

# ACCESSIBILITY FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

ISSUES AND RESOURCES

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*You cannot champion diversity and exclude disabled people. You cannot champion access and exclude disabled people. You cannot champion accommodation and exclude disabled people. You cannot champion civil rights and exclude disabled people.*

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## Table of Contents

Purpose.....	2
Background.....	2
Issues.....	5
Conclusions and Recommendations to GSA Council .....	8
Bibliography .....	10
Appendix: Definitions.....	14
Appendix: NEADS recommendations.....	16
Appendix: Barriers - Postsecondary Education Standards Development Committee Report .....	20

### *A note on language*

Language evolves over time and preferences differ person to person within equity deserving populations. Many disability activists prefer to use term “disabled person” or “person with disability” when they are the intended subject of discussion rather than using euphemisms to avoid the term “disability” (Rodriguez, 2021). Euphemistic language is still adopted by many institutions and allies, for example with the University of Waterloo renaming its former “Office for Persons with Disabilities” to the current “AccessAbility Services”. This report will often use the terms “disabled person” and “person with disability” to reflect activism that normalizes the term “disability”.

### Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of some challenges and barriers faced by graduate students with disabilities. This includes a scan of resources available to this population as well as current university policies. The report is by no means exhaustive and is meant to spark further action by the GSA-UW to help inform its advocacy, particularly featuring recommendations for future supports and policy.

### Background

Disabled people face challenges in completing post-secondary education and participating in the workforce. They are underrepresented in post-secondary degree attainment. While 39% of the young adult (ages 25 to 34) population in Ontario have completed a post-secondary degree, this percentage is lower for members of this population with disabilities; only 10% of young adults with learning disabilities, 11% of young adults with physical activity disabilities, 18% of young adults with hearing disabilities, 22% of young adults with mental health disabilities and 34% of young adults with seeing disabilities have completed post-secondary degrees (Colleges Ontario, 2021). This population is at a disadvantage when applying to graduate school, not only due to low undergraduate diploma rates but also because of barriers faced in interview and employment processes. The employment rate of young adults in Ontario with post-secondary degrees (including college diplomas, credentials and university degrees) is 92%, but this drops for all populations reporting disabilities, with the lowest at 66% for physical disabilities. Perhaps it’s also unsurprising that this population tends to have more difficulty repaying student loans (Pizarro Milian, Zarifa, & Seward, 2019). The desire to avoid discrimination may lead those with hidden disabilities to underreport themselves as requiring accommodation in application processes, and those who do request accommodations are not guaranteed to receive them. Notably, the University of Waterloo recently failed to accommodate a reported disability in an undergraduate application process to the legal standard of undue hardship (CanLII, 2020).

Discrimination on the grounds of disability is illegal in Ontario. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (herein after referred to as the “Charter”) as well as the Ontario

Human Rights Code (hereinafter referred to as the “Code”) prohibit discrimination against protected classes including disability (Government of Canada, 2021; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2016). Organizations have a duty to accommodate disabilities to the point of undue hardship. The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, or AODA, sets out a process for establishing industry accommodation standards (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2021). More recently, the Accessible Canada Act was implemented in 2019 to adopt further accessibility standards in federally governed industries (Jacobs, Anderson, Rohr, & Perry, 2021). In practice, enforcement of legal protections often requires costly and arduous legal services rather than proactively enforcing its standards, such as with the AODA’s American equivalent, the Americans with Disabilities Act (Markham, 2021). Moreover, despite the AODA’s adoption in 2005 with a goal of developing, implementing and enforcing industry accessibility standards by 2025, Ontario’s post-secondary accessibility standards are still in development as will be discussed later in this report (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2021) (Ontario, 2021). Post-secondary institutions often adopt their own policies in line with legal requirements. The University of Waterloo outlines internal policy in the spirit of creating equity and access (ie. Policy 58 – “Accessibility” and Policy 65 – “Equality in Employment”) (University of Waterloo Secretariat, 2021) yet reporting on the effectiveness and enactment of these policies are somewhat lacking. The Ontario Ombudsman, an avenue to address complaints about the fairness of university processes, has not publicly reported any complaints about equity policy enactment in universities thus far. It is difficult to interpret whether this indicates of success of university policies in addressing ableism or if this is due to underreporting of academic ableism, but history and the lack of data on students with disabilities in academia suggests it is the latter.

