



# Accessibility Report

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# Key Takeaways

- In this mixed-methods project, 474 students responded to the accessibility survey while 13 students participated in video or email interviews. Of the survey respondents, 58% identify as a person with a disability. Mental Illness (42%) and learning disabilities (26%) were the most common types recorded.
- Of survey respondents, AccessAbility Services (43%) is the most commonly used disability related service. 89% of respondents who identify as having a disability are registered with AccessAbility Services. Unfortunately, many students had issues registering for the service, understanding its scope and responsibilities, and some students encountered discrimination from service employees.
- Health (25%) and Counselling Services (24%) were the other commonly used services by survey respondents and interviewees. Regarding Health Services, some students described issues with individual Doctors and were concerned about the lack of long-term psychological and psychiatric care. Issues with Counselling Services also discussed the lack of longer-term, consistent care, especially with the 6 session limit the service has in place.
- 43% of respondents said they do not believe their instructors understand or accommodate enough concerning disabilities. Many students reported how some professors did provide accommodations while others refused and questioned why accommodations were even necessary. During COVID-19, online learning was helpful to some students, while others complained about lack of accommodations such as closed captioning or heavy workloads.
- As there are many areas for improvement, WUSA is recommended to form a Student Accessibility Committee that will work with the University to combat issues outlined in this report. Other recommendations outside of the committee include WUSA promotion of the Centre for Academic Policy Support (CAPS) and inclusion of accessibility data into the existing Student Safety Committee portfolio.

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# 1. Accessibility Report Overview

## 1.1 Introduction

At the August 23rd, 2020 WUSA Students' Council Meeting, the creation of this project was approved with the purpose of understanding both accessibility on campus and issues students may face related to their disabilities as a whole. WUSA is committed to supporting students with accessibility issues at the University of Waterloo through exploring their lived experience. To drive this project, the Accessibility Commissioner was hired and worked alongside the WUSA Research Team to achieve the following goals:

- Identify physically inaccessible areas on campus
- Understand the scope of systemic issues students face at AccessAbility Services in accessing accommodations needed to succeed
- Determine other services or university systems where students encounter accessibility issues
- Assess the effectiveness of current accessibility policies and resources
- Identify existing gaps pertaining to accessibility within the university landscape
- Determine meaningful ways WUSA can prioritize and address accessibility issues moving forward

These goals were captured in the design of the data collection methods detailed below.





## 1.2 Data Collection Methods

### Survey

The Accessibility Survey opened on December 14, 2020 and closed on February 13, 2021. A total of 474 responses were received, 75.3% (357 submissions) of which were complete. Complete responses here refers to respondents that completed all survey questions and submitted their answers at the end; 117 of the responses were partial, meaning the respondents left the survey before a final submission. The survey link was sent out 34,459 enrolled undergraduate students and with 474 total responses, the response rate was 1.38%. While this response rate is quite low, this number is not of particular concern as the survey was targeted to students with accessibility needs, who make up a smaller proportion of the general undergraduate population. Since there is a smaller number of responses, both partial and complete ones have been considered in this data analysis. Survey Questions can be found in Appendix A of this report.

### Focus Groups and Interviews

To complement the survey and to gain a deeper understanding of student experiences, individual interviews and focus groups were conducted via Microsoft Teams between February 24, 2021 and March 23, 2021 based on participant availability. In total, 7 students participated in these approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour video interviews. Students were able declare their interest for participating in an interview by submitting a Google Form published on WUSA social media channels in February. The form asked about participant availability, preference for a group or individual interview, and topics they wished to discuss. Based on the provided information, the Accessibility Commissioner organized a Microsoft Teams call with participants and the Student Research and Policy Assistant, who was the designated note-taker. Each interview utilized a 10-question template created by the Accessibility Commissioner to ensure reliability of results. This template can be viewed in Appendix B of this report.

While data collection interviews were ongoing, 6 students who did not participate in video calls provided written answers to the 10-question template via email or Discord chat. This alternative method allowed for students who were not comfortable being interviewed to still participate in the research process and have their voice heard. All interview materials have been anonymized and identifying information, besides the participant's faculty when applicable, will not be included in this report or any accompanying materials.

### 1.3 Demographics

Demographic information was provided by participants who filled out the Accessibility Survey. Participants were asked which faculty they were in with the majority (25.95%) being in the Faculty of Arts, followed by Science (14.56%), Engineering (11.6%), Math (11.18%), Health (10.13%), and Environment with 9.92% (Figure 1). Overall, the relative percentage of participation from each faculty besides Math and Engineering are within 3-4% of their total enrollment population at the university, making this survey a fairly representative one (University of Waterloo, Enrolment, 2021). However, it should be noted that the Math and Engineering faculties are under-represented in this survey. To mitigate this, data from video interviewees in those faculties are highlighted throughout the report.

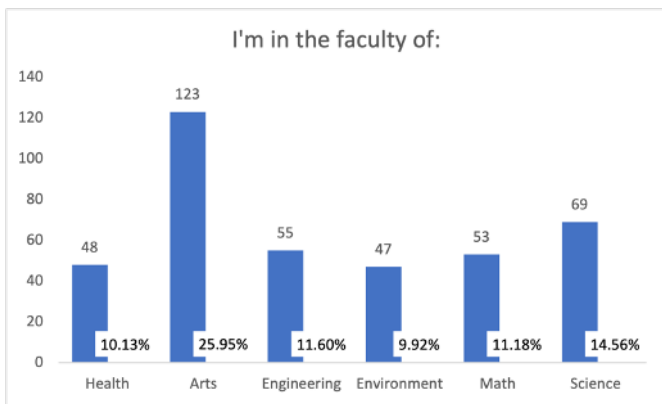


Figure 1: Responses to 'I'm in the Faculty of:'

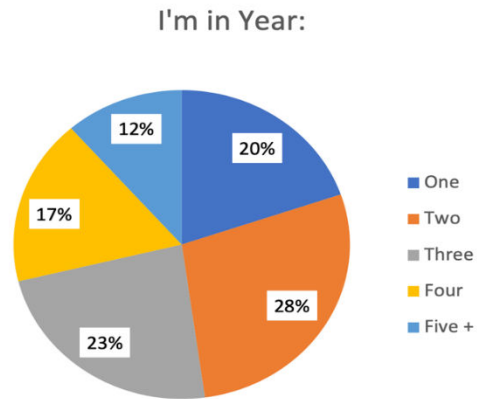


Figure 2: Responses to 'I'm in year:'

This same even split is also evident in the year of study demographics collected, with each year receiving between 17% and 28% of the response. The smallest demographic, year 5+, only received 12% of the survey response (Figure 2). In the survey results, only 11% of respondents indicated they were international students while 89% of survey participants were not. For comparison, 22% of the total undergraduate population in 2020/21 identify as international students (University of Waterloo, International, 2021). To ensure that international students were represented in all data collection methods, as their experiences are unique and may reveal issues domestic students do not face, 1 video interview participant also identified as an international student. Survey participants were also asked if they identified as a mature student <sup>1</sup>, to which 15% were and 76% were not. For this question 9% of survey respondents selected the 'no answer' or 'prefer not to say' options.

<sup>1</sup> Defined as an undergraduate who has been out of high school for at least 2-4 when applying for postsecondary education

Shifting from general questions to ones with an accessibility focus, survey participants were asked if they identify as a person with a disability, which 58% did. This is an important question as those who indicated 'no' (29%) or 'no answer/prefer not to say' (13%) were not shown some subsequent questions that asked about specific experiences or services which those who identify as a person with a disability may have encountered. However, all survey participants were able to provide feedback for some general accessibility questions later in the survey.

Moving forward, those respondents who identified as a person with a disability were asked exactly what type of disability they identify as having. This was presented as a "select all that apply" question where students were able to highlight multiple types if applicable. The most common type was a 'mental illness disability' (42%), followed by a 'learning disability' (26%), and 'physical disability' at 16% (Figure 3). For those who selected 'other,' neurological, cognitive, and ADHD were common answers provided.

