

Joint-Working Group on Student Accommodations and Faculty Workload, April 2024

Report

UVic has a legal duty to provide equal opportunities for students with permanent disabilities and chronic health conditions to access post-secondary education who are registered with the Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL) by taking reasonable measures to accommodate them. The duty to accommodate is a shared responsibility, requiring the cooperation of the administration, academic units, and individuals responsible for delivering education and supporting students in their learning, such as faculty and instructors, teaching assistants, staff, etc. Students are also expected to cooperate in efforts to find suitable accommodation to support their educational pursuits, specifically, to participate in all the essential requirements of their courses or program. What constitutes essential requirements of a course or program are determined by the course instructor and unit or program leader.

An increasing number of UVic students have documented disabilities that require the development of accommodation plans by the Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL) staff. Consequently, there is an obligation to provide the necessary accommodations to ensure equal access to education. In 2017/18, approximately 1300 students at UVic had registered with CAL. By 2022/23, this number had increased to approximately 2900, with a further increase to approximately 3600 students in 2023/24. The increasing rates of participation among students with documented disabilities at UVic and post-secondary education more generally are indeed commendable, as they contribute to creating conditions for accessible and inclusive educational experiences. However, the increasing need to support students requiring academic accommodations has placed considerable strain on our existing resources. This strain has resulted in an increased workload for faculty and staff, while students express concerns about receiving the appropriate support for their education. The complexities of providing appropriate accommodations, particularly for timed assessments and activities, has increased disproportionately due to space constraints and the time required to manage these accommodations. In sum, the current situation is unsustainable, and is a challenge not unique to UVic.

To address increased faculty workload related to student accommodations and the associated concerns regarding the adequacy of accommodations and resource availability, the University Administration and the Faculty Association established a Joint Working Group on Student Accommodations and Faculty Workload pursuant to a letter of understanding in the Collective Agreement between the University of Victoria Faculty Association and the University of Victoria, July 1, 2022-June 30, 2025 (Appendix R).

The LOU states: The mandate of the Working Group will be to:

- a) review the scope and nature of student accommodation requests and impact on faculty workload, including changes that have occurred over the past five years;
- b) review CAL deadlines;
- c) consider the adequacy of CAL services, identify gaps and make recommendations on

- appropriate supports to address student needs and instructors' concerns relating to accommodation requests;
- d) determine strategies for faculty grounded in universal design principles to minimize the need for academic accommodation requests.

The Working Group was tasked to provide recommendations to the Vice-President Academic and Provost by June 30, 2024, and for the University to respond to the recommendations and develop an implementation plan within six months of their receipt.

The Working Group started their work in September 2023, with a presentation by Barb Eccles, UVic General Counsel, on the legal context and requirements for student accommodation. The Working Group also reviewed the CAL data on students with documented accommodations from 2017-2018 to 2023-2024, which showed a significant year over year increase in students registered with CAL. As of September 2023, about 15 percent of UVic students are registered with CAL, each with an academic accommodation plan. Consequently, there has been a corresponding increase in the issuance of accommodation letters to UVic instructors who must accommodate students enrolled in their courses. The current number of students receiving accommodation is expected to increase in the coming years given the increasing number of K-12 students with a documented disability.

It must be noted that the actual number of students requiring accommodations may surpass the reported figures. This discrepancy arises from the fact that not all students with a disability have access to medical professionals for formal diagnoses, making them ineligible for accommodations. In some cases, students may not even ask for accommodations for fear of stigmatization.

Students require a wide range of accommodations, with the highest proportions of accommodations as of 2023 being for extended time for test/exams (95%), distraction-reduced room (65%), audio recordings of lectures (53%), assignment extensions (46%), allowances for class absences (41%), supervised breaks during tests/exams (39%) and peer note-takers (37%). Some of the grounds for accommodation may overlap.

To better understand the academic accommodations landscape across Canadian universities, the Working Group engaged in consultations with several institutions. The aim was to determine their approaches for managing accommodations, including strategies to address increasing faculty and staff workload while ensuring students receive appropriate accommodations in accordance with the duty to accommodate students with a documented disability. The universities consulted included the University of Calgary, Carleton University, Dalhousie University, University of Guelph, Queen's University and University of Toronto.

The Working Group specifically requested information on the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in managing accommodations. While none of the consulted universities currently mandate the integration of UDL, they all express encouragement for its adoption. There has also been an increase in the incorporation of components of UDL by faculty and instructors across these institutions. Like UVic, all the universities consulted provide centralized support for scheduling and invigilating midterms and final exams for students with documented disabilities requiring accommodations, as needed. However, the Working Group did not probe the extent or nature of the central support for accommodated timed assessments at every institution or the numbers of accommodated assessments relative to UVic's numbers. Simon Fraser University reported that

with a student population of over 37,000, they have an average of 8,000 accommodated assessments per year, whereas UVic administers about 22,000 accommodated assessments annually in recent years for a student population of just over 22,000.