By now, you may have noticed that this report has not yet drawn from literature on graduate students with disabilities. This is due to a shortage of research on the issues faced by graduate students with disabilities. A quick scan of literature reveals that research on students with disabilities mainly focuses on the kindergarten to grade 12 population, with some studies addressing undergraduate learning. The National Educational Association of Disabled Students (2016) stated that “no significant research on [the disabled graduate student] population has been undertaken within Canada or the United States”, yet post-secondary institutions still create policy that affects this population. Among studies with disabled subjects, it is much more difficult to find any with a focus on disabled experiences. This lack of centering disabled people in policy or research is perhaps best motivated after discussing historical context.

In the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, universities across North America preached the superiority of certain races and bodies through eugenics “science”, a discriminatory idea backed by flawed scientific arguments that these populations and their offspring are unfit for society (Dolmage, 2017) (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2018). Laws that upheld eugenics principles facilitated the institutionalization of disabled

people, native populations and immigrants (Eugenics Archive, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Universities and academics benefitted from these institutions through conducting experiments or dangerous medical procedures on these isolated and disenfranchised populations (Dolmage, 2017; Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2018). Prominent politicians and academics called for legalizing forced sterilization procedures for those deemed “unfit” to procreate (Borys, 2019). For example, the University of Alberta played a pivotal role in judging who to sterilize under Alberta’s Sexual Sterilization Act, which was only repealed less than 50 years ago (Eugenics Archive, 2013; Borys, 2019). Many spent the rest of their lives institutionalized, which medical schools across the world relied on as a supply of cadavers for exploratory examination due to the relative lack of social outrage and belief that patients – particularly of poorer backgrounds whose families did not reclaim their bodies for burial – would repay society for their institutionalization by bring subjects of study after death (Wright, Jacklin, & Themeles, 2013). Asylums formed a symbiotic relationship with medical schools and psychiatrists that allowed access to patients who could not withhold consent to their own examination. Even today, bodies of former asylum patients unearthed in a mass grave on University of Michigan property are subject to further exploratory biological studies unrelated to their cause of death (Daley, 2017) (Mearhoff, 2018). Eugenics principles, which originated from colonial North American research institutions, have left a lasting legacy on perceptions of disabled bodies in society and academia.

Less than one century ago, people with disabilities were treated as burdens. Since the 1960’s, civil rights movements challenged the systematic exclusion of disabled people from society (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2018). The Disability Rights Movement demanded removing barriers to education, transportation, and employment (Carmel, 2020). In the 1990’s, this movement also adopted the phrase “nothing about us without us”. As Charlton (1998) writes in his book of the same name, “For the first time in recorded human history politically active people with disabilities are beginning to proclaim that they know what is best for themselves and their community.” As with any equity-deserving group, representation of people with disabilities is important when making decisions that affect this population. Yet even demanding that disabled people are promoted to the top positions of organizations that claim to advance their cause has been, and still is, a hard-won battle. Gallaudet University, founded in 1864 to teach deaf and hard of hearing students (Gallaudet University, 2021), only appointed its first deaf President in 1988 after public demand for a ‘deaf President now’ (Carmel, 2020). The medical model of disability persists in painting disabled people as victims in need of charity, despite disabled activists insisting that many of the issues they face are due to social perception rather than due to the existence of their own disability (Bunbury, 2019; Current Affairs, 2020). For example, Jim Sinclair’s 1993 essay “Don’t Mourn For Us” challenged the prevailing dialogue that autistic children and adults

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<sup>1</sup> Bigoted stereotypes were used to justify erroneous notions of who was able to succeed in society. Those deemed “unfit” to procreate were often disproportionately women, aboriginal people, immigrants, and poor (Borys, 2019).

are to be pitied in a move towards the neurodiversity movement that accepts autism as a difference rather than a defect (Pripas-Kapit, 2020; Sinclair, 1993). Yet Autism Speaks, a multi-million dollar not-for-profit organization founded by Bob and Suzanne Wright when their grandchild was diagnosed with autism, has a history of excluding disabled voices and instead catering to family members of autistic individuals<sup>2</sup> (Luterman, 2020). By keeping disabled voices at the margins, organizations, laws and policy concerning disability still predominantly prioritize able bodies and voices as the norm, while failing to promote disabilities as differences that are equally deserving of inclusion.

## Issues

Disabled voices must also be centered in the discussion of accessibility challenges for graduate students with disability. However, the absence of research that asks this population about their challenges makes recommendations of future advocacy difficult. While a couple of contemporary books are devoted to the topic of academic ableism (Dolmage, 2017; Brown & Leigh, 2020; Brown, 2021), graduate students with disabilities are in a unique position for accommodation requirements that deserves more attention. Graduate students have multiple roles as students and employees, yet accommodation laws and policies decentralize accommodation requirements, creating different procedures and laws based on industry as well as the relation of the disabled person to the organization compelled to provide accommodation. This leaves graduate students to self-advocate for their accommodation rights not once upon entering their graduate program, but every time they adopt a new role. The University of Waterloo (UW) acknowledges the need for a centralized accommodation service, though exploratory progress on developing such a service is delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (University of Waterloo, 2021).