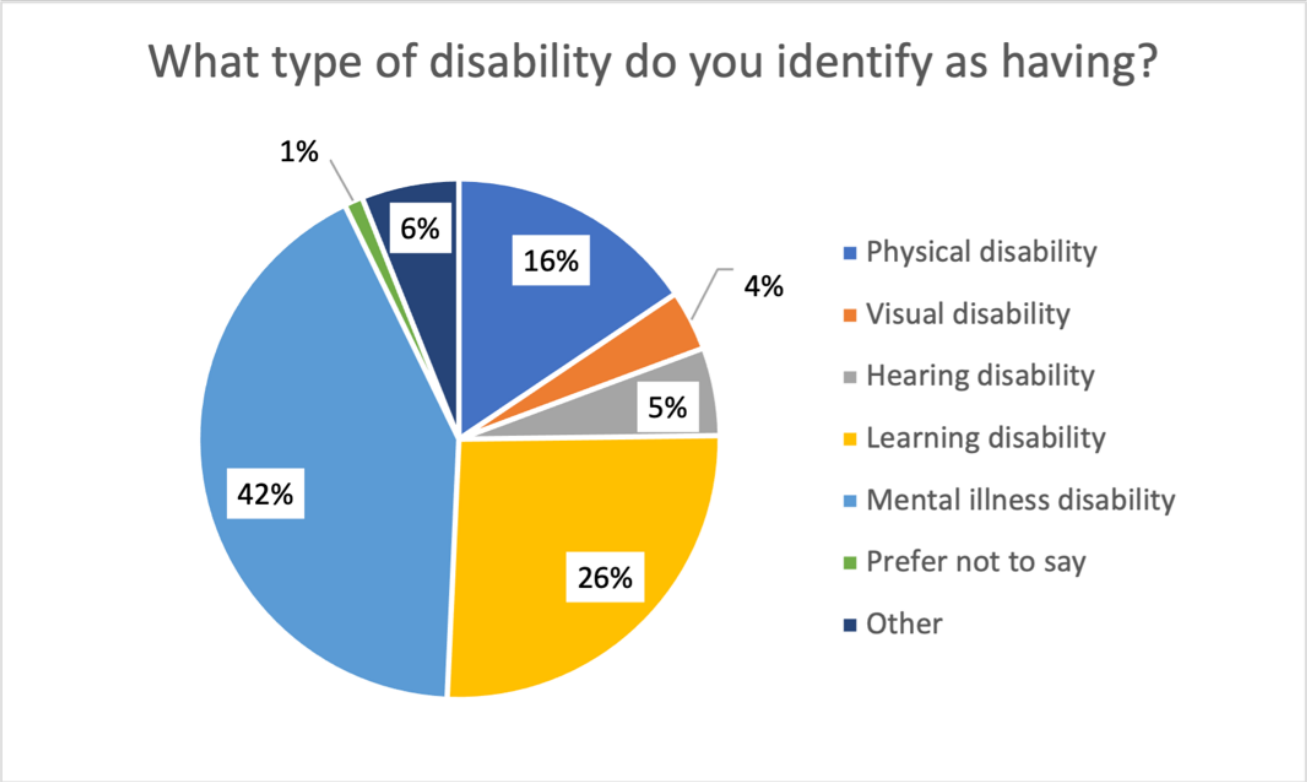


Figure 3: Responses to 'What type of disability do you identify as having?'

As a follow up, respondents were asked what sort of functional limitations they experience due to their disability, again in a “select all that apply” format. Most commonly, mood (31%) and ability to focus (37.5%) were selected (Figure 4). Other frequently selected answers include reading (16%), ability to understand social cues (12.2%), and handwriting (9.7%). It is important to note that the presented categories do not represent all limitations a person may experience and even with the write-in answers (e.g., energy limits, communication needs, chronic pain) provided, the full spectrum of possible functional limitations is not represented.

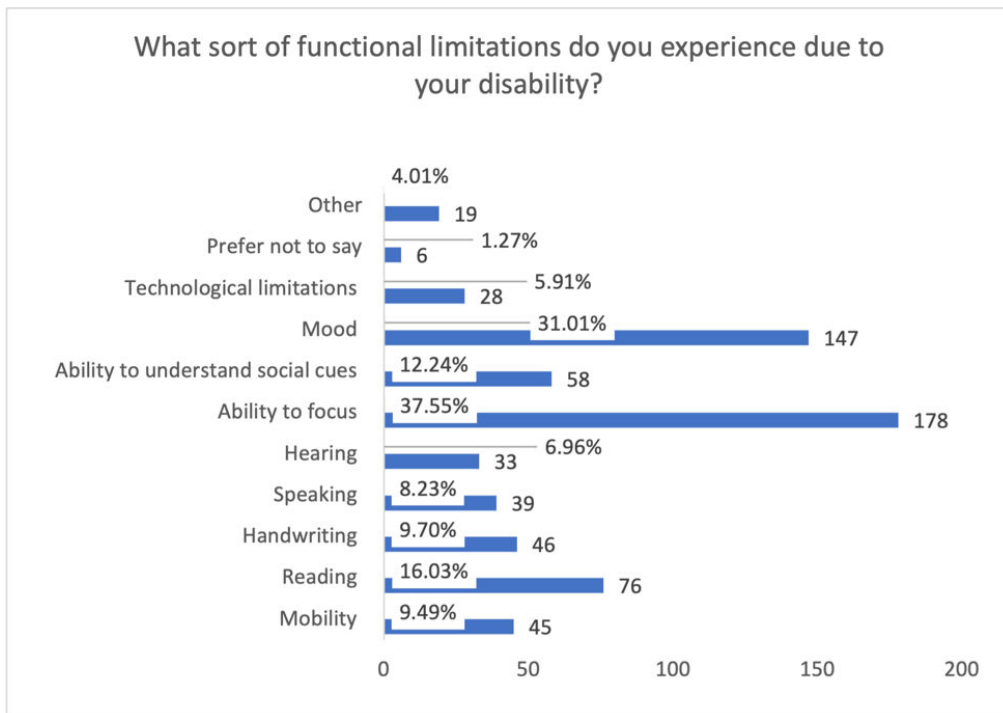


Figure 4: Responses to ‘What sort of functional limitations do you experience due to your disabilities?’

The final demographic question asked students if they have a service animal. The majority of survey respondents (95%) said no they do not have a service animal, while 3% said yes and 2% indicated they preferred not to say.



## **2. University of Waterloo Services**

Students were asked a series of questions about their experiences with the various services affiliated with the University of Waterloo. Survey respondents were asked what difficulties they had accessing these services and interviewees were asked to describe their experience with services in general.

### **2.1 AccessAbility Services**

In particular, student experiences with AccessAbility Services were important to collect as this service is the most well-known office for academic accommodations offered at the university (AccessAbility, About AccessAbility Services , 2021). For students curious about AccessAbility Services, information available on their website states that the service supports “all students with known or suspected disabilities or disabling conditions” by creating individualized plans for each student that include a wide variety of accommodations for academic, housing, and medical needs.

According to the registration process detailed on the AccessAbility website, students must apply for AccessAbility online and provide supporting documentation such as medical documents, mental health diagnosis, or physical mobility verification if needed. Following this, students meet with an accommodation consultant to finalize registration with the service and create their support plan with a list of eligible accommodations. Finally, students must request their accommodations for each course every term and of AccessAbility Services is then responsible to convey each student’s accommodation plan to the appropriate course instructor (AccessAbility, Applying for Academic Accommodations, 2021).

Survey respondents were asked multiple questions about AccessAbility Services, including if respondents know how to register as a student with a disability with AccessAbility. The majority of respondents (69%) indicated yes, they were aware, while 23% said no, and 8% selected no answer or prefer not to say. As a follow up, respondents who identify as a person with a disability were asked if they were registered with AccessAbility, of which 89% were while 9% were not. The remaining 2% selected ‘no answer’ or ‘prefer not to say’. This indicates that the target audience of AccessAbility Services is in fact utilizing it, and that awareness of the service’s existence is high.

## **Registration Process**

However, just because students are registered with the service does not mean the process to do so was easy or accessible in a timely manner. Both interviewed students and survey respondents frequently discussed the “cumbersome” registration process, especially with regards to the amount of paperwork required. One student lamented,

“[the] large paperwork packages to access accommodations can be difficult to navigate and understand with issues such as executive dysfunction or fatigue due to chronic illness. Complicated systems to access services that students are largely left on their own to figure out. Mostly large chunks of text that can be difficult to process/understand for students with learning disabilities.”

Other students agree with this sentiment, adding the following:

“[AccessAbility Services is] decent once accessed or registered, but generally cumbersome to access. I understand the need for uploading documentation to register with AccessAbility Services, but sometimes this can cause a delay in urgently needed services or act as a barrier. The semesters I was suffering with depression, I typically didn’t go to a doctor or counselor about it until the end of term. It’s hard to find motivation or energy to get signed up for help oftentimes, even after making the decision/realization.”

The long registration process hinders student use of their needed accommodations and can be a huge barrier to a student’s academic success if registration is not completed in a reasonable amount of time. One student detailed how their “1st term lab accommodation process was so long it wasn’t resolved until 2 months into the semester and by then the student had already missed assignments and their grades suffered.” Another student expressed frustration at the multi-step registration process, revealing that “my condition is not something that is going to change and I don’t need ongoing treatment. It was VERY difficult to track down all the forms and get the right information, making an appointment was a struggle as well. I didn’t have access to accommodations in my first semester which resulted in me failing most midterms.”

Even some students that entered university with the proper documentation and diagnoses had to wait months to become fully registered because of extended wait times for intake appointments. For example, one student “went into university with diagnoses so they could get accommodations. [They] called the university before coming onto campus to make sure accommodations were all set up – was told they HAD to be on campus to do that. When on campus [they] were told they needed a meeting before setting up accommodations but had class every day and couldn’t get the meeting scheduled for over a month.” This experience demonstrates the ways in which even students who are proactive in their approach still face barriers. Now, it is important to note that not all students registering with AccessAbility run into these issues, some research participants had few to no issues with the service at all. But for those who do, these issues can severely impact the student’s ability to succeed at university.

