accessibility Office Rep:**

- Students learning online has showed how important technology can be for learning, but some professors have a ‘no laptops policy’ in their classes, we should get rid of that

**Cece:**

- There’s nowhere to give continuous, anonymous, safe feedback about the Accessibility Office
- Brightspace is also bad, it would be nice to have a calendar feature that shows all the deadlines for all my classes in one place.

Members collectively agreed that this was a productive, positive meeting and suggested that the group continue to meet.
Executive Committee Feedback

Meeting Time: 03-05-2021, 1pm / 03-08-2021, 1pm

Present: DSU President (Chair), DSU VPI, DSU VPFO, DSU VPAE, DSU VPSL, Director of Operations, Director of Research & Outreach

Minutes for Meeting #1

These feedback sessions occurred during meetings of the Executive Committee of the DSU.

VPAE:
- International students face a lot of issues around academic integrity because they can feel uncomfortable or uncertain reaching out to their professors to see if something is OK due to cultural differences and fear of negative interactions.
- There is a disconnect between the Awards Office and Accessibility Office – students who have an accommodation recognized by the province can take fewer courses and still be recognized as a full-time student (so they are eligible for awards) but this communication often doesn’t happen, so they aren’t considered.

Minutes for Meeting #2

VPSL:
- There needs to be more consideration of screen fatigue and the impact of always learning online, especially for students with ADHD and other learning disabilities.
  - Exam accommodations for these students should be made to account for how much harder it can be for these students to write in an online environment.

Director R&O:
- Issues re: screen could be mitigated if professors all recorded their classes.

VPI:
- More time for online exams would help too.
- The ongoing discussion about ‘no backsies’ on online tests doesn’t make sense – students should be able to skip, go back, and review all of their work.

VPAE:
- There aren’t enough speech-text technologies available for students. The options to loan out this tech also aren’t available to students who aren’t in the area. Dalhousie should look at investing in software for all students or options that are accessible regardless of location.

VPI:
- Professors should extend the same leniencies that they have due to Covid all of the time, they need to care about their students all the time.
- Accommodations should always be available.
VPAE:
- Acute issues requiring accommodations aren’t covered by the Accessibility Office (ex. concussions), which leaves serious short-term illnesses without support, unless they can convince their professors to accommodate them.

VPSL:
- There should be more options to support students with anxiety, stress, and sensory needs, especially in crowds and social situations – campus is a very busy place.
  - We could advocate for low-sensory accommodations (Ex. letting students come 5 minutes late to class to avoid the busy waiting spaces) or low-sensory sessions in certain buildings or stores – like the bookstore?

VPFO:
- Ensuring there are low-sensory study and workspaces would be great. There are a few designated quiet spaces on campus, but the lights are always too high, and the scent-free campus isn’t a guarantee.

VPAE:
- Some syllabi are too strict and aren’t accessible – ex. no late entry to class, no laptops in the classroom, some profs even dock points from your overall grade if you ask for an extension on an assignment.
- Another example is graduate students. You can’t take a sabbatical from your research without extremely extenuating circumstances.
- There’s also an ongoing rhetoric that university policies shouldn’t be translated because students have to be English proficient to attend Dal.
- The academic integrity process has some procedural bumps.

President:
- The translation comment doesn’t acknowledge that just because you speak English in school doesn’t mean you want to/should be forced to all the time, and especially not to understand important policies and complex procedures
- There’s also a valid fear of professors marking you down if you ask for accommodations, extensions, or point out unfair treatment.
- Getting profs to change their syllabi and practices is hard because of academic freedom rules, but NS Legislature trumps academic freedom – profs will have to change to comply.
Feedback Summary: Key Priorities, Themes & Recommendations

Physical Campuses

- Dalhousie’s Studley campus has accommodated most (but not all) of the basic physical access needs but significantly lacks in accessibility for disabilities outside of the physical.
  - Carleton, Sexton, Truro, and Yarmouth are less-updated campuses that may need more renovations to comply with physical access requirements.
  - More gender neutral, age-inclusive (changing tables), accessible washrooms should be built on campus.
  - More low-sensory dedicated study and workspaces should be created, on all campuses.

