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**POLICY PAPER**

***University Accessibility***

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**Table of Contents**

[**Preamble** 3](#_Toc69294707)

[**Introduction** 3](#_Toc69294708)

[**Principles** 4](#_Toc69294709)

[**Concerns** 4](#_Toc69294710)

[**Recommendations** 5](#_Toc69294711)

[**Funding** 7](#_Toc69294712)

[**Physical Barriers** 10](#_Toc69294713)

[**Student Services** 13](#_Toc69294714)

[**Student Life** 20](#_Toc69294715)

[**Course Design** 22](#_Toc69294716)

[**Policy Statement:** 24](#_Toc69294717)

[**Glossary of Terms:** 28](#_Toc69294718)

[**Works Cited** 30](#_Toc69294719)

# **Preamble**

Having the opportunity to receive an education which ensures accessibility through equitable principles and policies is essential in order for students with disabilities to achieve fulfilment and success throughout their university career. Currently, students with disabilities may face additional barriers at the University which may prevent them from succeeding in all aspects of their student experience. The MSU believes that through implementing accessibility policies within areas such as funding, physical barriers, student services, student life, and course design, McMaster University can take on the necessary measures to make the University more accessible and inclusive for all students.

# **Introduction**

The McMaster Students Union believes that all students have the right to access an education which is accessible. Accessibility comes in many different forms. In the paper the key topics covered will be regarding funding, physical barriers, student services, student life, and course design. It is important that when looking at this topic it is analysed through an intersectional lens as there are many different components.

For far too long, people with disabilities have been severely mistreated in society, and this pattern is still seen to this day as folks are still being discriminated against due to ableism. Ableism is a type of discrimination one faces when said discrimination occurs solely due to the presence of one’s visible or invisible disabilities. This sort of discrimination can occur in the forms of micro or macro aggressions, consciously or unconsciously.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As society has failed to embrace and implement policies to create a more equitable environment for disabled folks the same pattern can be seen in University settings. For so long these rigid institutions have not provided any sort of accommodations or even acknowledged disabled students. Currently, many schools are behind in leading innovation at their institutions in terms of providing a high-quality education which is accessible while simultaneously looking to create positively memorable University experience for disabled students by creating inclusive environments for them.

The systemic barriers currently in place at the University makes it difficult for students with disabilities to succeed and feel supported. McMaster University needs to be a leader in taking a stance by supporting all students in all aspects of their undergraduate careers. Creating an accessible physical, social, and academic environment are some of the pillars in reversing the barriers currently in place which are preventing students from success.

Through research, consultations, and feedback the principles, concerns, and recommendations highlighted, the policy paper looks to prevent discrimination and create an equitable environment for students with disabilities.

# **Principles**

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| * Students with disabilities should have equal and fair access to funding and resources to help remove barriers associated with receiving education at McMaster University. * All students should be able to succeed in their academic pursuits and environments, free from any barriers or obstacles. * McMaster University must provide accommodations to students who require them. * Students should not be forced to disclose any diagnosis to McMaster University in order to receive accommodations. * Student experiences are vital for enriching and complimenting the development of students beyond academics should be inclusive and accessible to all students. * Courses should be designed with principles of universal and inclusive design in order to make them as accessible as possible. |

# **Concerns**

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| * There are additional costs associated with receiving an education at McMaster University for students with disabilities. * There is inadequate access to additional funding or resources available to students with disabilities which may limits some from receiving an education at McMaster University. * Students may be unaware of scholarships available for those with disabilities as McMaster does not provide readily accessible information about such grants for students. * Students with disabilities struggle with physical campus accessibility barriers that prevent this demographic from learning effectively. * Students often avoid disclosing their disabilities due to the stigma associated with disabilities. * There do not exist many peer support supports within the McMaster Community for those with physical and learning disabilities. * Current accessibility programs through Student Accessibility Services are not adequately addressing student feedback on necessary improvements to the programs. * Forced disclosure of a diagnosis to SAS is a barrier to accessing accommodations. * Waiting time for any at the Student Wellness Centre with a mental health professional, whether initial or follow up, is too long to provide the sufficient mental health support students need. * The current method of calling out names when it is someone's turn for their appointment is not accessible for individuals who may be hard of hearing. * Students with disabilities often have to leave lectures early when faced with long distances between classes and are therefore unable to network, connect with peers and often miss course content. * Seminars and experiential workshops hosted by external organizations taking place in inaccessible rooms/halls lead to a barrier between students with disabilities and their development and learning. Students with limited access to technology may face limitations in their participation in enrichment and social events. * Opportunities being communicated to the student body (via posters, social media, etc.) are missed by students with disabilities pertaining to the viewing, listening and processing of information. * Accessibility concerns may be an afterthought for many professors who are failing to meet existing university guidelines regarding accessibility which prevents students with disabilities from succeeding in the classroom. |