### **Re-Registration for Previously Enrolled Students**

After completing the rigorous registration process, students are entered into the AccessAbility Services system and can utilize the accommodations they selected with their service advisor for that term. In subsequent terms, students are supposed to re-apply for accommodations themselves through the service’s online portal. Students select from their list of previously used accommodations and are not required to meet with an AccessAbility Service advisor if they do not need to change that list or the type of accommodation they want to receive (AccessAbility, Requesting and Managing your Accommodations, 2021). This is meant to streamline the process for registered students and ensure that their accommodations are communicated to instructors as soon as the term starts before any issues can arise.

However, for many research participants, this has not been the case. Students detailed experiences where AccessAbility Services required them to re-submit paperwork, re-do intake appointments, or re-do other aspects of the registration process despite being registered with the service in the previous term. One student divulged:

“For the most part, Accessibility services are doing a fantastic job. However, I sometimes find it difficult when I send in requests for accommodations that I have documentation on file for, and am still requested to book an appointment. In those times, it difficult for me to make those arrangements, and it’s frustrating that an appointment is necessary. There seems to be a lack of consistency when it comes to this matter.”

Another student explained that there is “so much paperwork, and changes in forms and requirements, which forced me to go back and forth between them and my doctors, and it was pretty ridiculous! Also, lack of communication regarding change of requirements, and forms, as well as benefits for students who register with AccessAbility.” It is clear that this is a burden for students and should be re-evaluated to ensure that students have a smooth experience with AccessAbility Services once registered.

Other students echoed this and explained how the re-justification of their need for accommodations negatively impacts their academic experiences and view of the service. One student exemplified this, explaining how “[they] felt like it is sometimes really tedious...seeking help with accessibility makes them fill out a form every time they want an accommodation and it is tedious to re-explain the entire situation and their disability every time they need some accommodations. [The student] feels like they are constantly re-explaining their situation and constantly having to prove their disability and need for accommodation while advocating for themselves instead of having accessibility advocate for them like they are supposed to.” In more extreme cases, students expressed that “the accessibility process is very draining, and the waiting process is very long and going through that process is exhausting and could cause more anxiety and issues.” These situations are not ideal for students who are trying to access a service meant to relieve stress and anxiety about academics. They are especially not ideal if the student has already gone through the long and extensive registration process.

### **Communication of Service and Student Responsibilities**

In conjunction with problems registering and re-applying for accommodations, students reported numerous concerns about communication issues they have experienced at AccessAbility Services. This includes communication about the scope of AccessAbility Services, the specific forms needed to register or change accommodations, expectations of instructors to accommodate students, as well as many other lapses in communication. One student said that a difficulty they’ve had accessing this service is not “knowing which forms to submit and who to contact when seeking support from Accessibility regarding communication of disability related course needs to profs.” Another student had “difficulty exercising my AccessAbility accommodations as laid out in my accommodations plan. Professors don’t seem to know about my accommodations and neither does the first year office.” It is clearly stated in the guidelines for student academic accommodations that it is the responsibility of AccessAbility Services to communicate and provide direction on accommodation plans to course instructors, to ensure accommodation requests are carried out (AccessAbility, Responsibility of AccessAbility Services, 2019).

As shown above, in some cases this responsibility is not being followed through with and students are becoming concerned and confused about what their role is versus what the responsibility of AccessAbility Services is. Additionally, some students have been given contradictory information, further confusing them as they navigate various systems meant to improve their time at university. These experiences as well as many similar ones documented in this research, indicate that there is a lack of communication between AccessAbility and service users that clearly outlines each party's responsibilities and expectations.

This lack of communication regarding division of responsibilities is also present when discussing the scope of the service. Students have indicated that at times they have reached out to AccessAbility for help and were told that the service did not address those issues even though students believe someone from the service would have been helpful in addressing their concerns. For example, one student explained:

"When I first approached AccessAbility Services for support a couple of years ago, I was told I needed confirmation of diagnosis in order to make an appointment with a consultant or access any of AccessAbility's services, even though I suspected something was amiss with my ability to perform well at school and could have used guidance from a qualified consultant on what it might be and how I might be able to get assessed."

Another student stated that they had "recently called campus asking for support and for information about the process to get a new diagnosis and they [AccessAbility] told them to just 'google it.'" These instances and others like them imply that information about the scope and general services provided by AccessAbility are not being effectively communicated to students. This fosters a lack of knowledge about the service that is harmful to students when they reach out to AccessAbility and are brushed off because it is not in the service's purview at the moment.

Taking a deeper look into AccessAbility communications, some students have expressed displeasure at the way accommodation options are presented to them and the lack of variety amongst them. One student:

"..found them to be a bit underwhelming, I don't really feel like the services/ accommodations that I have access to are actually what I need and sometimes you don't actually have the full picture of what is available to you for me dealing with accessibility felt like "these are the accommodations we use, and X and Y are the ones that are closest to your needs" rather than "these are your needs, and we can do X and Y to try to level the playing field" like I generally don't feel like what I was offered for accommodations actually helps me."



This student feels as though AccessAbility is not communicating the full spectrum of available accommodations, limiting their ability to think critically about all the options and select the ones that would be the most helpful to them. Another student outlined their overall experience with AccessAbility by saying: “the process of signing up for AAS [AccessAbility] was hard and laborious – a bit of a hassle trying to get everything set up. Didn’t know what was available as an accommodation at AAS and just picked what the consultant suggested – didn’t know what was available and what might have been helpful otherwise.” Accommodations are meant to work for the student, if they are not the correct fit or are not helping as much as they could, it is important that the student be able to know what other options are available. Thus, a recommendation to improve communication of AccessAbility Services’ spectrum of support is outlined later in this report. This lack of knowledge about the variety of accommodations obtainable to students also affects students in the cooperative education program, details of which are outlined in the employment section of this report.

### **Interpersonal Communication at AccessAbility**

Besides the general service wide communication issues, students have reported a multitude of concerns about the interpersonal communications occurring between themselves and their AccessAbility advisor or contact at the service. Unfortunately, many students shared experiences of discrimination, ignorance, or other negative commentary directed at them by AccessAbility staff. While not all students have experienced this and not all staff members behave in such a way, it is incredibly important to highlight these experiences in this report. One student had “[AccessAbility] effectively say I wasn’t disabled enough for accommodations. This is discriminatory and, in some instances, illegal. I firmly told them so when they denied me and I didn’t receive a response.” Another student had an:

“Accessibility advisor [tell] me if I stopped taking all my medication I would get better and that it was pharmaceuticals that were causing my disability. I have a genetic disease... I’ve had proctors in the accessibility office comment on my spinal brace to me and stare... if you’re working in that office, maybe you shouldn’t comment on people’s assistive devices? I don’t wear it because it’s ‘cool and looks like armour’...”

These are very serious incidents that students have encountered, made even more serious by the fact that they occurred with people hired to work with and be responsible in some respects, for students with accessibility needs.

These experiences imply that any training completed by AccessAbility employees may not be robust enough or that any reporting process for discriminatory behavior is not effective enough. In particular, students voiced concerns about AccessAbility staff knowledge about permanent disabilities. For example, “when I registered for academic accommodations some people I talked to didn’t really know what to do about my disability and I had to talk them through it, correct them on incorrect knowledge they had about it, etc, so it would be nice if there was more broad knowledge of different disabilities students might have.” Another student compared their experience with the service to one of their peers:

“[The peer] has had to fight for every minute of extra time and for the first few months of University they had to go without the hearing equipment they used in high school that would allow them to hear the lectures. They have been told multiple times by staff at accessibility that they don’t need what they are requesting even though they are only requesting what they need to succeed. I have faced none of these issues and all I had to do was set up a meeting to get my needs attended to whereas they have faced tons of discrimination from accessibility services themselves...”

Furthermore, one additional student wrote into the survey to discuss how they faced “systemic discrimination, [and AccessAbility’s] refusal to accommodate a medically verified disability (diagnosed and verified by an Educational Psychologist, a General Physician and a Psychiatrist).” Incidents like these are very serious as they not only affect a student’s ability to receive their academic accommodation, but they may affect the student’s mental health and wellbeing, their ability to succeed in their course work, and their willingness to utilize university services in the future. Therefore, strong recommendations aimed at improving interpersonal AccessAbility communication and expanding knowledge about disabilities are outlined later in the report.

### **Student Suggested Changes**

Students provided suggestions for changes they would like to see from AccessAbility to make the service a more efficient and inclusive place. These are not the final recommendations of this report but serve to ensure student voices are heard. First and foremost, students desire AccessAbility staff to undergo more sensitivity training and become more knowledgeable about how to work with people with accessibility needs. For instance, “there was one AccessAbility advisor who was assigned to assist me with talking to my professors and he kind of gaslit me about my symptoms and made me feel like my illness was my fault. I would suggest the office goes through all of their staff to ensure they go through sensitivity training and flag any who need to be retrained...”