Some additional supports are available to disabled graduate students at the University of Waterloo. In particular, AccessAbility Services claims to design an accommodation plan for all aspects of the graduate academic career (AccessAbility Services, 2021), which notably omits assistance with accommodations as a graduate teaching assistant, research assistant or sessional instructor. The decentralization and lack of funding for accommodations creates barriers to accessing supports in higher education. In 2008, the average annual funding at American disability services offices for accommodating all students with disabilities was \$257,287, which is less than a dean's annual salary to accommodate thousands of students (Dolmage, 2017). As a result, many students have difficulty accessing accommodations that suit their needs. The Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association (WUSA) (2021) received reports of some undergraduate students encountering a cumbersome registration process with lots of paperwork, month-long delays to receiving course accommodations, needing to re-justify their accommodation needs even after initial registration, and even discrimination from AccessAbility staff.

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<sup>2</sup> Self-identified autistic leaders are still glaringly absent from the Autism Speaks team, despite the organization's renewed mission that removes a search for a 'cure' for autism in 2016 after public criticism (Autism Speaks, 2021).

Underfunding of disability accommodation services may lead to a lack of trained, qualified staff, timely barrier-free accommodations and internal quality assurance processes. There is no doubt that graduate students may have also faced some of these barriers when navigating AccessAbility services. The AccessAbility website states that “we can design an accommodation plan for all aspects of your graduate academic career” (AccessAbility Services, 2021), but how does this design work in practice if undergraduate students report having difficulty getting even non-customized support? Also notably absent from AccessAbility Services support services is employment supports, which are another critical aspect of the graduate student role through Research Assistantships, Teaching Assistantships, and Sessional Instructorships. Even if one navigates the UW Human Resources website for information on employee accommodations, this redirects to another page with more redirections, none of which directly answer the question of how to receive accommodations as employees. This kind of decentralization not only puts the onus on disabled people to spend unpaid hours and fill out multiple forms proving they are ‘disabled enough’ to access basic needs, but also may leave it up to the individual supervisors or course instructors who are unfamiliar with disability to arbitrate on whether those accommodations get granted. Keeping accommodation funding decentralized discourages requests for support and may result in discrimination against those with disabilities whose employment accommodations may be perceived as too costly to the department. It is important to survey the graduate student population to get accurate information about the quality of accommodations received both in their academic career as well as when fulfilling employment conditions.

Moreover, the patchwork approach to accommodations that emphasizes only fulfilling the legally mandated minimum requirements fails many students. University accommodations systems demand that students tell them what they need rather than communicating the range of supports available to students (Dolmage, 2017). This limits students’ ability to navigate accommodations that would be helpful to them, as noted in WUSA’s survey (Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association, 2021). In particular, those not familiar with knowing the academic or local accommodations supports available may particularly struggle with navigating accommodations (Dolmage, 2017). Disabled international students may struggle with the documentation requirements when transitioning to another country and coping with the lack of their usual support systems (Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association, 2021). Reducing one’s course load or taking a break in studies is an accommodation often suggested to lower stress levels, but such unscheduled breaks may not be feasible for international students due to visa or post-graduation work permit requirements (Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association, 2021). As well, some accommodations may be more difficult to access for international students. Bursaries for the cost of accommodation technology or services require a demonstration of Ontario Student Assistant Program eligibility (OSAP, 2021), a program inaccessible to international students. However the author of this report cannot find any other specific funding supports available to graduate students with

disabilities at UW<sup>3</sup>. The lack of financial support for accommodations within institutions creates a greater disparity in the ability for students to access accommodations that suit their unique needs.

The barriers students face when accessing accommodations impacts the success of students with disabilities in post-secondary education and in their post-graduate careers. People with disabilities are disproportionately unemployed, underemployed and earning less compared to their able-bodied peers after post-secondary education (Graduates with Disabilities Face Employment Struggles: Study, 2015). Their debt levels after graduation are 60% higher than their peers and unknown numbers of disabled students don't even make it to graduation (Dolmage, 2017). Disabled people are still systematically isolated and disenfranchised. As many as 30% of the 6.2 million disabled Canadians live in poverty, and risk losing economic independence through government cutbacks to social supports (Pettinicchio & Maroto, 2020). As a society, we burden the disabled with funding their own accommodation needed to exist, including medication, psychological and physical supports. Employment benefits or government funds sometimes help cover such supports. For example, graduate students have access to counselling services and health care through UW as well as through their health and dental plan. But benefits do not always fully cover support needs, leaving some paying out of pocket.