Given that part of the existing challenges at UVic stem from the limited functionalities of Clockwork, our current accommodation management software, the Working Group also explored how the universities consulted are using technology to manage accommodations and reduce faculty and staff workload while ensuring a seamless student experience. We found that the accommodation management system currently used by Queen's, namely, Ventus, seemed to have features capable of addressing our concerns regarding accommodation management. As such, the Working Group requested a demonstration of the software. Ventus, open-source, will require development and customization to align with our specific needs. We also requested a demonstration of Accommodate, a commercial software, to compare its functionalities with those of Ventus. While the Working Group's mandate does not include recommending the adoption of a particular accommodation software, we recognize the significance of technological solutions in managing accommodations and reducing faculty and staff workload. As such, we intend to share our findings in this area with the appropriate body responsible for making the final decision.

The LOU specifically tasked the Working Group to “determine strategies for faculty grounded in universal design for learning principles to minimize the need for academic accommodation requests”. Thus, we also sought information on experiences of incorporating UDL principles in courses, including assessments, as well as the necessary resources to support faculty in making their courses accessible. The Working Group invited a faculty member with expertise in UDL to share their experience and offer some suggestions on accessible course design. Also, we invited LTSI staff to share with the Working Group resources available to support faculty on accessible and inclusive course (re)design while also maintaining high standards of academic integrity.

Based on the work described above, the Working Group developed initial draft recommendations for consultations. In addition, in recognition of the fact that the highest proportion of student accommodations is for extended time for timed tests and exams, the Working Group discussed strategies aimed at minimizing the need for 1.5 extra time accommodations, the objective being to make timed assessments accessible for as many students as possible, thereby allowing CAL to focus on other assessments, as much as possible. This strategy directly addresses faculty workload by reducing the need for separate accommodations for students requiring up to 1.5 extra time. Moreover, it is equitable by acknowledging that some students requiring accommodations lack the necessary documentation to register with CAL, among other things, due to financial constraints or concerns about stigma.

It must be emphasized that the goal is to enhance accessibility in courses and assessments wherever possible. Achieving this goal requires the adoption of various strategies tailored to specific contexts, with universal additional time for timed assessments being just one of several approaches (for examples of possible UDL strategies, see the Appendix below, and the [UDL Learning Guide](#) on the Teach Anywhere site).

The Working Group also focused on exploring technological solutions to ease workload for faculty and staff and improve the overall user experience. However, the Group recognizes that this may be a medium-term solution due to the requisite lead-up time for adopting and implementation of a new accommodation management software. Recognizing the current constraints in resources, the

Working Group determined that enhancing CAL processes and maintaining current supports for courses and assessments are reasonable and effective short- to medium-term solutions while we work towards long-term solutions, such as establishing a centralized exam center.

The Working Group consulted the following for their feedback before finalizing the recommendations:

- Instructors of First Year Courses Working Group
- Chairs and Directors
- Associate Deans (Undergraduate) Academic Council
- Deans' Council

Recommendations

The Working Group recognizes that while inclusive course and assessment designs can reduce the need for individual accommodations, they cannot eliminate them. Given the increasing number of students requiring accommodation, including students unable or unwilling to request support, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility in courses and assessments is equitable for all students.

As such, the Working Group supports fostering an educational environment at UVic that prioritizes accessibility in learning and teaching.

While some faculty have effectively made this transition (to the extent possible), the Working Group acknowledges that others are at different stages in the process of creating accessible and inclusive courses. The Working Group therefore recommends providing resources through LTSI to assist instructors in (re)designing their courses and assessments, as appropriate, according to accessibility principles.

The Working Group also acknowledges that there are various approaches to improving the accessibility and inclusivity of courses, and understands that some approaches may prove more effective and relevant in some disciplinary contexts than others. Instructors are encouraged to adopt approaches that, in their pedagogical judgement, work best for their disciplinary context. Acknowledging the time required to transition to access-centred course and assessment design and the continued need for accommodations for many students, the Working Group recommends maintaining centralized support for accommodated assessments, as necessary. This recommendation is in alignment with the additional recommendations below intended to foster a culture of inclusive learning and teaching. In this spirit, we present the following recommendations:

1. Maintain a system that provides centralized coordination of timed in-term and final tests and exams for students requiring accommodated assessments. This includes centralized scheduling of space and invigilators.
2. Revise CAL guidelines for accommodated assessments by considering the following:
 - a. Extend deadlines for booking and printing midterms, tests and exams. This should also be applicable to other offices that administer accommodated tests and exams.
 - b. Improve communication with instructors by providing them with a list of students and their respective accommodations in advance of assessments.
 - c. Integrate automatic notifications for scheduled assessments (via Outlook).
3. Replace Clockwork with new academic accommodation software.
 - a. Establish a process for selecting accommodation management software that involves engagement with campus stakeholders (i.e., instructors, students, CAL staff, and UVic Systems). Encourage representation from the Department of Computer Science or related discipline on the selection committee.