Another student "...felt like they were coddled and talked to as if they were a child and patronized when they use the service." This is a crucial step to improving the student experience as it does not matter how well other systems work if the 'point person' that handles accommodations is ignorant about a student's identity or capability.

Additionally, students desire a stronger process for accommodating incidents after they occur. As students currently must apply for their accommodations at the beginning of each term, it can be hard for students to predict situations that may arise in the middle of term that may require different accommodations than the ones they selected at the beginning. One student detailed how "I wish it was easier to get in touch with the accessibility advisors. Having to email and then call doesn't sound like a lot, but it's very stressful. It would also be easier if some of the teachers would give the accommodation even before the paperwork and stuff so that the stress of missing grades is taken away earlier." Increasing academic flexibility for students with accessibility needs is of concern for the AccessAbility system as well as instructor and academic policies. That need for flexibility is detailed in the academic experiences section of this report.

The final main change students would like to see concerns the notetaking service AccessAbility provides. This accommodation is when volunteers take notes for other people in a course that need them. However, one student involved in this research stated:

"...the volunteer note taking service is broken. I've been on both sides of it and been so frustrated. the website to sign up as a note taker frequently just bugs out and doesn't go through. I tried to volunteer in 1st or 2nd year and had to email support and they never did get the system working...also never get people volunteer to take notes when I needed that accommodation, and later found out that people tried but had the same thing happen where the system wouldn't put it through."

As the notetaking service is used frequently by students and is critical to their ability to participate in courses, issues with this service are very concerning.

As a whole, student experiences with AccessAbility Services are variable. Some students found AccessAbility to be incredibly helpful and welcoming, while others encountered ignorance and discrimination while trying to apply for their accommodations. It is crucial for essential services such as AccessAbility to ensure that all students who need accommodations are provided them in a safe, inclusive

## 2.2 Health and Counselling Services

Counselling Services on campus. These services provide mental health and medical care to all students at the university and are crucial to students with accessibility needs; both because students may need their medical services but also because professionals in these departments are used for AccessAbility documentation and can recommend students for accommodations to other departments within the university system.

### Health Services

One of the most pressing issues brought up by students about health services is their lack of LGBTQIA+ inclusivity. Multiple students with a variety of gender and sexual identities have reported instances of transphobia and judgement leveled at them from campus doctors. One student described the service as:

"...one of the single most transphobic places on campus, not only do they dead name you constantly if you are trans, they frequently ignore your corrections and never update the databases to correct it, and that's even though you've filled out all the proper paper work with the university over a year ago, even then you're lucky if you'll be listened to in general...It says a lot about the on campus health center when one of the first things you learn about it as a queer person is how rampantly transphobic it is."

Another student "went to health services once and it was so horrible [they] have never been there since." Not only are these experiences awful for the students, but they also impact student ability to receive on campus healthcare in the future. This is very concerning, especially if students are not from the Waterloo region and cannot see an external family doctor regularly or if their external doctor documentation is not up to AccessAbility standards to use for accommodations.

Another major concern students have about Health Services is the quality and consistency of care provided to students. Of note, the psychiatry and psychology departments within health services had the greatest number of concerns voiced in this research. This is because those departments, particularly psychiatry, deal with medications which can severely impact a student's wellbeing. Unfortunately, one student reported:

"[They were] severely mistreated by one of the psychiatrists at Health Services. To my knowledge, she is no longer a psychiatrist here, but the fact that it was allowed to happen in the first place is dangerous and possibly fatal. She continuously raised the dosages of medications despite their ineffectiveness and dangerous side effects I was experiencing. All concerns were brushed off and I was given an even higher dose than before."

In this example, the quality of care provided by Health Services was incredibly low and may have resulted in irreversible damage to the student because their concerns were not taken seriously. Of course, not all students experience their care this way and not all doctors at Health Services behave in this manner, but these are not the only examples that describe mishandling of student medication by a Health Services doctor. This indicates that there may be a need for a more thorough investigation into these departments and the existing oversight in place to ensure high quality care is being provided.

Despite the very negative experiences some students have had with psychiatry at UWaterloo, it is a very needed department that is currently not equipped to meet all student needs. As one student explains:

“For the love of God hire more psychologists and psychiatrists, for some reason the university went down from having multiple psychologists and psychiatrists to having only one psychologist that works a few days every other week and a few psychiatrists via arbitrary budget cuts. This created extensive, arbitrary wait times for numerous students to see even a single psychologist in order to start being diagnosed with anything in general such as ADHD. This needs to change, being treated for mental health issues on campus is already a joke, this just shows how bad it is in detail.”

If students cannot access quality doctors who know how to navigate the university system and provide help with other services consistently, numerous aspects of their lives are impacted negatively. This sentiment can apply to general doctors employed at Health Services as well. For example, one student “heard stories from other people about difficulties getting medication – especially male doctors when trying to get birth control – there is sexism at health services. And [the student] experienced this as well.” As well as experiences where students “felt attacked by individuals. And refusal to switch me to a different doctor when I had a bad experience due to my mental health. I had to argue and fight for a new doctor.” These examples demonstrate that there may be personal biases at play regarding student access to certain types of healthcare that need to be addressed service wide in order to provide all students with equitable access to high quality care. Suggestions for stronger oversight and student reporting systems at Health Services are detailed in the recommendation and desired activities section of this report.

## **Counselling Services**

Counselling Services is the main office on campus that provides mental health and wellness care to students at the University of Waterloo. This office works in conjunction with Health and AccessAbility Services to supply medical documentation and quality counselling so that students can be supported holistically while in university.



However, the biggest concern students have is the lack of long-term, consistent care provided by Counselling as well as Health Services. Currently, Counselling Services has a 6-session limit, meaning that students can only make 6 appointments with a counsellor, after which they will not be scheduled for another one. It is unclear if the limit is for sessions per term or per academic year and that distinction is seemingly variable from student to student. Numerous students have highlighted this issue, saying "it would be really nice if counseling services had longer term care options/connections for people with chronic problems, because 6 sessions a year doesn't go very far, and having the same counselor for a longer period is actually really helpful." Another student reported that:

**"Counseling has been good, but there is a big issue with the 6 sessions per year limit at uwaterloo, it is hard to open up in 6 sessions and when those are up you have to find something outside of waterloo which defeats the purpose of the counselling session especially if you take a long time to open up to a counsellor. Really want more than 6 sessions at counselling services, that would make everything so much better and would better contribute to healing."**

This session limit affects student ability to receive mental health care at the level they need in order to succeed at university.

Additionally, students are having trouble getting consistent care from the same counsellors at this service. Some students have been assigned numerous different counsellors that each require the student to start their counselling process over again because a consistent care provider was not assigned. For example, one student "had counseling that stopped without any explanation, leaving me without access to mental health support. I have also been unable to continue seeing the previous counselor, making me have to start from the beginning all over again with someone new, only to have my appointments stopped again without explanation." This prolongs the student's time at Counselling Services and may even impact their ability to receive academic accommodations if counsellors change so frequently. Another student details exactly this, describing how "when working with my chosen counsellor, being accommodated appropriately has been a non-issue.

However, when not with that counsellor; it is extremely difficult to have professors work with my accommodations. A lot of the conversation consists of microaggressions and blame shifting..." These experiences, and many others like them indicate that clarity is needed from Counselling Services about the session limit and the scope and length of care they can provide to students. Therefore, recommendations for improved communication from Counselling Services to students is detailed later in the report.

Finally, extended wait times at Counselling and Health Services are frustrating and discomfoting to students. One survey respondent wrote in:

“The counsellors are overbooked a lot. The wait list is very long and we’re limited to a certain number of appointments per year. If they don’t believe you’re at risk of harming yourself or others, it’ll take a while. Even the counsellors mention how they dislike the Waterloo system and it’s impossible to actually help a student. They don’t even offer proper recommendation to appropriate outside sources and can be dismissive as well. It’s strange how a University with such a terrible track record for mental health has never taken major steps to improve these services.”

All these experiences imply that while the care most students have received from Counselling Services has been helpful, there are logistical issues which impact the quality of the service. It is crucial that these concerns are addressed so that students do not have to worry about which counsellor they will have next or when to strategically schedule their very few appointments. Clarifying these logistical concerns would allow students to instead focus on themselves and their health.

## **2.3 Other Services**

In addition to AccessAbility Services, Health Services, and Counselling Services, there are numerous WUSA and University run programs in place that students may interact with throughout the course of their tenure at the University of Waterloo. To capture this, general questions about student use of various systems were asked in the survey.

All survey respondents were asked if they knew how to submit a Verification of Illness Form (VIF) with the university; of which, 58% of respondents said yes, 23% selected no, and 7% provided no answer or preferred not to say. This indicates that a majority of students are aware of how to submit this critical form if needed, as a VIF is normally the only acceptable way for any student to receive a retroactive accommodation for a missed assignment, test, or lab. Students must submit a VIF within 48 hours after a deadline to start the process of a retroactive accommodation. VIFs must be signed by an acceptable medical professional and while Health Services will complete this form, students must pay a fee that is not covered by OHIP/UHIP (Registrar, 2021).