The lack of accessible, affordable housing also creates additional barriers and raises the cost of living for students with disabilities. Even though students may apply for accessible on-campus housing at UW (University of Waterloo Accessible Housing, 2021), undergraduate students at UW reported a stressful application process and inaccessible housing units (Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association, 2021). Some students instead opted to search for accessible off-campus housing, which they reported as more expensive than other off-campus housing options (Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association, 2021). Accessible, affordable housing is even more scarce than affordable housing in the Kitchener-Waterloo region (Groleau, 2021), posing a challenge for graduate students who may require accessible off-campus housing. An examination of the financial barriers faced by disabled graduate students is crucial to ensuring equity and post-graduation success.

The attitudes, behaviours, perceptions and assumptions regarding disabled people creates additional barriers in post-secondary education. For example, many students may fail to disclose a disability due to stigma, particularly if they already may face discrimination due to other aspects of their identity (Dolmage, 2017). Disabled people also encounter ableism or may internalize ableist beliefs, preventing full participation in society (Ontario, 2021).

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<sup>3</sup> The "Awards and discounts" page on AccessAbility Services lists a tuition discount available to disabled undergraduate students taking a reduced course load and provides a link to DisabilityAwards.ca, a site run by NEADS. Despite other Canadian universities offering awards specific to disabled students, no UW awards are listed on the site.



The Postsecondary Education Standards Development Committee lists eight barriers encountered in the postsecondary education sector (Ontario, 2021):

1. Attitudes, behaviours, perceptions and assumptions
2. Awareness and training
3. Assessment, curriculum and instruction
4. Digital learning and technology
5. Organizational barriers
6. Social realms, campus life
7. Physical and architectural barriers
8. Financial barriers

Each of these barriers must be addressed to increase access for students with disabilities. Even though this report focuses on recommendations concerning attitude, campus life, physical and financial barriers, as these are most obviously within the realm of the GSA's power to change, this is merely a starting point. Councillors and GSA members are encouraged to read all 179 recommendations from this report to consider how the GSA may help to dismantle all barriers for disabled graduate students. The author of this report has given the GSA feedback on these recommendations.

### Conclusions and Recommendations to GSA Council

Graduate students with disabilities are a diverse group that is understudied. The lack of attention to accommodation needs results in inequitable conditions that put this population at a disadvantage. The GSA is in a position to offer supports and advocate for change that would improve the experiences of these students. **Given the lack of data, it is crucial for the GSA to listen to the experiences of graduate students with disabilities to inform future advocacy avenues.** Furthermore, to create lasting systemic change, the GSA should adopt the mentality of "nothing about us without us" by ensuring that disabled students are consulted before enacting changes that affect their experience.

The GSA should conduct a survey examining the experiences of graduate students with disabilities. This survey should examine the support and barriers (such as the eight barriers identified in the previous section) when inquiring about the experiences of these graduate students. When examining supports, the GSA should not only inquire about knowledge of existing supports such as those mentioned in the report, but probe experiences and satisfaction with the supports available to identify gaps in services. Survey questions should also probe how experiences may differ amongst the diverse disabled graduate student population, for example specifically surveying experiences of disabled racialized students, international students, and parents. The data must be obtained and stored in a way that preserves the confidentiality of respondents, as recommended by NEADS (National Educational Association of Disabled Students, 2016). Given that the Equity Office is currently conducting their first equity survey (Equity Office, 2021) and WUSA recently conducted an accessibility survey (Waterloo

Undergraduate Student Association, 2021), the GSA may wish to coordinate with these bodies when developing their graduate student-specific questions. The results of this survey may inform the GSA's political positions. For example, the GSA should adapt its advocacy position on housing to ensure that affordable, accessible housing is available to graduate students with disabilities. Moreover, the GSA's political position on graduate student funding may take into account recommendations for removing financial barriers for graduate students with disabilities. The GSA may also refine its advocacy positions, such as those on graduate student mental health or give input on UW's Multi-Year Accessibility Plan (University of Waterloo, 2021), with information from such a survey.