The Accessibility Center & Hammond Building

- The Accessibility Center is in a good location, but doesn’t have accessible processes, staff, and doesn’t serve all students.
  - It feels like the Office does not want to give accommodations and are untrusting of students, which is demoralizing and ableist.
  - They do not recognize all disabilities, or the impact of those disabilities on an individual’s experience as a student, as worthy of accommodations – just the ones they are comfortable with.
  - The Accessibility Center and staff should frequently partake in implicit bias, anti-oppression, harm-reduction training, other professional development training, and evaluations.
  - The Accessibility Center needs to formally review its policies and procedures and ensure that each resource is accessible to all those who need it.
  - The Accessibility Center should determine policy and processes for formally addressing acute accommodation needs.
  - The Accessibility Center needs to have a method for accepting anonymous feedback on resources, staff, and impact.
  - The Hammond Building should be re-designed to be more welcoming.
  - Students should only have to register their accommodations once, with the ability to make updates if/when needed.
  - The Accessibility Center should pre-determine a process for dealing with an influx of accommodations requests before Fall 2021.
  - Students should be given access to resources, including advocates, to educate them on all their options and support them in securing accommodations.

Website & Brightspace

- Dalhousie’s website poses many issues – mainly in navigation
  - The website should have standardized page formatting among different units, faculties, and departments.
- Brightspace is similarly difficult to navigate.
  - Brightspace should include a calendar feature for each student that syncs all deadlines for all classes to one spot.
Online Learning

- Online learning has revealed that many accommodation requests for distance learning options that were once deemed ‘too difficult to coordinate’ no longer have justification.
  - Students should be given access to the full offerings of the academic timetable from off-campus, if needed.
- There are specific issues with online learning for students with disabilities, especially those who are hearing or visually impaired and those with learning disabilities.
  - Professors should be asked to annotate sides or record their classes with closed captioning, and ensure they are available on Brightspace for students who have difficulty accessing live lectures.
  - Dalhousie should invest in text-to-speech and speech-to-text software, available for free download to students.
- Exam regulations aren’t standardized or formalized.
  - Students should have access to the same advantages they had during in-person test taking (ex. the ability to skip forward, go back, and review tests).
  - Students should have the standard exam time to complete online exams.

Teaching & Syllabi

- Many classroom restrictions placed by professors are ableist, demoralizing, and impose inappropriate paternalistic rules on students:
  - No laptop / phone / tablet restrictions
  - Late to class policies
  - Late assignment policies
  - Mandatory/graded participation or attendance
  - No sick days / medical certificates or declarations of absence not accepted
  - No sabbatical policies
- Professors are generally accommodating, but not all are. Many professors can independently decide whether they will give accommodations which allows them to take advantage of an imbalanced power dynamic between professor and student.
  - Many professors won’t give accommodations without medical certificate or extensive documentation, requiring students to disclose private, sensitive medical information to be treated equitably.
  - Many students hold fear or uncertainty because of cultural differences, in approaching their professors for accommodations. They worry that they’ll be marked poorly for asking for accommodations or that their professor will be upset with them.
    - This is especially impactful for students who identify as part of an equity-deserving group, who already face implicit bias and oppression in the classroom.
- Some students require a notetaker for their classes – these note takers are not paid fairly and aren’t guaranteed. Dalhousie should hire a reasonable number of paid students each year to take notes to ensure this accommodation is available.
- There is an obvious conflict between professor’s negotiated rights to academic freedom, and accessibility for all students. However, academic freedom is not absolute and does not trump the requirements of the Accessibility Act of Nova Scotia. Senate regulation should be passed mandating what is and is not the purview and ability of Faculty, based on the Act.