When provided the opportunity to write-in about various aspects of their experiences with accessibility on campus, many survey respondents discussed this current VIF process and expressed displeasure with it. One student explained how under the current system “securing a VIF each time there’s a symptom flare-up can be expensive, time-consuming, and emotionally exhausting.

On some level, it would be nice if I could just be trusted to self-report the impact of my disability on my ability to work in that moment- instead of needing it affirmed by a [counsellor]/doctor every time.”

Since the VIF must be submitted within a 48-hour timeframe every time a deadline is missed, students with chronic or longer-term conditions are forced to pay for and resubmit a VIF potentially multiple times a term.

Many other students also discussed how technicalities of the form could result in them not receiving accommodations, leading to inconsistencies in student experiences. For example, one student detailed:

“I had my academic advisor try to deny my VIF once, that was terrifying. Counseling had told me 100% that I should not be writing a midterm and that they would give the VIF and then I could discuss with my prof how to move things around according to the syllabus and my academic advisor emailed me after the midterm date passed saying that it would not be accepted because it was not marked “severe” on the form.”

This miscommunication of form technicalities between the various departments involved in VIFs has caused students to be denied their appropriate accommodations and created more stress for them. As this is currently the most acceptable way for students to retroactively ask for accommodations, it is crucial that this process is effective and consistent for all students.

Additionally, participants were asked what University of Waterloo services they have used in relation to disability accessibility in a ‘select all that apply’ format. This was an important question to ask as these services are foundational for the student experience as a person who identifies as having a disability. Most commonly (43%), students used AccessAbility services, followed by Health (25%), and Counselling services (24%). Additionally, 3% of students accessed MATES, a WUSA peer-to-peer support service, while 2% of respondents have not used any services (Figure 5).

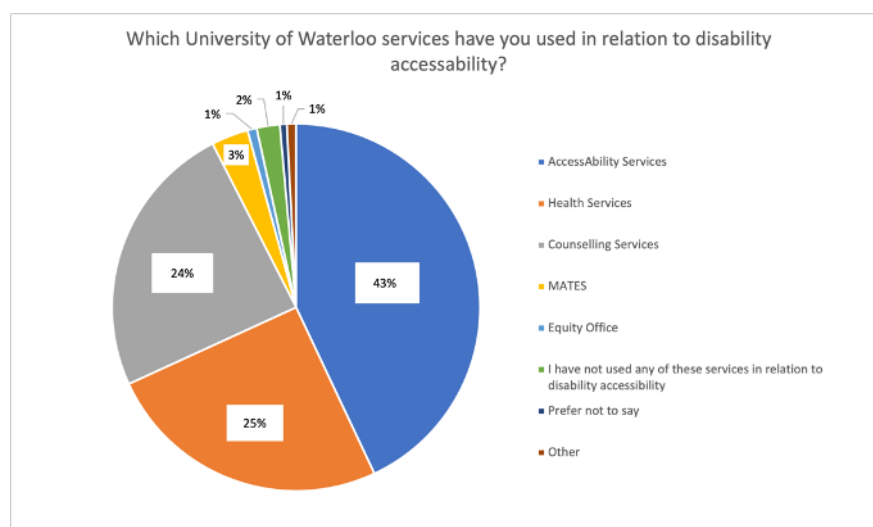


Figure 5: Responses to ‘Which University of Waterloo services have you used in relation to disability accessibility?’

As a follow-up, students were asked if they had any issues accessing the above services, including physical accessibility into the building, complications with paperwork, or any other barriers. Fortunately, 61% of respondents said no, they had not run into any issues. However, 32% had encountered access issues and 7% of respondents selected 'no answer' or preferred not to say. Those who answered 'yes' to the previous question were then asked to identify what services they have had issues with in a 'select all that apply' format. The majority of students (45%) indicated they had issues with AccessAbility Services, followed by Counselling (29%), and Health Services (22%). Other services like the Equity Office and MATES each received 2% of the response to this question. This indicates that just under half of the people who experienced issues accessing services had those issues with AccessAbility.

Other issues students brought up about UWaterloo services in general include issues with coordination between services, alternative class and appointment options, as well as the petition process for course withdrawal. Some students have found it to be particularly difficult:

**"The fact that I am not treated like every other student when it comes to enrollment and administrative tasks. These accommodations are not a benefit, they are to make sure everyone's post secondary experience to be equal. I have to sign up and register with accessibility every term and ask permission to get accommodations for each class and term, other students just enroll and go to class, I have three more steps before I can go to class and feel included...I should not have to fight and apply a second time each term to get accommodations intended and often causing me extra stress and using much of my time. This is all extra work and stress those with disabilities do not need to endure and is a frustration and reminder that I don't get to go to school like everyone else."**

The extra effort and amount of time it takes a student with accessibility needs to be prepared to start a study term is much more than other students. If there is a lack of coordination and communication between university services, the process is that much harder for students.

Students also expressed a desire for more alternative options to forms, appointments, and courses besides the traditional idea of going in-person or making a phone call. One student wrote, "with a visual impairment - the paperwork I had to fill out upon enrolment with the [AccessAbility] service was difficult for me to read. In addition, when writing exams or tests, accessibility services can only blow up the test to 11x17 paper which is often not large enough to read without eye strain." Especially in a virtual environment, the need for alternative communication methods (e.g., captions on lectures, transcriptions, larger text, number of video calls vs. emails) may be forgotten. This is a problem because those methods are crucial for people who need them.

Finally, students want more information about how to petition the university for retroactive accommodations (i.e., course withdrawals, incomplete courses, dispute over an assignment, etc.). For one student, they “want there to be a better accommodation process for students to withdraw from a course and not have to petition. Faces anxiety when trying to complete the withdrawal forms and that has been a barrier in completing the process.” Despite many students indicating they had gone through this, withdrawn from a course or had to submit a petition, many students were unaware of services like the Centre for Academic Policy Support (CAPS) that could help them through the petition process (CAPS, 2021).

When another student was asked “would it be helpful to have someone help write petitions?” the student replied that they “don’t know what the administration needs from the student sometimes but has been successful in the past even though it has been really draining. Would be nice to have someone walk them or support them through that process as that process could make the student really anxious at times.” This desire for support and someone to walk them through the process is a part of the service CAPS provides. It is unfortunate that awareness about the service is not reaching all the students it could. Thus, a recommendation for the promotion of CAPS is outlined later in the report.

### 3. Professor and Academic Experiences

Outside of student experiences with various services on campus, students were asked about their experience with professors and coursework as someone who identifies as having a disability. As the University of Waterloo is first and foremost an educational institution, the academic experience and interactions students have with their professors is incredibly important to include in this report.

In a “select all that apply” format, students were asked to indicate any nonphysical accessibility barriers they had faced on campus. The most common accessibility barriers students indicated were related to teaching/ learning structure (27.4%), followed by stigma against disabilities at 20.89%. Less than 10% of survey respondents indicated they did not face any non-physical accessibility barriers on campus or preferred not to answer (Figure 6). This implies that the vast majority of students who identify as a person with a disability do face a wide variety

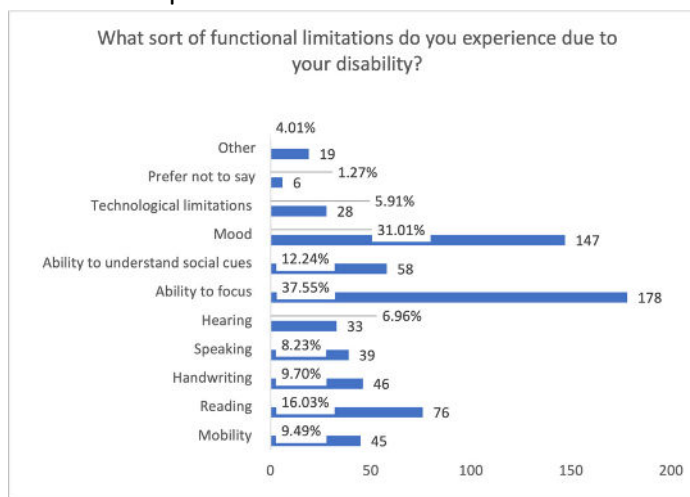


Figure 6: Responses to ‘What, if any, non-physical accessibility barriers have you faced on campus?’



of barriers during their university tenure unrelated to the built campus environment. Many of those barriers relating to academics and interpersonal communications between students and university systems.

To build on the previous question, all survey respondents (including those who do not identify as having a disability) were asked if they feel their instructors are understanding and accommodating enough when it concerns disabilities, including mental health. 30% of respondents said yes, they do feel their instructors are understanding and accommodating, while 43% of respondents said no, their instructors are not accommodating. 19% of participants were unsure and 8% provided no answer or preferred not to say. It is concerning that the majority of survey respondents feel that instructors are not understanding enough, even amongst respondents that do not identify as having a disability. This indicates that that instructor behaviour is very noticeable, and a lack of instructor understanding for accommodations impacts all students at some level.