The GSA should also consider implementing additional supports which are informed by disabled voices. As a start, the GSA could investigate implementing supports outlined in the NEADS and AODA reports (National Educational Association of Disabled Students, 2016) (Ontario, 2021). The GSA may explore using its advising service to assist graduate students with disabilities with the transition to graduate school, particularly bearing in mind the issues that graduate students with families or international students may face during this transition. Disclosure is also a nuanced topic that many graduate students may need help navigating. The relationship between the student and supervisor strongly impacts the graduate student experience, however graduate students with disabilities may encounter additional challenges in this relationship due to unmet accommodation needs and stigma around disclosing a disability in the academic culture. Difficulties around disclosure and employment may continue when graduate students transition to the workplace post-graduation, so there may be an additional need to provide specialised career services helping students with disabilities navigate their post-graduate career.

The GSA is also an important component of student life and should ensure that disabled students do not face barriers to getting involved in student societies or events. It should dedicate resources to accessible supports to help students with disabilities access important GSA information, participate in social events and get involved in student associations. This recommendation extends to unit associations. The GSA may consider providing centralized information on how to create accessible information resources, events, and association structures. The Centre for Teaching Excellence (Centre for Teaching Excellence, 2021) and Equity Office may also have some guidance on how to create accessible communications and/or events.

Improving the accessibility of graduate education may improve the graduate student experience and career outcomes for graduate students with disabilities. However creating an inclusive environment also benefits all graduate students. The disabled population is the largest marginalized population that any person may become included in at any time, meaning the population of graduate students with disabilities may not be static due to the development of a temporary or permanent disability. Creating inclusive physical and organizational structures allows for easy adaptation to suit individual needs as they evolve.

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## Appendix: Definitions

**Ableism:** According to the Law Commission of Ontario, ableism (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2016):

“may be defined as a belief system, analogous to racism, sexism or ageism, that sees persons with disabilities as being less worthy of respect and consideration, less able to contribute and participate, or of less inherent value than others. Ableism may be conscious or unconscious, and may be embedded in institutions, systems or the broader culture of a society. It can limit the opportunities of persons with disabilities and reduce their inclusion in the life of their communities.”

**AODA:** Acronym for the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. Originally adopted by Ontario in 2005, its purpose is (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2021):

- a) “developing, implementing and enforcing accessibility standards in order to achieve accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities with respect to goods, services, facilities, accommodation, employment, buildings, structures and premises on or before January 1, 2025; and
- b) providing for the involvement of persons with disabilities, of the Government of Ontario and of representatives of industries and of various sectors of the economy in the development of the accessibility standards.”

**Disability:** The AODA defines disability as (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2021):

- a) “any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect or illness and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, includes diabetes mellitus, epilepsy, a brain injury, any degree of paralysis, amputation, lack of physical co-ordination, blindness or visual impediment, deafness or hearing impediment, muteness or speech impediment, or physical reliance on a guide dog or other animal or on a wheelchair or other remedial appliance or device,
- b) a condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability,
- c) a learning disability, or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language,
- d) a mental disorder, or
- e) an injury or disability for which benefits were claimed or received under the insurance plan established under the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997; (“handicap”)

**Medical model of disability:** The framework that disability is a defect needing to be cured, and absent a cure, the person with a disability is unable to participate in society to a full extent (Bunbury, 2019).

**Social model of disability:** The framework that views society as disabling due to its accommodation of abled bodies as the norm, to the exclusion of disabled bodies (Bunbury, 2019).

**Undue hardship:** Organizations in Ontario have a legal duty to accommodate disabilities to the point of undue hardship according to the Ontario Human Rights Code. When assessing whether the organization is in compliance with this requirement, courts will consider only the cost of accommodation, available outside sources of funding, and any health and safety requirements (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2016). Inconvenience, speculative costs, and stereotypes are not recognized excuses for a failure to accommodate a disability.



## Appendix: NEADS recommendations

This appendix is transcribed from the NEADS report “Understanding Accessibility in Graduate Education for Students with Disabilities in Canada” (National Educational Association of Disabled Students, 2016).

### **PART 1: INCORPORATING REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS**

#### **RECOMMENDATION 1: STRENGTHEN THE STUDENT-SUPERVISOR RELATIONSHIP FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN GRADUATE EDUCATION**

We recommend that efforts be undertaken to educate both students and supervisors about their rights, obligations and responsibilities, in particular those that relate to disability in the context of graduate education, in order to foster strong relationships and student success.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 2: CLARIFY ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATE PROGRAMS**

We recommend that efforts be undertaken to educate both students and supervisors about essential requirements in graduate education and within their field of study, and their interfaces with disability and accommodation.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 3: DEVELOP ACCOMMODATION FRAMEWORKS IN THE CONTEXT OF GRADUATE EDUCATION**