# **Recommendations**

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| * The Government of Ontario and McMaster University should increase funding to student disability services to increase outreach efforts necessary to connect all students with recognized or self-identified students. * McMaster University should provide additional funding to Student Success Services to meet the heightened demands students with disabilities may face due to short-term or long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. * Where possible, McMaster University should collaborate with the relevant stakeholders to create proactive solutions to weather-related barriers on campus. * When possible, McMaster University should ensure that weather-related barriers on campus are addressed in a timely manner, including timely snow removal on sidewalks and streets near the McMaster campus. * The University should communicate with students when there is an accessibility barrier on campus and the surrounding areas. * The University should clearly outline where classes will be held in Mosaic prior to course enrolment and offer an app where students can access this information. * McMaster University should ensure that the University is always fully compliant with all provincial accessibility laws / legislations and should be taking acting measures to go above and beyond to ensure campus is accessible for all students. * McMaster University should perform annual audits of buildings to ensure that inaccessible classrooms and locations are updated regularly. * Maccess should expand programs directed at those with physical disabilities and learning disabilities. * McMaster University should ensure that student services, including peer support services such as the Women Gender and Equity Network (WGEN), are in spaces which are readily accessible to all students. * Social media campaigns should be used to communicate what students are able to receive specific supports from Student Accessibility Services and what accommodations are provided to the general student body. * The University should inform the general student body that having accommodations does not show up on one’s transcript. * Student Accessibility Services should allow for many note-takers per course. * Student Accessibility Services should provide accommodations based on barriers to learning. * If a formal diagnosis continues to be required to access accommodation there should be funds available for students to help pay for said costs. * McMaster University should hire more Student Wellness Centre councillors to meet the high student demand, while continuing to provide counselling services and growing resources for students to access beyond the Student Wellness Centre. * Student Wellness should increase their number of counsellors during times of high stress and implement a reasonable minimum number of times they will see a student per semester. (Example: Exams and start of the Semester). * Counsellors should have possible crises appointments built-in to their schedules and more clearly communicate crises intake procedures. * Students should be made aware of referrals they can get from the Student Wellness Centre to programs outside of McMaster. * When in person sessions resume for counselling or other services provided by the Student Wellness Centre, the service should implement a waiting system that is accessible to those who are hard of hearing or are visually impaired. * Students with disabilities should be given priority when registering into courses. * The University should, in collaboration with students, create a list of accessible venues that seminars and experiential learning events should be hosted at. * The University should provide a standard set of accessible fonts, a checklist of design considerations, and an overview of criteria on simplicity of vocabulary and clarity of speech to all MSU organizations. * Instructors should work with students to provide extensions on outstanding assignments for all students, acknowledging the increased stress caused by rapid changes in work, school, and placement, and the time spent coordinating these changes. * Instructors should not require students to attend class remotely during specific times or participate in coursework (assignments, quizzes, etc.) within an excessively short timeframe. * Instructors shouldprovide multiple options to a reasonable extent for communication with students so that students may communicate with them in the ways which cause minimal barriers for them. * The University should ensure online course materials and in person classes are compliant with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and McMaster Accessibility Policies. |

# **Funding**

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| **Principle 1:** Students with disabilities should have equal and fair access to funding and resources to help remove barriers associated with receiving education at McMaster University  Students with disabilities often have additional costs incurred on to their education which require additional resources to help relieve financial pressures. Therefore, it is important for students to have equal access to bursaries such as the Bursary for Students with Disabilities (BSWD) and the Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities (CSG-PDSE). These should be promoted through McMaster portals such as Mosaic and on the McMaster University website. Financial barriers can also increase for students that are part-time as not all bursaries, grants and scholarships provide enough funding for part-time students. This causes students to have to look for additional ways to cover funding which can prevent them from achieving academic success e.g. working full-time or part-time jobs.  **Concern 1:** There are additional costs associated with receiving an education at McMaster University for students with disabilities.  Students with disabilities often have additional costs incurred on to their education which require additional resources to help relieve financial pressures. For instance, students with disabilities often must purchase walking, visual, auditory aids; medications; assistive and adaptive technologies; off-campus healthcare and accessing alternative formats for various course-related materials. Nearly 40 percent of Ontario students required medication of some sort, 37 percent required specialized or assistive forms of technology and 18 percent required walking aids, hearing aids or wheelchairs.[[2]](#footnote-2) These additional costs can become a financial burden for some students who also have to pay tuition costs. In addition, these costs can include and are not limited to communication boards, guide dogs, white canes, sign language interpreters, attendant care services, transportation, wheelchairs/scooters, crutches, or other walking aids, alternative formats, specialized or adaptive technology, and drugs or medical supplies. There are also additional costs associated with living off campus which includes rent and finding accessible accommodations. Lastly students may have to undergo psychosocial assessments in order to provide proof of their functional limitations which can typically cost anywhere between $1, 800 - $2, 400.[[3]](#footnote-3)  **Concern 2:** There is inadequate access to additional funding or resources available to students with disabilities which may limits some from receiving an education at McMaster University  McMaster does not provide enough information on bursaries and grants available to help students with disabilities fund their post-secondary education within Ontario. These bursaries and grants include and are not limited to the *‘Canada Study Grants for High Need Students with Permanent Disabilities’*, *‘Canada Study Grant for High Need Part-time Students’*, ‘*Ontario Special Bursary Plan.*’ These grants and bursaries should be readily promoted via Mosaic, Student Accessibility Services and the Student Success Centre. [[4]](#footnote-4)  **Concern 3:** Students may be unaware of scholarships available for those with disabilities as McMaster does not provide readily accessible information about such grants for students.  There is no explicit information on McMasters website concerning scholarships for students with disabilities. There should be access to the Government of Ontario’s website that highlights the ways in which full time and part-time students can apply to the Bursary for Students with Disabilities (BSWD) and Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities (CSG-PDSE), alongside other scholarships available such as the ‘Autism Ontario Education Scholarships, Donald Oscar Cannon Scholarship, Dr. E. Bruce Hendrick Scholarship Program, Eric Waldron Scholarship, James R. (Jamie) Greilich Memorial Scholarship, Jeanne and Peter Nolan Award, John D. Mchie Achievement Award of Excellence, Lillian R. Stegne Memorial Bursaries, alongside others. In addition, faculty academic advising offices and the McMaster Student Success Centre should provide information about these resources.[[5]](#footnote-5)  **Recommendation 1:** The Government of Ontario and McMaster University should increase funding to student disability services to increase outreach efforts necessary to connect all students with recognized or self-identified students  Over the last five years tuition fees have been increasing, adding to the additional costs students with disabilities are often forced to bear. The lack of funding available to services that deal with student accessibility needs places an extra burden on students having to look for resources that can tackle financial barriers, and aid that can help students achieve academic success. These concerns have led to students with disabilities obtaining limited resources from their respective institutions. Stronger outreach programs can help students with disabilities become aware of the services available at their respective institution to be able to understand the various forms of financial academic support offered.  **Recommendation 2:** McMaster University should provide additional funding to Student Success Services to meet the heightened demands students with disabilities may face due to short-term or long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.  To meet the ongoing demands of students with disabilities concerning remote learning more funding should be allocated to the Student Accessibility Services to provide better remote resources. These may include assistive technologies, stronger transition services for students entering first year and an increase in student support specialists. |