The final question in the Accessibility Survey allowed students to expand on their answers regarding professors, many of which indicated that some instructors were great about providing accommodations and some were not. This medley of instructor behaviour led a few people to select 'no' on the previous question even if they had experienced a few professors that were understanding. One student wrote in; "Regarding the last question: there are some instructors who are really understanding and seem to care about their students. However, there are also those who impose hard deadlines and will not even listen to/consider reasons for why people may need extensions or resubmissions or whatever else it may be, even during the stress of online learning."

Many students, both survey respondents and interview participants, mentioned specific faculties where they had heard or encountered a spectrum of instructor behaviour regarding accommodations. Of course, these are not universal experiences, and few generalizations can be drawn from the small sample size utilized in this project, but from the data collected some trends emerged. For example, responses that name-dropped the Faculty of Health and Faculty of Environment indicated those faculties were decent at understanding and accommodating students. This could be due in part to the small faculty size, where students have repeat professors who can better recognize the students' need for different accommodations over multiple terms. As one environment student explained; "I have friends that are in science and engineering faculties who are shocked at how accommodating the professors are in environment, I say that that would never happen in the other faculties. [This is a] part of the small program feel – professors really get to know their students." A health student agrees and continued on to say;

"I think [Health] does a good job of normalizing discussions surrounding disability and mental illness. However anecdotes from colleagues in other programs would suggest that other faculties are not particularly aware of or accommodating of the mental distress students often experience on campus due to the pressure of exams and the challenges in getting support for these issues (most of which are personally difficult to disclose to strangers)."

Of the other students who specifically mentioned a faculty, Math, Science, and Engineering came up most frequently when sharing negative experiences with instructors. In general, students in these faculties who participated in this research expressed feeling that instructors did not provide reasonable accommodations to students and that the faculties were designed without accessibility needs in mind. In particular, one science student "feels like the people involved with labs don't take accommodations seriously and don't believe students may need accommodations and the student finds it very discouraging to be in the labs with people who are quick to take off marks and are not even thinking about the idea that maybe a student needs accommodations." This student went on to explain how only 1 professor tried to help them get accommodations while others did not seem to understand the student's need for them. Another student had a similar experience "in engineering, [the student] went to talk to professor after they missed midterms and one professor told them they weren't working hard enough and that their mental health issues weren't that bad, they [just] weren't working through them enough." Other engineering responses detailed how mental health and the faculty structure are not very compatible in its current form.

### **Refusal to Accommodate**

Besides the actual design of the program, instructor beliefs about the necessity of accommodations is another common issue students encounter when trying to communicate with their instructors. As mentioned earlier, many times professors do not seem to believe in accommodations and refuse to provide them to students. For example, one student responded to the survey explaining the following:

"I've had profs deny my accommodations on the basis that they didn't want to bother the grad students with late work. I've also had advisors and profs not believe my condition despite being connected with accessibility services. I've had profs openly not give me accommodations state[d] on a plan that is emailed to the prof at the beginning of the semester. I've also experienced a lot of microaggressions from profs and students alike with respect to my disabilities and need for accommodations."

Another respondent explained that "I had a prof make fun of my disability and tell me I was trying to find the easy way through school."

A lot of professors are insensitive to disabilities and make people feel bad." These types of interactions can severely colour a person's viewpoint of that class, their faculty, and the university to a degree, especially as the university employs these instructors who have immense power over a student's mark in that course.

Additionally, many students report that some instructors believe providing accommodations would be biased against the rest of the class because the accommodation would be too advantageous. For example, one student "had an awful experience with one professor that said giving the student an accommodation would be 'unfair' to the rest of the class despite definitely needing it and providing evidence of their need." Another student detailed:

"Peers of mine have had their registered AccessAbility accommodations DENIED by instructors based purely on whim (i.e. the instructor didn't feel they needed the extra time and felt it would be TOO advantageous for them)...I myself have had similar experiences in which certain assessment types...I have never felt more stupid than trying to "tough out" those assessments, because "other AccessAbility students were able to complete these assessments just fine without accommodation."

These experiences are problematic on many levels and are, as mentioned, incredibly harmful to a student's wellbeing and academic achievements. Thus, various recommendations aimed at improving professor understanding and response to students asking for accommodations is detailed later in the report.

In an effort to combat instructor dismissal of accommodation necessity, students feel as if they must share their private medical information with the professor as a way to justify their desired accommodation for that course. This tactic is employed by a few students interviewed, for example:

"Every single time (every class) the student felt they needed to share everything about their disability and medical history with every single professor in order to get some sort of accommodation. The student feels like the professors don't believe them unless they share everything about their medical history which is very personal, and they don't want to share that information with all of their professors."

Students feel that they must personally address instructors to receive their approved accommodation because the instructors decide whether or not accommodations are necessary. This also applies to doctor's notes and professional opinions, instructors have created "...a pervasive ideology that students with accommodations should be responsible for defending their doctors' suggestions if their professors disagree. What I'd like is that if professors disagree with a doctor's medical opinion of the student and suggestions for accommodation,

it would be the professor's responsibility to argue against the accommodation, rather than make it the student's job to appeal while handling their own challenges." Students feel as if they are forced to share personal details with instructors they may or may not know at all to get the accommodations they need to succeed.

Besides the many privacy concerns and the mental toll retelling personal details incurs, students are also frustrated at the university systems that allow instructors to ignore or flat-out deny reasonable accommodation requests that come from within the University. Additionally, the idea that class policies and assignment deadlines are iron-clad is also harmful to students who may need last-minute extensions or other accommodations because of their accessibility needs. A survey respondent discussed this topic, writing;

"I've had professors tell me that because of my physical disability that I should start my work earlier to avoid penalties instead of being understanding and working with me on a deadline that is flexible. My health issues are unexpected and I cannot inform them in advance, but most profs say they will not grant extensions if they are asked within 72 hours of a deadline. These policies do nothing but add to my mental stress, as I can't control being physically unwell. Lastly is the issue of mandatory attendance. I should not be losing marks if I physically cannot get out of my bed..."

The rigidity of the course policies and harsh penalties for late work pre-COVID-19 (see the next section about online learning during COVID-19) unduly affects students with accessibility needs and is not conducive to succeeding while at university.

### **What Instructors Should Understand**

As students continued to talk about their experiences with instructors, a general theme of what they want their professors to understand about their needs and the desire for flexibility emerged. The sentiment that problems will come up, emergencies will happen, people are human and deserve to not be penalized for needing an extension or an accommodation, were pervasive in student responses. One student revealed that "when I do feel energetic enough,

it's fleeting and by that time I usually would have missed many course components. I try to cram and study everything while I find myself happy and energetic enough to do so but due dates would have already passed by then.

So, I feel like there's no safety net or flexibility in course structures to prevent me from failing." If instructors better understood accessibility needs and listened to other university services, such as AccessAbility, Health, and Counselling, then policies and course deadlines can be adapted and improved for students who need accommodations.

Students "want professors to keep in mind that mental health is an ongoing issue and there will be flareups that do not revolve around their deadline..." To create meaningful change that improves the lived experiences of students with accessibility needs, professors and other instructors must understand student's needs, rights, and why it is important to listen to AccessAbility Services.

To enact these changes, research participants outlined various ways professors can be involved in the process. Most importantly, communication between university systems needs to improve, particularly between the professors and student advocates/ advisors at AccessAbility Services. One science student expressed this need saying; "[they] want more communication from the get go between accessibility and the lab to organize everything because if it doesn't happen then they get marks off. Doesn't feel like there [is] a standard accommodation process for students in labs, the extra time in labs requests are not being accommodated." Improving communication between departments would allow for better standards to be set for students with accessibility needs. That student goes on to explain how they "believe there is something going on in the science faculty because of all these issues that were encountered...there are clearly some gaps between the promise of getting accommodations and not getting them because the professors aren't listening or connecting with accessibility services correctly."

Improved communication is one thing, but ensuring that instructors provide accommodations is another. That is why one student suggested "there should be an easier process for reporting profs that are dismissive of/not accommodating to students with disabilities (learning, mental, or otherwise)." An improved reporting process would allow students to share experiences with specific courses where their registered accommodations are not honored and hopefully point out specific areas for faculties and services to target for enhanced education about accessibility needs.

Overall, students have varied experiences and opinions about their professors and their academic experiences at the University of Waterloo. Some experiences and classes, as discussed earlier, have been understanding of accommodation needs. Other experiences have not been so positive for students. While individual instructor behavior may always cause a problem, there are larger, more systematic changes that can be made to drastically improve the academic experience for all students with accessibility needs.



## 4. Online Learning During COVID-19

Expanding on students' experiences with professors and classroom accommodations, research participants were asked about their specific thoughts regarding online learning in the past year due to COVID-19. The transition to virtual learning has been a major adjustment for educational institutions during this time and has resulted in a steep learning curve for everyone involved. However, it is important for this report to highlight the exact issues and barriers students with accessibility needs have encountered during this year (2020/21).