We recommend that the accommodation framework and models in use for graduate settings be examined and improved to better ensure the success of graduate students with disabilities.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 4: PROMOTE AWARENESS ABOUT DISCLOSURE IN THE GRADUATE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT**

We recommend efforts be undertaken to provide educational materials on disclosure and supports to service providers and students transitioning into graduate school. These supports are intended to ensure the full awareness of the nuances of disclosure in the graduate environment, and to familiarize students and faculty with their responsibilities under provincial and national legislation.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 5: IMPROVE PROCEDURES TO ACCESS ALTERNATIVE FORMAT MATERIALS**

We recommend that academic departments and university libraries work together to determine ways to enhance the provision of alternative format materials to graduate students with disabilities.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 6: BUILD FLEXIBLE ACCOMMODATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS**

We recommend that policies and practices around accommodating graduate students with disabilities account for creativity and flexibility in accommodation planning and accomplishing graduate degree requirements, and that eligibility guidelines for scholarships, academic employment opportunities and other components of the graduate student environment take this creativity into account.

### **RECOMMENDATION 7: CLARIFY ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT POLICIES FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS**

We recommend that steps be undertaken to clarify or develop policies and practices around disability, disclosure and accommodation in the academic employment setting, and that these be disseminated to students, union staff, faculty and departmental administrative staff, as appropriate.

### **PART 2: LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD**

### **RECOMMENDATION 8: DEVELOP FINANCIAL AID POLICIES TO HELP REMOVE BARRIERS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS**

We recommend the development of policies, practices and resources aimed at removing financial barriers to graduate education.

### **RECOMMENDATION 9: ESTABLISH NATIONAL FUNDING FOR DISABILITY-RELATED ACCOMMODATIONS IN GRADUATE EDUCATION**

We recommend that national granting agencies (specifically, SSHRC, NSERC and CIHR) research and establish appropriate funding sources and mechanisms to provide centralized funding for researchers working on disability-related accommodations in graduate education.

### **RECOMMENDATION 10: REVIEW EXISTING POLICIES TO ENSURE THE ACCESSIBILITY OF EXISTING TRI-COUNCIL AND CHARITABLE FOUNDATIONS FUNDING AND SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS**

We recommend that funding agencies undertake reviews of their practices and policies to ensure accessibility and full inclusion of students with disabilities.

### **RECOMMENDATION 11: DEVELOP MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS AND POLICIES FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS**

We recommend that policies, practices and resources designed to support students with mental health disabilities be established.

### **RECOMMENDATION 12: ENCOURAGE UNIVERSAL DESIGN IN GRADUATE EDUCATION**

We recommend the adoption of a set of consensus “principles of success” arising from universal design concepts to foster the enhancement of the graduate student experience for students with disabilities on campus.

**RECOMMENDATION 13: RECOGNIZE STUDENT SUCCESS**

We recommend that institutions and relevant national associations consider methods by which their promotional campaigns about academic achievements in graduate studies might be designed to be inclusive of and enhance participation and success of students with disabilities.

**RECOMMENDATION 14: REMOVE BARRIERS TO THE POSTDOCTORAL EXPERIENCE FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

We recommend that appropriate steps be taken at the institutional, organizational and national levels to identify and implement solutions that would enhance access to and participation in postdoctorate positions for persons with disabilities.

**PART 3: BUILDING KNOWLEDGE****RECOMMENDATION 15: CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCH ABOUT THE EXPERIENCES OF GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

We recommend that coordinated efforts be undertaken at the national and institutional levels to gather on an ongoing basis relevant demographic information about the population of graduate students with disabilities.

**RECOMMENDATION 16: ESTABLISH DATA COLLECTION METHODS TO RESEARCH THE EXPERIENCES OF GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

We recommend that a multi-pronged and ongoing data collection effort be established by institutions and relevant provincial and/or national organizations. Where possible, data collection could be integrated with existing procedures for the overall graduate student population.

**RECOMMENDATION 17: PROTECT STUDENT PRIVACY IN THE MANAGEMENT OF DATA**

We recommend that a series of standards and practices be put in place to protect student anonymity and confidentiality in the analysis of large datasets relevant to the student experience of graduate students with disabilities.

**RECOMMENDATION 18: REMOVE BARRIERS TO CO- AND EXTRA-CURRICULAR PROGRAMMING IN GRADUATE EDUCATION**

We recommend that efforts be undertaken to explore the interface between disability and co/extra-curricular programming.

**RECOMMENDATION 19: IDENTIFY BEST PRACTICES FOR TRANSITION PLANNING INTO GRADUATE EDUCATION**

We recommend further research to identify best practices for transition planning for students with disabilities intending to pursue graduate education, in order to enhance existing supports.