# **Physical Barriers**

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| There are a variety of physical barriers both on campus and in the surrounding community that hinders accessibility to students with disabilities. These barriers include inclement weather that impedes access to campus, inaccessible classroom design, and a lack of accessible transportation. This section outlines recommendations to address these concerns, as well as ways in which the University can be held accountable for meeting those concerns.  **Principle 1:** All students should be able to succeed in their academic pursuits and environments, free from any barriers or obstacles.  As of the 2018-2019 SAS report to the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, over 3000 of students with disabilities registered with SAS.[[6]](#footnote-6) This is nearly doubled from the 2016 report that was the basis of the previous Accessibility Policy Paper, with likely many more students with disabilities who are unregistered. The University has an obligation to ensure all students can succeed in the academic setting, but students with disabilities often face obstacles at McMaster that impedes learning. The University should ensure these obstacles are eliminated, and that there is access to necessary support and resources to ensure an inclusive, equitable experience.  **Concern 1:** Inclement weather in the winter months pose significant transportation barriers for students with physical disabilities.  During the Winter semester, the University often closes its campus due to inclement weather, such as heavy snowfall and freezing rain. This usually occurs during the afternoon, leaving students stranded on campus due to the lack of an earlier notice.  **Concern 2:** Students with disabilities struggle with physical campus accessibility barriers that prevent this demographic from learning effectively.  The 2016 MSU Accessibility Forum, currently the most up-to-date official consultation with students with disabilities, echoes the sentiments of its 2014 predecessor regarding physical inaccessibility on campus and in classrooms. Both Forums discuss how a lack of accessible entrances and elevators is the first of many obstacles they face when attempting to attend class.[[7]](#footnote-7) [[8]](#footnote-8) This is further supported in the McMaster Accessibility Guide from 2016-2017, wherein UH, GH, MUSC, Divinity College, Commons Testing, Bridges, and Centro all have inaccessible lifts, which greatly hinders physically disabled students learning and experience at McMaster as all of these are key areas of student life.[[9]](#footnote-9)  Moreover, many lecture halls have a limited amount of accessible seating, with the only wheelchair accessible seats located at the very front or very back, such as MDCL 1305, CNH 104, TSH 120, ITB 137, among others. Additionally, some lecture halls have no accessible seating at all, such as HSC 1A1 and 1A6, ABB 27, BSB 147, and the DSB basement classrooms.[[10]](#footnote-10) Additionally, students have reported that the limited accessible seats in lecture halls are often occupied by able-bodied students who don’t require them, thus creating a shortage of seating for students who need these seats. Also, none of the lecture halls have railings on lecture hall stairs, further making mobility difficult for students with physical disabilities.  Another common issue that students encounter is difficulty travelling to buildings within the 10 minutes allocated between classes. This is influenced by a multitude of factors, such as classes going over time, inclement weather, and the rush that occurs before and after classes wherein large groups of students simultaneously enter and leave a lecture hall, causing congestion at otherwise accessible pathways.  **Recommendation 1**: Where possible, McMaster University should collaborate with the relevant stakeholders to create proactive solutions to weather-related barriers on campus.  The University should collaborate with students, the SAS, and other relevant groups to update the school closure policy to ensure student safety and accessibility is prioritized during campus closures. For example, the University can implement a school closure announcement policy that mandates closures are announced prior to a set time that students would begin commuting to campus. Similarly, the University can update the Communication section of their current Storm Emergency Policy by implementing a mass, automated email to all students and staff when closures occur in order to increase visibility regarding the announcement rather than relying only on the McMaster website and social media accounts that not everyone subscribes to.[[11]](#footnote-11)  **Recommendation 2:** When possible, McMaster University should ensure that weather-related barriers on campus are addressed in a timely manner, including timely snow removal on sidewalks and streets near the McMaster campus.  The University should collaborate with the City of Hamilton to increase the current winter class priorities that currently exist to establish the timeline in which roads are snow ploughed. Currently, Main St. West, King St. West, and Osler Dr. are considered (1) Major arterial roads and escarpment access, wherein they aim to have the roads clear of snow within 4 hours of snowfall. However, the surrounding neighbourhoods that are predominantly populated with students are considered (2A) Primary collector roads, (2B) Secondary collector roads, and (3R) Residential roads, which can take anywhere from 8 to 24 hours to be clear of snow after snowfall. As such, students with physical disabilities who live in the surrounding neighbourhoods are likely to miss class for at least half a day, if not more, due to the uncleared sidewalks and streets. If possible, the University should advocate to the City of Hamilton to consider increasing the ploughing priority of the neighbourhoods surrounding the University to maximize the ability of students with physical disabilities to attend campus.  **Recommendation 3:** The University should communicate with students when there is an accessibility barrier on campus and the surrounding areas.  In the University’s Risk Management Manual (RMM) policy #323 on Health and Safety, and the policy on Approval Authorities for Construction and Maintenance Projects, there is no mention of informing staff and students about construction projects that are barriers to travelling on and around campus and accessing buildings and locations. Since the University runs construction and maintenance projects throughout the school year, it is important for all students, especially those with physical disabilities, to be aware of barriers to accessing the campus.[[12]](#footnote-12) [[13]](#footnote-13)  **Recommendation 4:** The University should clearly outline where classes will be held in Mosaic prior to course enrolment and offer an app where students can access this information.  While it is difficult to accurately establish where classes are held, due to the uncertainty of class sizes even weeks into the semester, the University should give students a general idea of the location of lectures on Mosaic / offering information through an app which is easily accessible to students. In order to aid students with physical disabilities in creating schedules with more reasonable distances between classes, the University should give approximate locations as to where classes are held based on data on class sizes from previous semesters.  **Recommendation 5:** McMaster University should ensure that the University is always fully compliant with all provincial accessibility laws / legislations and should be taking acting measures to go above and beyond to ensure campus is accessible for all students.  There are many laws and legislations in Ontario related to addressing barriers to accessibility. These include the Ontario Disabilities Act, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, and the Ontario Building Code. The University should ensure that there are necessary staff to oversee compliance with current legislation and that regular audits are performed to ensure that the University is adhering to the standards and best practices outlined in the aforementioned legislature.  **Recommendation 6**: McMaster University should perform annual audits of buildings to ensure that inaccessible classrooms and locations are updated regularly.  The University should regularly perform facility audits to ensure compliance with provincial accessibility laws and legislation. There are various organizations that the University can collaborate with to perform these audits, such as Accessibility Services Canada, which offered free building accessibility audits and certifications via a grant program from the Ontario government.[[14]](#footnote-14) Another option is to form a committee that operates under the MSU, so that it can work independently from the University, to perform these audits and report findings to both the University and MSU. |