The main concern that students report regarding online learning is the lack of accommodations they were receiving. Many students were under the impression that professors were supposed to accept all accommodation requests without question; however, some professors were not doing so. This is worrisome especially as one student has "found [online learning] very challenging, [the student] feels like online there are less accommodations offered through AccessAbility services." A blanket accommodation acceptance policy can certainly be helpful, especially in terms of cutting down paperwork and processing times at AccessAbility Services. Unfortunately, if professors do not follow through with said policy and AccessAbility Services does not respond to an intervention request, serious issues can occur for students.

A major drawback of online learning, especially for students with accessibility needs, is that professors and classmates do not see each other in person and therefore cannot diffuse a stressful situation – for example, concerns about public speaking – in the moment. One student put it this way:

**"Online school has made disability accommodations limited. Out of sight & out of mind. Profs can't see when I'm struggling to use my hands and am in pain. Profs can't see the change in my behaviour when I'm experiencing a prolonged depressive period. And there is the mentality that everyone is struggling so everyone should have the same accommodations in the class without any consideration of how this pandemic is amplifying the negative mental health impacts on those with pre-existing conditions..."**

The virtual environment strips away those safeguards that are only available to students in-person and can let more students 'slip through the cracks' of online learning. An example of the 'out of sight, out of mind' mentality students see their professors exhibiting,

is how certain standard accommodations have not transitioned online when requested by students. During in-person education, transcripts, notes, and other aids could be provided to students should they need them. Online however, students are finding that these accommodations are not being provided. For example, one student explained: "During online learning professors are made aware of disability in the classroom and are asked to have transcripts available but then ignore the request...This [has] happened because the professor talks too fast, too quickly or simply does not consider that they have students with accommodations in their classroom."

Similarly, another student expressed that they would really appreciate mandatory captioning of all videos in online courses. Without reasonable accommodations like transcripts or captions, students may have immense difficulty completing their coursework and understanding the concepts presented to them in class.

These issues, in conjunction with focus and workload concerns, have made online learning a huge adjustment for students with accessibility needs. On the other hand, some aspects of virtual education have been very helpful for students. For example, the asynchronous schedule allows students to work when they feel at their best and in their own space. They do not have to worry about logging in at a specific time for a class or worrying about missing live lecture material. However, the downside to this model is the amount of participation activities and weekly assignments some courses are requiring instead. The following quote demonstrates a common sentiment among survey respondents:

**"Essentially it's just tough to be engaged and care about keeping up with work. Weekly quizzes or discussion post requirements can sometimes help with this but other times [are] too overwhelming so it's hard to find a balance and I don't think there's really a one size fits all approach for this. However, if there were more leeway for students to choose their participation venue (or lack of maybe) for each course that might be very helpful..."**

It is important to note that all students are struggling through online learning in this past year due to COVID-19. But students with accessibility issues who may already have concerns about receiving their proper accommodations during in-person education, have been especially impacted. As such, recommendations detailed later in the report seek to address some of the issues students face in a virtual learning environment. While virtual learning is the only type occurring as of May 2021, it is hoped that a return to in-person education post-COVID-19 will negate many of the issues that students face in a fully virtual setting. In addition, if virtual learning does continue in some way, the needs of students with accessibility concerns will need to be addressed.

## 5. Employment

Another important aspect of the overall student experience at the University of Waterloo is employment and cooperative education. Thus, it is of particular importance to understand how students with accessibility needs and those who identify as a person with a disability experience work and co-op during their university tenure.

Students participating in video interviews were asked about their experience working as a person with a disability, either as a co-op student or in general outside of the university system. As a whole, the interviewed students did not feel they had to disclose their disabilities to employers unless a situation arose where they might need an accommodation. Of course, this experience is not transferable for everyone at Waterloo, and some students may have visible accessibility needs that are more easily discernable by employers. Unfortunately, those students may be less likely to participate in a co-op program as the highly variable nature of co-op (i.e., the potential to have to move every term to a new place for work) may not be accessible for students who identify with a disability. One student explained this when they stated that they “have concerns about friends [who] chose not to do co-op because of their physical disability and that’s an issue, the moving around nature of co-op is not really accessible for some people.”

Even for students in the co-op program, various components of the process are inaccessible or can contribute to an aggravation of a student’s disability. One student explained how “sometimes they found a job they wanted to apply for and then read the description and realized they couldn’t do that job at all – they just didn’t apply.” Another student mentioned that “the process of finding a job is more stressful and flares up disability more than the job itself.” This is unfortunate and an especially tall hurdle for students to work around when the job types available to co-op students are inaccessible and not conducive to their needs. When students cannot apply to certain types of positions it limits their job choice options, increasing stress as there may not be as many back-up positions available to them.

Another concern for students during the co-op process is the interview stage, when students have one chance to make an impression on potential employers no matter how they are coping with their disability that day.

This is brought up in one student's experience where they have "had periods of time when interviews were occurring, and the student was feeling poorly and went to the interviews anyway. Those interviews went badly, and it sucks to know an interview went poorly." The rigidity of the co-op process makes it very difficult to reschedule interviews if a student is not feeling well the day of, and Co-operative and Experiential Education (CEE) penalizes students if they do not show up (Co-operative Education, 2021). Students are aware of this and, as demonstrated in the above quote, will go to interviews even when they do not feel their best. This may be due in part to the fact that the vast majority of interviewed students did not know that AccessAbility Services can provide various accommodations at job interviews for students registered with their service.

The one student who mentioned this area of accommodation "didn't know that AccessAbility Services could be involved in co-op interviews and that definitely could have been useful during their co-op experiences – doesn't think people know about that and it could have been so helpful for that." In addition, one student reported "never [having] a conversation with someone on campus about appropriateness in the workplace and accommodations in the workplace (especially with regards to toys and focus help). Everything they figured out about accommodations in the workplace they have figured out on their own."

While there may be folks at CEE and AccessAbility Services that willing and trained to talk to students about accessibility needs while being employed, students are unaware of these resources or where to find information about them. In one student's case, "the mental health struggles noticed during co-op were hard to deal with because I didn't know if there are any university supports while on co-op." There appears to be a gap in communication between various departments on campus and students about the variety of services offered to those involved in the co-op process. If students are not aware of the services, they cannot utilize them. As such a recommendation for improved communication and conveyance of this service is detailed later in the report.

Overall, students with accessibility needs are not being supported correctly with regards to employment despite the present accommodations and services in place that could help them. The issue is making sure all parties, from CEE to AccessAbility to the student, are aware of each other and communicating properly to ensure that all needs are met. People who identify as having a disability deserve to have access to the appropriate accommodations. To which, many of them already exist in the current coop system but are not being applied to all those who need them.

## 6. Built environment

### 6.1 Buildings on campus

Issues surrounding physical mobility around the University of Waterloo campus was also captured in the survey and interviews. In particular, survey respondents were asked to select all physical accessibility barriers they have faced on campus in a “select all that apply format.” Fortunately, the most common answer was ‘none’ with 28% of participants indicating they have never faced physical accessibility issues on campus. Other popular responses include ‘improper clearing of ice and snow on accessible pathways’ (13%), ‘inconvenient accessibility paths between buildings’ (10%), ‘lack of elevators’ (7%), and ‘small sidewalks’ (7%). All options presented in this question did receive responses, indicating that students experience a variety of physical barriers around campus. The full list of barriers presented in this question can be seen in Appendix A, question 17.

Another question regarding the built campus environment asked all survey respondents, regardless of their identity as a person with a disability, if they feel the University of Waterloo campus and its buildings in general have been made accessible to them; 50% of respondents said yes, the campus did feel accessible, while 10% said no and 25% of respondents said they were unsure if campus had been made accessible. The other 15% of survey respondents preferred not to say or indicated ‘no answer’ to this question. This breakdown of responses is concerning as there is clearly some uncertainty amongst all students as to how accessible the campus actually is. Students who commented on this and other building questions often started off saying “while I have not personally faced physical issues around campus...” and continued on pointing out various built issues like lack of ramps, signage in buildings, and accessible elevators that could impact any student, not to mention those with mobility issues.

As a follow up, all survey respondents were asked if they feel there is a particular building which is especially inaccessible. All 95 answers to this question were categorically coded by the building or area of concern on campus (Table 1).

While students discussed a variety of specific buildings, some themes emerged regarding what exactly was of concern. These include signage inside of buildings (maps of classrooms, bathrooms, exits), inaccessible or inconvenient entrances, steep staircases both throughout the building and in classrooms, ergonomic design of desks and tables, as well as unreliable elevators.