**RECOMMENDATION 20: IDENTIFY BEST PRACTICES FOR TRANSITION PLANNING INTO THE LABOUR MARKET AFTER GRADUATION**

We recommend further research to identify best practices for career and transition planning for students with disabilities transitioning out of their graduate programs, in order to enhance labour market outcomes and measures for students with disabilities.

**RECOMMENDATION 21: BETTER UNDERSTAND BARRIERS IN THE GRADUATE ADMISSIONS PROCESS**

As part of future initiatives looking at the experience of graduate students with disabilities, we recommend further research on the issues and barriers faced by students with disabilities during the recruitment, application, interview and admissions cycle for graduate education.

**RECOMMENDATION 22: IDENTIFY BEST PRACTICES FOR ONLINE AND REMOTE LEARNING IN THE GRADUATE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT**

We recommend further research to identify student needs and best practices in online and remote learning for students with disabilities pursuing graduate education.

**PART 4: NEXT STEPS****RECOMMENDATION 23: COLLABORATE ON FURTHER RESEARCH**

We recommend the collaborative undertaking of further studies to assess the longitudinal experiences of students with disabilities in graduate education, and to ensure the successful implementation of policy and practice changes.

**RECOMMENDATION 24: ESTABLISH A NATIONAL CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOCUSED ON GRADUATE EDUCATION**

We recommend that the feasibility of establishing a national centre of excellence focused on the experience of graduate students with disabilities be examined.

**RECOMMENDATION 25: DEVELOP RESOURCES**

We recommend that resources supporting the initiatives fostered herein be developed.

## Appendix: Barriers - Postsecondary Education Standards Development Committee Report

*The following barriers are excerpts from the 2021 Initial Recommendations Report on the development of postsecondary education standards as set out in the AODA (Ontario, 2021).*

### **Barrier area 1: Attitudes, behaviours, perceptions, assumptions**

Persons with disabilities face barriers resulting from ableism which can then assume the form of internalized ableism. That is when negative attitudes and beliefs about disability, expressed or held by others (often, people in positions of authority), are directed towards persons with disabilities, and then accepted or endorsed by them on a personal level. This results in a negative self-view including feeling "less than" and a burden, self-doubt of one's capabilities, and, that a perception that they do not "fit" or belong. Ableism can significantly and negatively affect a person's well-being, performance and access to opportunities in work and school.

The committee is in agreement with the Ontario Human Rights Commission's (2018) view that "we will not have an accessible province by 2025 without tackling the social attitudes that prevent persons with disabilities from participating and contributing to the community."

In this section, we offer specific recommendations in the following five areas, while also recognizing a multidimensional framework is required to shift culture to create lasting attitudinal and behavioural change:

- transformational leadership
- accountability: metrics and performance measures
- research and scholarship
- awareness
- language

It will be through the combination of and synergy among all the postsecondary education recommendations, the other accessibility standards and strong transformational leadership, that will help shift attitudes, behaviours, perceptions and assumptions.

### **Barrier area 2: Awareness and training**

Accessibility and inclusion are constantly evolving, and knowledge that may be current one year is likely to be outdated the next. Recommendations in this section build upon the requirements of the information and communications standards. However, there is currently no requirement for periodic refreshing of any previously received staff training.

Our recommendations are meant to cascade and be viewed as a whole. We present an overarching recommendation for strong leadership by the Ontario government in

coordinating the development of the nine training recommendations for specific audiences.

To ensure a consistent and portable quality of training for all postsecondary employees and students, the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility should take the lead in developing, renewing and providing standardized accessibility training across the province regardless of postsecondary institution.

All employees (faculty and teaching staff, as well as, academic, student services and support staff) should receive foundational employee onboarding training and awareness education related to the act and how it applies to a postsecondary education setting, ableism and discrimination, as well as, engage in activities to promote self-examination. As with other mandatory training for staff, accessibility training should be renewed on a regular basis.

### ***Barrier area 3: Assessment, curriculum and instruction***

Postsecondary institutions have grappled with providing equitable access to assessments, curriculum and instruction for students with disabilities. This struggle arose because the current pedagogical practices in higher education evolved from a system that did not consider the full inclusion of students with a diverse range of abilities and learning needs. As a result, students with disabilities have come to rely on a cumbersome and expensive process of vetting and approving academic accommodations so that they may gain equal access to postsecondary education.

We approached the barriers in our learning environments with a systemic lens – that the system was not designed for inclusion, and in order to change this, we need to look at all the overall systems that impact and support learning in postsecondary education.