# **Student Services**

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| **Principle 1:** McMaster University must provide accommodations to students who require them.  Everyone has an equal right to access education under 26 of the UN Declaration of Human Right (UNHDR) (1948). In the UNDHR (1948, s.26) it states higher education, such as post-secondary, should be “...equally accessible to all on the basis of merit”. As a result, a person's ability to access post-secondary education should only be limited by their personal merit, not accessibility concerns. Moreover, McMaster University, as a post-secondary institution must ensure that all students requiring accommodation are granted that as prescribed under the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2016).[[15]](#footnote-15)  **Principle 2:** Students should not be forced to disclose any diagnosis to McMaster University in order to receive accommodations.  In order to support the mental wellbeing and dignity of students with disabilities, one must consider the real and perceived stigma students may face when they are asked for an explicit diagnosis disclosure in order to access accommodations. This stigma may negatively impact the general well-being of the student when they request accommodations. Students may also be completely discouraged from seeking accommodations in the first palace. As a result, a diagnosis disclosure should only be allowed in situations where it is deemed absolutely imperative by the professor and the student SAS coordinator. Moreover, if it is deemed imperative a disclosure occurs students should have complete control over their involvement and how individuals will be notified allowing them to retain a sense of empowerment and dignity in the situation.  **Principle 3**: Students should have access to timely and sufficient mental health care through the University.  Post-secondary students are at high risk for mental health issues. These mental health issues are also linked to affecting student’s ability function, leading to valid claims for accessibility. In regards to McMaster this increasing trend of mental health issues has been spotted among students with the number of individuals accessing Student Accessibility Services with mental health concerns increasing rapidly over the last few academic terms, more than one third of all visits to the Student Wellness Centre being mental health related, and 70% of the student population stating they want to seek counselling.[[16]](#footnote-16) Moreover, in the year 2014-2015 counselling appointments through the Student Wellness Centre have increased by more than 10 times.[[17]](#footnote-17) As a result, due to high demand for mental health services on campus, that seems to only be increasing, it is apparent that more robust mental health services must be offered to the student community at McMaster.  **Concern 1:** Students often avoid disclosing their disabilities due to the stigma associated with disabilities.  Disabilities, whether visible or invisible, are often met with a certain amount of stigma that can negatively impact an individual’s self-image, relationships, and over all life.[[18]](#footnote-18) In attempts to manage and/or deflect stigma placed on them, some students, especially those with invisible disabilities, may choose not to disclose their disability leading to no accommodations.[[19]](#footnote-19) By not accessing accommodations or registering with SAS students will have little access to services that will vastly improve and/or could be essential to their success in a post-secondary environment.[[20]](#footnote-20)  **Concern 2:** There do not exist many current peer support supports within the McMaster Community for those with physical and learning disabilities.  Due to cultural shifts surrounding mental health there has been an increase in programs and clubs within McMaster surrounding the area of mental health and trying to deconstruct the stigma surrounding it. However, accessibility relates to more than just mental health, and some students within the McMaster community have expressed that they have felt a lack of support surrounding their physical or learning disabilities. This may be due to a number of factors and should be addressed through a variety of means.  **Concern 3**: Current accessibility programs through Student Accessibility Services are not adequately addressing student feedback on necessary improvements to the programs.  Based on reports of students, some services offered through Student Accessibility Services, such as the note-taking program, have gaps that need to be filled in order for them to reach their peak effectiveness.[[21]](#footnote-21)  **Concern 4**: Forced disclosure of a diagnosis to SAS is a barrier to accessing accommodations.  People experience disability and a need for accommodations differently, no two people are the same. As a result, accommodations are needed by different people for different reasons. By limiting accommodation to just people with diagnosable illness/disabilities stops students who would benefit from accommodations due to different reasons, for example a time of extreme stress which could affect academic performance, from accessing them.[[22]](#footnote-22) Moreover, requiring formal diagnosis is a barrier to students affected by stigma of their disability and/or economics means.[[23]](#footnote-23)  **Concern 5:** Waiting time for any at the Student Wellness Centre with a mental health professional, whether initial or follow up, is too long to provide the sufficient mental health support students need.  McMaster University currently has around 28,000 undergraduates and 5,000 graduate students, with the Student Wellness Centre supporting them all.[[24]](#footnote-24) However, the Student Wellness Centre only house -- counsellors. Due to vast overpopulation of students compared to councillors and the high-risk levels of university students for mental health struggles many students report long wait times for appointments and long periods of times between follow up appointments.  **Concern 6:** The current method of calling out names when it is someone's turn for their appointment is not accessible for individuals who may be hard of hearing.  When students seek services from the Student Wellness Centre and are waiting to be accommodated, the staff often just calls in people’s names in order to let everyone know who is next. Students have voiced concerns that for those who are hard of hearing this method is not one which is accessible.  **Recommendation 1:** McMaster University should pursue comprehensive and continuous training for all faculty staff and volunteers surrounding disabilities and accessibility matters to ensure all faculties are up to date and the University can mitigate stigma and barriers for students seeking accessibility.  Currently, all McMaster staff and volunteers must complete training on AODA standards under a module run through Mosaic called *AODA and Human Rights Code*. However, this module is only required to be taken once throughout a person's employment at the University, or whenever updates occur, and does not focus largely on accommodations needed for educational purposes or encouraging individuals to reflect on their biases. To ensure this training is effective the AODA course should be required to be repeated every few years, similar to other models on Mosaic, and it should also focus on accessibility in an educational sense. The repetitiveness of the module may likely have more impact on McMaster staff and volunteers than simply being completed once.  **Recommendation 2:** Maccess should expand programs directed at those with physical disabilities and learning disabilities.  When first starting their peer support group Maccess focused more so on mental illnesses, which is reasonable considering there are commonly experiences within the post-secondary community.[[25]](#footnote-25) However, there is a need and opportunity for Maccess’ peer support groups to expand spaces for those with physical and learning disabilities as there are few other spaces on campus for students in those communities to connect. Peer support is beneficial to all people, and it should not just be limited to those with mental health concerns. In regard to learning disabilities, Maccess has recently added a peer support group which should continue to be developed.  **Recommendation 3:**) McMaster University needs to ensure that student services, including peer support services such as the Women Gender and Equity Network (WGEN, are in spaces which are accessible to all students.  Currently, the personal physical space for WGEN is not accessible as it is on the second floor of MUSC which is difficult to access as it is not wheelchair accessible. Also, harsh lighting in this space is another accessibility concern. It is important that this service be relocated to a space which can be accessible by all students as the service is essential for many students looking to seek out support.  **Recommendation 4:** Social Media campaigns should be used to communicate what students are able to receive specific supports from Student Accessibility Services and what accommodations are provided to the general student body.  Students are increasingly using social media to connect, especially during COVID.[[26]](#footnote-26) As a result, using the power of social media to run campaigns on who qualifies for accommodation and what accommodations are available could increase the student body’s knowledge on Student Accessibility Services making them more likely to seek accommodations they would benefit from. Social media could also be used to break down the barrier of self-stigmatization students report in regard to their disabilities stopping them from initially accessing accommodations.[[27]](#footnote-27)  **Recommendation 5:** The University should inform the general student body that having accommodations does not show up on one’s transcript.  Stigma is a large barrier affecting whether or not a student chooses to access help and/or accommodations.[[28]](#footnote-28) Some students express worries around disclosing accommodations affecting their relationship with professors, peers, and even future employers due to the stigma surrounding them.[[29]](#footnote-29) As a result, some students may choose not to access programs they would benefit from as they believe it could hinder their future possibilities in terms of graduate studies and/or employment.[[30]](#footnote-30) To combat this worry of students, it should be made clear that any accommodations they receive from Student Accessibility Services will not be placed on their transcript.[[31]](#footnote-31)  **Recommendation 6**: Student Accessibility Services should allow for many note-takers per course.  One major flaw of the student accessibility service's current note taking system is that there is usually only one person per class that is a designated note taker.[[32]](#footnote-32) This system makes students needing accommodations highly reliant on one person.[[33]](#footnote-33) As a result, if the sole note taker does not take good notes or misses class students are without an avenue to pursue.[[34]](#footnote-34) By opening up the number of note takers, note takers do not have so much stress or responsibility placed on them and students who need accommodation have access to more resources as different people will pick up on different things when in class.[[35]](#footnote-35) This change would also offer more students an ability to volunteer and give back to their community in a positive way.  **Recommendation 7:** Student Accessibility Services should provide accommodations based on barriers to learning.  Following in the footsteps of York University, McMaster should switch their standard for accommodation to proof of barrier to learning instead of an explicit formal diagnosis. According to this standard, in order to receive accommodations through SAS, students would present medical or specialists documents stating they have a disability or situations in their life acting as a barrier to learning which would benefit from accommodations. This will diminish some of the stigma associated with the disclosure process leading more students to accessing the accommodations they need.  **Recommendation 8**: If a formal diagnosis continues to be required to access accommodation there should be funds available for students to help pay for said costs.  If a formal diagnosis is required for accommodations through Student Accessibility Services, while not encouraged, there should be programs established to make formal diagnosis more accessible; As in some instances this need for medical documentation can be a barrier to accommodations the student would benefit from.[[36]](#footnote-36) This is echoed in the work of Chambers, Bolton, and Sukhai (2013) findings there are considerable costs associated with medical testing for many disabilities, specifically it is noted that learning disability assessments can cost upwards of $3000 with large waiting lists associated with them. As a result, to alleviate some of the financial burden students may incur seeking a formal diagnosis to access accommodations funds should be made available to cover some costs.  **Recommendation 9**: McMaster University should hire more Student Wellness Centre councillors to meet the high student demand, while continuing to provide counselling services and growing resources for students to access beyond Student Wellness Centre.  Currently, one of the largest barriers to accessing quality mental health care at McMaster is the number of councillors at the Student Wellness Centre. Due to a low number of councillors, student waiting times for appointments are long, as a result the hiring of more counsellors means more students will be able to be seen in the same amount of time, cutting wait times as a result. Moreover, as the student population of McMaster continues to grow, wait times for councillors will only continue to be exacerbated if more counsellors are not hired. With the Covid-19 pandemic, services moved online. With the return to campus the University should also continue to offer services both in person and online.  **Recommendation 10**: Student Wellness should increase their number of counsellors during times of high stress and implement a reasonable minimum number of times they will see a student per semester. (example: Exams and start of the Semester).  Starting a new semester or exam/midterm season can be extremely stressful times for university students, explaining the moderate to high levels of stress that are almost synonymous with being a university student.[[37]](#footnote-37) Psychological stress, especially high levels of it, are linked to the onset, worsening, or perpetuation of differing mental illnesses including, major depressive disorder, general anxiety disorder, and schizophrenia.[[38]](#footnote-38) This link can explain the huge influxes of students seen in the Student Wellness Centre during September and exam seasons. As a result, the Student Wellness Centre should be adequately equipped to meet the increase in demand for counselling services during these known times of high stress for students. Students also take a lot of courage to open up to councillors and may not hear back for long periods of time due to the high demand of councillors. Through hiring more councillors which will allow for more appointments the MSU encourages SWC to see students more often so they can seek the help they need in a meaningful and impactful manner.  **Recommendation 11**: Counsellors should have possible crises appointments built-in to their schedules and more clearly communicate crises intake procedures.  On the Student Wellness Centre’s (n.d, par.4) website under crisis support it states “ [w]e will do our best to arrange an appointment with a counsellor within 24 hours”.[[39]](#footnote-39) However many students have reported that in reality when seeking crisis support they do not receive it until days later. Not only would more counsellors help with this problem but also having time set aside in counsellors’ schedules to take crisis appointments would be useful as it would likely mitigate the wait time in these emergency situations. The system should also be more clearly communicated so students know how to access urgent support.  **Recommendation 12**: Students should be made aware of referrals they can get from the Student Wellness Centre to programs outside of McMaster.  Doctors at the Student Wellness Centre have the ability to refer students to comprehensive mental health programs run outside of McMaster in the Hamilton Community, for example a wide variety of free mental health clinics at St. Joseph's Hospital. These outside clinics can offer students more comprehensive and consistent treatment options while also alleviating some of the strain on McMaster’s already overrun Mental health programs. However, outside clinics are still somewhat unknown to the student population. As a result, when speaking with Student Wellness Centre this option should be given to students as it allows them to make informed decisions about their treatment and choose the option for themselves and their needs.  **Recommendation 13:** When in person sessions resume for counselling or other services provided by the Student Wellness Centre, the service should implement a waiting system that is accessible to those who are hard of hearing or are visually impaired.  The Student Wellness Centre should implement a system where students are given a ticket number and are able to view a large screen where they can see if their number is next or a small buzzer gadget which they can hold onto and feel vibrate once it is there time for an appointment or any service in which they are seeking. |