- b. Establish “Accommodation Management Software Review Taskforce” with a mandate to periodically evaluate UVic’s accommodation software. This includes consulting with campus stakeholders to gather feedback and suggestions for enhancements/upgrades to keep software responsive and relevant for all users.
- 4. Foster a culture of inclusive and accessibility centred learning and teaching to reduce reliance on accommodations by:
 - a. Promoting Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as appropriate in course (re)design. (For examples of possible UDL strategies, see the Appendix below, and the [UDL Learning Guide](#) on the Teach Anywhere site.)
 - b. Allocating resources to enhance the accessibility of courses and assessments. Examples include:
 - i. Creating more grants and enhance existing grants to assist instructors in developing and supporting inclusivity and accessibility in course and assessment design.
 - ii. Providing enhanced supports for discipline-specific advice on integrating accessible learning/UDL principles through LTSI.
 - c. Develop university-wide orientation and handbook for instructors on CAL best practices and legal requirements regarding accessible education. Offer workshops for all instructors to provide further information about legal requirements for accessible education, CAL best practices and communication protocols between CAL and instructors.
 - d. Create Faculty-level service positions, to be held by an instructor and/or staff in that Faculty, to assist instructors with discipline-specific ideas for making courses and assessments more accessible, as well as to liaise with LTSI and CAL.
 - e. Ensure that academic units implement clear procedures for determining individuals responsible for providing accommodations/accessibility within a given course component (i.e., clarifying whether it falls under the purview of the instructor, senior lab instructor, TAs, etc.).
 - f. Entrust LTSI with leading a community of practice for instructors to share ideas and experiences aimed at promoting and enhancing accessibility in their courses.
- 5. Following evaluation of the midterm pilot and depending on success and lessons learned, including the use of universal extra time, expand centrally scheduled midterm exams across campus, at least twice per term, as appropriate.
- 6. Develop protocols for situations when students with accommodations need to take timed tests and exams at different times than the rest of the class to prevent potential academic integrity concerns. Academic units or instructors are encouraged to adopt an approach (or approaches) appropriate to their specific context. Examples include but are not limited to:

- a. Requiring students to sign an agreement not to disclose test or exam content if they write prior to the rest of the class or to refrain from seeking information about the content if they take it after the rest of the class completes the assessment.
 - b. Requiring students to remain at the test or exam location for a specified period until or after the start of the non-accommodated test or exam. Students must be informed of the waiting period and any limitations on their activities during that time before the test or exam date.
 - c. When necessary, accommodated tests or exams should be scheduled to overlap with the non-accommodated tests or exams by a specified period, at least 30 minutes. To ensure that this is always possible, CAL and OREM should extend their weekday evening hours by up to one hour (to 7:00 pm) as necessary to accommodate evening timed assessments starting at 6:30 pm.
7. In the long term, establish a separate assessment centre, with specialized space for holding accommodated tests/midterms and final exams across campus.

Membership of the Joint Working Group

- Elizabeth Adjin-Tettey, AVP Academic Programs, co-chair
- Lynne Marks, Faculty Association President (on study leave till June 30, 2024), co-chair
- Shailoo Bedi, Executive Director, LTSI
- Laurie Keenan, Director, Centre for Accessible Learning
- Travis Martin, Assistant Teaching Professor, Faculty of Science, Faculty of Science Accessibility Coordinator
- Caterina Valeo, Professor, Faculty of Engineering & Computer Science
- Carleigh Dean, VPAC Project and Communications Officer, Working Group Support

Appendix – Below are examples of Universal Design for Learning principles that instructors can adopt as appropriate for their courses and disciplinary context:

- Reviewing course objectives through an accessibility lens and aligning assessments with course learning outcomes.
- Rethinking the frequency and nature of assessments.
- Providing universal extra time for completing timed tests and exams.
- Using online assessments (e.g., BrightSpace, Online Assessment Room).
- Building in means to address missed work for all students, such as with “best X of Y” strategies for assignments.
- Providing some level of choice/autonomy in assessments, such as where students can choose from a set of options so that they feel more connected with their work.
- Video record lectures, to be provided on a timed basis or for students who miss lecture periods.
- Design activity components (LAB/TUT) such that any activity can be completed within the timeframe by students needing up to 1.5x additional time. This may include allowing reports to be completed outside of the scheduled time so that in-person time is focused on the activity.
- Proactively designing class notes with screen reader compatibility in mind, utilizing PDF formats and including alt-text for images. Anticipating the use of screen readers in providing notes to class, such that documents are written in PDF rather than handwritten, and images have alt-text included.
- Incorporating a glossary of course-specific jargon/terms/syntax in the course for quick reference for students to understand the specific use within the context of the course (as opposed to multiply-defined terms in dictionaries).
- Reduce the number of different environments with which students must interact, e.g. simplify app-management overhead.
- Use Intelligent-Agents to provide reminders and assist students in developing effective study habits.

See also the [UDL Learning Guide](#) on the Teach Anywhere site.