Our recommendations fall into the following six key areas:

- pedagogy/andragogy
- accessible format educational materials
- institutional responsibility
- quality assurance
- diversity of learning environments
- proposals

### ***Barrier area 4: Digital learning and technology***

In an accessible digital learning environment, students with disabilities must be able to independently and effectively access and use technology, produce and consume content, and engage in learning. The context of the recommendations in this section span the postsecondary digital learning environment, where learning takes place online, remotely or blended using digital technology and digital content.

These recommendations were developed by committee members with expertise in digital technology, pedagogy, content, policy, procurement and practice. Each requirement involves barriers experienced or witnessed by one or more members.

Our recommendations fall into the following six key areas:

- accessible technology
- accessibility plan
- accessible procurement support
- accessibility training/practice
- accessible and inclusive pedagogy/andragogy
- accessible content

### ***Barrier area 5: Organizational barriers***

The recommendations in this section are intended to reduce, and ideally to eliminate, systemic barriers by developing and implementing organizational policies and procedures that consider the rights and needs of all students with disabilities.

Our recommendations were informed by the collective professional or lived experience of the members of the committee.

The following guiding principles helped to shape all recommendations in this section: 1) postsecondary institutions will create and maintain welcoming and accessible environments that facilitate full participation of all students and 2) students with disabilities will experience barrier-free access to every aspect of their postsecondary experience, including exploration of postsecondary options through application and admissions processes, day-to-day curricular and co-curricular activities, and on to graduation.

Our recommendations fall under the following six themes:

- admission and accommodation processes
- accessibility lens in institutional policies
- handling of accommodation requests
- inclusive teaching and learning environments
- service animals
- business continuity plans

### ***Barrier area 6: Social realms, campus life***

Campus life involves a wide array of activities and opportunities for all students and provides an additional layer of learning and experience within the postsecondary setting. The "student experience" gained through participating in campus life is now an important piece of a student's skill development and employment outcomes.

Students with disabilities often cannot engage with campus life, in leadership roles that can influence campus decisions, or are restricted in their choice of educational institutions. Additionally, students with disabilities lack accessible, meaningful and

predictable programming that facilitates their active participation in the social realm of campus life.

Recommendations in this section are focused upon identifying and removing barriers that hinder students with disabilities from accessing and successfully engaging with campus life outside of the classroom. We specifically focus on accessible events and off-campus activities, student leadership and student engagement. Transition literature, government resources and consultation with provincial colleagues and stakeholders all support the development of recommendations.

We offer recommendations in three key areas:

- accessibility supports
- leadership
- social belonging

### ***Barrier area 7: Physical and architectural barriers***

Recommendations in this section are focused on identifying and addressing barriers to accessibility in the built environment of postsecondary institutions. We took an expansive view of the “built environment,” acknowledging that access should not be limited to buildings but include all the human-made environments in which we live, work and study on a routine basis. In developing our recommendations, we focused on building on existing standards already in use at many postsecondary institutions and shaped our recommendations to address any gaps.

Our recommendations were developed by individuals with lived experience of barriers to the built environment, and those with oversight of providing accessible services and addressing systemic barriers in diverse postsecondary settings. These experiences helped us begin our work from the understanding that our institutions are not universally accessible.

We organized our recommendations across five areas:

- technical requirements – specifications for creating an accessible built environment
- scope – where these standards apply
- maintenance and upkeep – ensuring what is accessible stays accessible
- planning, operations, decision-making, oversight – creating transparency, disability-informed decisions and sustained changes
- awareness, user experience and transparency – improvement projects, signage, training for architects

In focussing on these areas, we sought to bring some clarity to the legislative environment surrounding accessibility standards, to proactively address barriers, and to meaningfully embed the lived experiences of persons with disabilities in a way that honours intersectional identities. By taking this approach we sought to assist



postsecondary institutions avoid mistakes, avoid significant costs in the future, and avoid creating long-lasting and hugely detrimental impacts that are difficult to fix.

***Barrier area 8: Financial barriers***

For students with disabilities, the financial barriers they experience are a web of complex systemic issues which can take many forms. In our discussions, we recognized that some financial barriers fell outside the scope of our mandate (for example, Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) reform), and chose to focus our recommendations on four key themes:

- cost differentials
- transparency
- graduate student funding
- intersectionality

These areas were chosen to do two things: first, to “spotlight” issues (such as graduate student barriers and intersectionality) that are often not addressed in conversations around financial barriers and, second, to reduce the manifestation of inequity or potentially exclusionary elements of policy and practice.