# **Student Life**

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| **Principle 1:** Student experiences are vital for enriching and complimenting the development of students beyond academics should be inclusive and accessible to all students.  McMaster University has a diverse spectrum of extra-curricular events and activities for students to enrich their careers in academia. These include skill-building workshops hosted by Student Success Centre, and celebratory events such as Light Up the Night and many more. The multitude of opportunities for growth, enrichment, and celebration are core aspects of the life of a student at McMaster and should thus be equally accessible to students with disabilities as they are for any other student. Students with limitations due to technology need to be accommodated to ensure they have equal access to online enrichment opportunities as well. Furthermore, students with disabilities or technological limitations should be encouraged and supported through their participation so that they may avail the opportunities available to the fullest extent they decide.  **Concern 1:** Students with disabilities often have to leave lectures early when faced with long distances between classes and are therefore unable to network, connect with peers and often miss course content.  Transitioning between lectures, tutorials and labs is a critical aspect of student life as it is the time when most students are able to unwind and connect with their peers. This opportunity is often unavailable to students with disabilities pertaining to mobility, especially if their schedules involve travelling great distances between classes. Often the students even have to leave the class early to make it to the next class on time, thus missing both networking and learning opportunities.  **Concern 2:** Seminars and experiential workshops hosted by external organizations taking place in inaccessible rooms/halls lead to a barrier between students with disabilities and their development and learning. Students with limited access to technology may face limitations in their participation in enrichment and social events.  McMaster University prides itself in the integration of experiential learning into our academic programs. One of the largest opportunities along the experiential learning route are seminars and workshops organized by both McMaster and student led organizations such as SAS, and wellness clubs. Students with disabilities are unable to access these enrichment and development opportunities when the events are held in locations inaccessible to them physically. Furthermore, for virtually available events accessibility entails having high speed internet, and a computing device capable of running the software’s used. Students without access to these are unable to benefit from opportunities intended for all McMaster students.  **Concern 3:** Opportunities being communicated to the student body (via posters, social media, etc.) are missed by students with disabilities pertaining to the viewing, listening and processing of information.  Communication is a key link in students’ ability to identify sources of development, enrichment and social engagement. Opportunities being communicated to the student body (via posters, social media, etc.) are missed by students with disabilities pertaining to the viewing, listening and processing of information. Usage of overly complex vocabulary and imagery that may be difficult to comprehend or understand for either students with disabilities or students in the process of gaining proficiency in the English language leads to these demographics to be excluded from potentially life changing experiences and opportunities. Furthermore, usage of illegible fonts, overly busy graphics and unclear speech can lead to more missed opportunity and inaccessibility.  **Recommendation 1:** Students with disabilities should be given priority when registering into courses.  There should be a prioritization of scheduling students with disabilities and encouragement to plan courses to minimize distances between classes and therefore reduce the amount of time spent travelling between classes and increase the opportunity for learning and networking. Further work can be done to automatically optimize schedules for students with disabilities to accommodate them better in terms of reduced average travel distances between scheduled lectures/tutorials/labs by aiming to have as many consecutive scheduled units in the same/neighbouring buildings and minimizing the need to travel back and forth across large distances.  **Recommendation 2:** The University should, in collaboration with students, create a list of accessible venues that seminars and experiential learning events should be hosted at.  Experiential learning requires students to gain more hands-on experience including attending workshops, clubs etc. To enable students with disabilities we can ensure clubs are following practices that not only allow for students with disabilities to participate but encourage it. Events held on campus should be strictly hosted in accessible rooms and lecture halls or have some means of moving access for people with disabilities. For external organizations a list of accessible locations should be made available to book. Furthermore, ensuring all students with technological restrictions are being supported and encouraged throughout their academic career at McMaster University giving them the best chance at networking and connecting to the McMaster student body and utilizing the opportunities created for all students. This can be achieved by having a responsive contact line to UTS to gain timely technical support, and utilizing software that is readily available, free and reliable for as large a range of devices as possible.  **Recommendation 3:** The University should provide a standard set of accessible fonts, a checklist of design considerations, and an overview of criteria on simplicity of vocabulary and clarity of speech to all MSU organizations.  Creating accessible standards resources that all media catered towards the McMaster student body is legible, clear and visible within a colour and contrast range accessible to all students. Considerations for students with auditory disabilities should be catered to using subtitles for all media. Considerations for students with visual impairments should be catered for by using contrasting colours and non-busy graphics. Considerations for students with disabilities pertaining to the processing of information should be catered to by using moderate paced speech whenever possible. Furthermore, requiring all communications to the student body to adhere to these accessibility considerations to equalize the access to student life opportunities for all students. |

# **Course Design**

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| **Principle 1:** Courses should be designed with principles of universal and inclusive design in order to make them as accessible as possible.  Course design has a major impact on university experience. Current measures are not adequate in ensuring that students are successful in their courses due to there not being strict measures in place to hold the university or instructors accountable.  **Concern 1:** Accessibility concerns maybe an afterthought for many professors who are failing to meet existing university guidelines regarding accessibility which prevents students with disabilities from succeeding in the classroom.  Professors are required to meet AODA requirements which is not the case. Many professors are not even aware that they are required to do this or do not know what tools and strategies are available to improve the accessibility of courses. However, some may view universal design as something that is optional within the university learning environment.[[40]](#footnote-40)  **Recommendation 1:** Instructors should work with students to provide extensions on outstanding assignments for all students, acknowledging the increased stress caused by rapid changes in work, school, and placement, and the time spent coordinating these changes.  Several students noted for Spring, 2020 online courses that they noticed more content being added to their online courses that did not seem able to be realistically completed. Some students speculated that perhaps this was an engagement strategy on the instructor side, but that this was having the opposite effect (making courses more inaccessible and less engaging)E.g. Issues noted in not sending lecture content ahead of time per accommodations (for document and material conversion, for example)**. [[41]](#footnote-41)**  **Recommendation 2:** Instructors should not require students to attend class remotely during specific times or participate in coursework (assignments, quizzes, etc.) within an excessively short timeframe.  Barriers also noted in providing the same amount of time to take tests, not accounting for distractions in the home environment. Students have talked about many experiences where this is a problem. A particular instance where the time provided for the assessment was quite fair (12 hour time period), but that the assessment itself was designed to take between 10-12 hours to complete – the assignment time period was held for the majority of the class between 6:30pm-6:30am)It was noted several times that having all course materials and services suddenly moved online has been especially anxiety inducing and sensory overloading, as students are now having to use their computers for multiple platforms and functionalities (work, school, socialization, etc.)Students have expressed feelings of anxiety and sensory overload.[[42]](#footnote-42)  **Recommendation 3:** Instructors shouldprovide multiple options to a reasonable extent for communication with students so that students may communicate with them in the ways which cause minimal barriers for them trying to access schoolwork.  Students switching from writing tests on paper that was originally provided by the University now not having access to this paper-only format; needing to obtain hardware to adapt to printing their own materials (in this case, one of the student’s accommodations was to be able to write examinations on paper) E.g. Not being able to access certain digital formats and platforms which are difficult / impossible to navigate (no captions, not screen-reader friendly, etc.)**[[43]](#footnote-43)**  **Recommendation 4:** The University should ensure online course materials and in person classes are compliant with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and McMaster Accessibility Policies.  The University and instructors should implement the necessary oversight and staffing to ensure that all online course materials are compliant with current regulations and policies. This is especially relevant as online elements are being incorporated into courses, as students fear that the move to online learning environments will jeopardize their grades and existing accommodations. In terms of in person classes there are classrooms such as LR Wilson which are difficult environments for deaf / hard of hearing students to learn in given the circular set up to the room. This barrier to lip reading should be flagged for these students in case they are to have a class there. Introducing better sound systems in lecture halls/classrooms that allow for Bluetooth compatibility with listening devices. |

# **Policy Statement:**

**Whereas:** There are additional costs associated with receiving an education at McMaster University for students with disabilities.

**Whereas:** There is inadequate access to additional funding or resources available to students with disabilities which may limits some from receiving an education at McMaster University.

**Whereas:** Students may be unaware of scholarships available for those with disabilities as McMaster does not provide readily accessible information about such grants for students.

**Whereas:** Students with disabilities struggle with physical campus accessibility barriers that prevent this demographic from learning effectively.

**Whereas:** Students often avoid disclosing their disabilities due to the stigma associated with disabilities.

**Whereas:** Low peer support outlets within the McMaster Community for those with physical and learning disabilities.

**Whereas:** Current accessibility programs through Student Accessibility Services are not adequately addressing student feedback on necessary improvements to the programs.

**Whereas:** Forced disclosure of a diagnosis to SAS is a barrier to accessing accommodations.

**Whereas:** Waiting time for any at the Student Wellness Centre with a mental health professional, whether initial or follow up, is too long to provide the sufficient mental health support students need.

**Whereas:** The current method of calling out names when it is someone's turn for their appointment is not accessible for individuals who may be hard of hearing.

**Whereas:** Students with disabilities often have to leave lectures early when faced with long distances between classes and are therefore unable to network, connect with peers and often miss course content.

**Whereas:** Seminars and experiential workshops hosted by external organizations taking place in inaccessible rooms/halls lead to a barrier between students with disabilities and their development and learning. Students with limited access to technology may face limitations in their participation in enrichment and social events.

**Whereas:** Opportunities being communicated to the student body (via posters, social media, etc.) are missed by students with disabilities pertaining to the viewing, listening and processing of information.

**Whereas:** Accessibility concerns may be an afterthought for many professors who are failing to meet existing university guidelines regarding accessibility which prevents students with disabilities from succeeding in the classroom.

**BIFRT:** The Government of Ontario and McMaster University should increase funding to student disability services to increase outreach efforts necessary to connect all students with recognized or self-identified students.

**BIFRT:** McMaster University should provide additional funding to Student Success Services to meet the heightened demands students with disabilities may face due to short-term or long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**BIFRT:** Where possible, McMaster University should collaborate with the relevant stakeholders to create proactive solutions to weather-related barriers on campus.

**BIFRT:** When possible, McMaster University should ensure that weather-related barriers on campus are addressed in a timely manner, including timely snow removal on sidewalks and streets near the McMaster campus.

**BIFRT:** The University should communicate with students when there is an accessibility barrier on campus and the surrounding areas.

**BIFRT:** The University should clearly outline where classes will be held in Mosaic prior to course enrolment and offer an app where students can access this information.

**BIFRT:** McMaster University should ensure that the University is always fully compliant with all provincial accessibility laws / legislations and should be taking acting measures to go above and beyond to ensure campus is accessible for all students.

**BIFRT:** McMaster University should perform annual audits of buildings to ensure that inaccessible classrooms and locations are updated regularly.

**BIFRT:** Maccess should expand programs directed at those with physical disabilities and learning disabilities.

**BIFRT:** McMaster University needs to ensure that student services, including peer support services such as the Women Gender and Equity Network (WGEN), are in spaces which are accessible to all students.

**BIFRT:** Social Media campaigns should be used to communicate what students are able to receive specific supports from Student Accessibility Services and what accommodations are provided to the general student body.

**BIFRT:** The University should inform the general student body that having accommodations does not show up on one’s transcript.

**BIFRT:** Student Accessibility Services should allow for many note-takers per course.

**BIFRT:** Student Accessibility Services should provide accommodations based on barriers to learning.

**BIFRT:** If a formal diagnosis continues to be required to access accommodation there should be funds available for students to help pay for said costs.

**BIFRT:** McMaster University should hire more Student Wellness Centre councillors to meet the high student demand, while continuing to provide counselling services and growing resources for students to access beyond the Student Wellness Centre.

**BIFRT:** Student Wellness should increase their number of counsellors during times of high stress and implement a reasonable minimum number of times they will see a student per semester. (example: Exams and start of the Semester).

**BIFRT:** Counsellors should have possible crises appointments built-in to their schedules and more clearly communicate crises intake procedures.

**BIFRT:** Students should be made aware of referrals they can get from the Student Wellness Centres to programs outside of McMaster.

**BIFRT:** When in person sessions resume for counselling or other services provided by the Student Wellness Centre, the service should implement a waiting system that is accessible those who are hard of hearing or are visually impaired.

**BIFRT:** Students with disabilities should be given priority when registering into courses.

**BIFRT:** The University should, in collaboration with students, create a list of accessible venues that seminars and experiential learning events should be hosted at.

**BIFRT:** The University should provide a standard set of accessible fonts, a checklist of design considerations, and an overview of criteria on simplicity of vocabulary and clarity of speech to all MSU organizations.

**BIFRT:** Instructors should work with students to provide extensions on outstanding assignments for all students, acknowledging the increased stress caused by rapid changes in work, school, and placement, and the time spent coordinating these changes.

**BIFRT:** Instructors should not require students to attend class remotely during specific times or participate in coursework (assignments, quizzes, etc.) within an excessively short timeframe.

**BIFRT:** Instructors shouldprovide multiple options to a reasonable extent for communication with students so that students may communicate with them in the ways which cause minimal barriers for them.

**BIFRT:** The University should ensure online course materials and in person classes are compliant with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and McMaster Accessibility Policies.

# **Glossary of Terms:**

**AODA:** AODA stands for the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA) became law on June 13, 2005. Ontario is the first province in Canada to pass legislation that will develop mandatory accessibility standards with the goal of identifying, removing, and preventing barriers for people with disabilities in key areas of daily living. The goal is to make Ontario accessible to people with

disabilities by 2025.

**Accessibility Forum:** The MSU’s annual Accessibility Forum is hosted by the Diversity Services Abilities Committee in collaboration with the University Affairs Committee. The forum allows students with disabilities to provide feedback on related issues relating to this topic. The feedback is recorded anonymously and used to provide focus for this policy paper.

**Barrier:** According to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), a barrier is "anything that prevents a person with a disability from fully participating in all aspects of society because of his or her disability, including a physical barrier, an architectural barrier, information or communications barrier, an attitudinal barrier, a technological barrier, a policy or a practice"

**BIFRT:** Be it further resolved that.

**Disability:** According to the Ontarians with Disabilities Act and the Ontario Human Rights Commission: “disability means the person has or has had, or is believed to have or have had, 1. 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, 2. a condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability, 3. a learning disability, or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language, 4. a mental disorder, or 5. an injury or disability for which benefits were claimed or received under the insurance plan established under the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997"

**Maccess:** Maccess is a peer support, advocacy, and community centre for students who experience disability, chronic illness, mental health concerns, or inaccessibility. Maccess aims to build and maintain a campus that celebrates, advocates, and ensures inclusiveness in the area of disability. We provide programming and events in an effort to establish a sense of community for those that self-identify as having disabilities or as disabled. In addition, Maccess strives to advocate on the behalf of students in a proactive and affirmative fashion and provide educational programming and opportunities to learn about critical disability studies.

**Mosaic:** McMaster’s course registration and management system.

**MSU:** As taken from the McMaster Students Union website “The McMaster Students Union (MSU) is the largest group on campus. Representing the approximately 21,000 undergraduate students of McMaster, all students enrolled in 18 (or more units) are members of the MSU."

**OHRC:** The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) is one part of Ontario’s system for protecting human rights; plays an important role in preventing discrimination and promoting and advancing human rights in Ontario.

**OUSA:** The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) is a coalition of student

associations from across Ontario. They have come together to protect the interests of

Ontario’s undergraduate students by providing research and recommendations to governments on how to improve the affordability, accessibility, accountability and quality of post-secondary education in the province. These elected student representatives work together to set OUSA’s policies and direction.

**SAS:** Student Accessibility Service is a McMaster University service that supports students who have been diagnosed with a disability with academic related concerns and accommodations.

**SWC:** The Student Wellness Centre is operated by McMaster University, and addresses wellness for all students by providing a range of counselling options, medical services, and wellness education resources.

**WGEN:** The MSU Women & Gender Equity Network (WGEN) is a peer support driven service that caters to women, trans folk, people who identify outside the gender binary, gender non-conforming folk and all survivors of sexual and gender-based violence from all gender identities.

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