Category	Number of Relevant Answers
Applied Health Sciences Complex	2
Arts Quad	5
Libraries	3
Mathematics and Computer (MC)	6
Needles Hall	5
Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology (PAS)	13
J.R Coutts Engineering Lecture Hall (RCH)	5
Science Buildings	2
General classroom concerns	2
Older Buildings	11
General concerns	14

Table 1: Summary of buildings or locations of accessibility concern around the University of Waterloo main campus

In particular, the irony of accessibility issues at Needles Hall is apparent in student submissions; one respondent expressed the following: “from a design perspective the long wheelchair ramp and the stairs upon stairs when you enter the building feel the opposite of the buildings function. I am talking about the needles hall building where [AccessAbility Services] is located.” Additionally, stairs and signage inside buildings is of great concern. As one student mentioned, “all buildings need better maps. Buildings should all have elevators that are easy to find. Buildings should have entrances that don’t have animals or bugs.” Other students go on to say that “Any of the old engineering buildings feel very imposing; have few bathrooms and also are almost impossible to navigate if you can’t walk up and down stairs” and “Older buildings on campus lack multiple entryways that are accessible to those who have physical disabilities.” It is clear from these responses that students are keenly aware of the variety of physical accessibility issues on campus.

In summary, students generally ascribed to this sentiment; “I think that we should be focusing more on making our older buildings accessible for all students before we continue to build newer ones, since this only means that certain areas of campus are lagging farther and farther behind.” Based on this response as well as suggestions to improve physical accessibility on campus, a recommendation addressing these concerns is outlined later in the report.

## 6.2 Student Safety

In addition to building accessibility, students also had the opportunity to discuss general safety issues on campus. The majority of feedback received on this subject regarded outdoor maintenance and transit around campus, particularly in the winter when campus can become covered in snow and ice. As mentioned in the previous section, improper clearing of snow and ice was a common response to the question about physical accessibility barriers experienced on campus. One student indicated that “I am not physically disabled, but I know that campus can be VERY slippery in the wintertime, which is a huge issue for those whose disabilities affect their mobility.” Recommendations for changes in this area include ideas such as more de-icing, bigger sidewalks and overall “improved winter maintenance to ensure that all areas of campus are fully accessible to those who require assisted mobility.” This is an on-going, large scale issue with many moving parts and as such next steps for WUSA are detailed later in the report.

## 6.3 Housing

The final aspect of the built environment discussed with the research participants was accessibility issues about University of Waterloo residences and off-campus housing. By researching this topic, a more holistic view of lived experiences by people with accessibility needs can be presented in this report, allowing for more cohesive recommendations and actions to be taken in order to improve said experiences.

Survey respondents were asked if they feel Waterloo residences have taken appropriate and effective action to ensure that residences are accessible to them; 34% said yes, residences were accessible while 8% said no and 29% were unsure if residences had taken appropriate actions for accessibility. The remaining 29% of respondents said ‘no answer’ or preferred not to say for this question. Students were then able to provide written responses, of which many mentioned that Waterloo residences did indeed have physical accessibility issues that would restrict student choice of living arrangements on campus. One student noted how “REV and V1 are largely inaccessible to wheelchair bound students because there are no elevators...” and another explained how “the UWP residences are old and have no elevators or fast pathways between buildings.” In just these two quotes alone, 3 out of 7 on-campus residences are mentioned as inaccessible or as having serious concerns, calling into question the level of accessibility of on-campus housing.

The other area of concern regarding on-campus housing is the accommodation process, whereby multiple students interviewed correctly applied for residence accommodations but had a difficult time confirming and actually receiving them. In one case a student “had a 15-email exchange with someone [from UW Residence] over the summer to get the room changed,

[the student] had indicated in the housing request form that the only thing they needed an accommodation for was a bathroom thing and they weren't accommodated as promised." Another student "specifically applied for single room with gender neutral washroom and eventually got it.

[The student] kept asking UW housing for confirmation because they needed their accommodation and UW housing never answered and wouldn't confirm – that stressed them out." To expand on these experiences, a student revealed:

"I felt like I had to explain my entire medical history to a random housing services employee in order to get the accommodations accessibility services had already noted – I felt concerned about confidentiality of the random housing services employee...Felt that because I was already registered with accessibility for accommodations, I shouldn't have had this issue."

These experiences indicate that a lack of communication between UW Housing staff, AccessAbility Services, and the students who had applied for accommodations correctly can cause severe, unnecessary stress about the housing process and medical confidentiality in students.

On the other hand, students typically did not run into many physical accessibility issues in off-campus housing; however, it should be noted that as this is a small sample size no generalizations for this aspect of the student experience can be conclusively drawn. Instead, students reported barriers of financial strain and the high cost of housing to be an issue for them when looking for an accessible living arrangement off-campus. One student noted "I generally use either Kijiji or the UWaterloo Off-Campus Housing to find housing. A lot of the easy to find and accessible buildings are much higher in price and in large student apartment buildings. It's a rock and a hard place situation since those cost more, have worse maintenance than a rented house, and unpredictable roommate pairings." Another student mentioned how "The [housing] market is incredibly expensive and unaffordable to find something decently livable...Students are worried that prices might get much more expensive once we return to in-person classes."

The concern about cost of off-campus accessible housing in Waterloo can be contextualized in the broader student housing trend exemplified in a recent WUSA Report<sup>2</sup>. For students with accessibility needs the combination of rising housing costs and any prices associated with their accommodation or medical needs may escalate the strain they are under.

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2 The WUSA Housing Report is being finalized in May 2021 and discusses various aspects of the lived student housing experience by University of Waterloo students

## 7. Finances

In addition to housing costs, students participating in the video and email interviews were asked about the financial aspect of being a person with accessibility needs. Overall students participating did not experience excessive financial strain regarding their needs. However, participants did note that various accessibility services and devices did cost money and could be an issue for other students. One student “has some physical accessibility needs and medical requests, [and] has noticed it costs lots of money and can be a barrier for people in need who don’t have secure funding.” This same student went on to describe how “AccessAbility Services requires money to get products needed after a trial period, which adds up...[AccessAbility] was able to help the student get a grant to cover initial costs of buying an audio recording device for notetaking which was nice, but the student has to cover refills now...” This sudden onset of cost for a device a student is already using can be detrimental for students with financial constraints. Students may have to stop using the device, switch to a different one that may not work as well for them, or adjust already tight budgets to make room for this new cost.

This phenomenon is also evident when students discuss their experiences with insurance. Navigating insurance plans and coverage is complex at the best of times but the effects of a misstep or change in health insurance can be especially immediate and severe for people with accessibility needs. For example, one student “switched from an external insurance to student insurance and had a bit of a challenge getting prescriptions outside of the SLC [Student Life Centre] pharmacy, [the student] couldn’t figure out how to show their insurance card to the other pharmacy and had to pay all fees upfront and get reimbursed later which wasn’t great or preferred.” Luckily, that student had enough money to cover fees upfront and wait for reimbursement. Other students, like this participant, may not be financially stable enough to do so:

“[The student] had to go off their medication recently because of issues with their health insurance, Because of COVID, the family finances have been impacted and [the student] was unable to [have] fees arranged for the term because of that. As a consequence, the student’s health insurance was unable to be renewed and then they were unable to buy their needed medication or make a doctor’s appointment for months – [the student] has been feeling severe side effects from being off their medication.”

For students not eligible for OHIP+ <sup>3</sup> (e.g., out of province, international, or students over 24), prescription coverage may be costly and hard to come by, further barring students from accessing accessibility aids.

There can be a great many costs associated with being a person with a disability.

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<sup>3</sup> Ontario Health Insurance Plan Plus, covers prescription medications for anyone under 24, on provincial healthcare, and not covered by a private plan (Ontario, 2021).

They have a great impact on that person's life, especially in university. As this theme is based on a small sample size, few generalizations can be made, but it is important to note that financial constraints are of concern to students with accessibility needs no matter their personal experiences at the University of Waterloo. Students understand that changing financial situations can have an immediate impact on their ability to access medical care, academic accommodations, and other resources needed to be successful at university.

## **8. International Students**

While this research project unfortunately was not able to collect as many accounts on international student experiences with accessibility on campus as desired, the data that was analyzed is incredibly important. Specific issues and concerns that only apply to international students can often be unintentionally overlooked in a space dominated by domestic students. Stress of permits, transport to Waterloo, lack of familial support due to distance, and other concerns may have a negative impact on a student's management of their accessibility needs.

For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all students in various ways, but for international students the effects of it are especially severe. One student revealed, "I could have gone home to [my home country] during this pandemic to save my parents from covering my high living expenses here in Canada, but on top of the difficult and ever-changing travel regulations both here and in [my home country], they felt I'd be physically safer in Canada." While this student may be physically safer in Canada, this decision affected the student's mental health and coping mechanisms as they "were not able to go home in over a year and feel very alone while staying in Waterloo – my friends went back home and I do not have a support network here." For some people with accessibility needs, it may already be hard enough to maintain a strong support system when everyone is in the same area, to lose that geographical proximity may make it so much more difficult to maintain those needed relationships.

A common tactic used by the University of Waterloo to help students manage their health and disabilities is to suggest lighter course loads or taking a semester off as a break to allow students to prioritize themselves and lower stress levels. As one international student explains, this may have the opposite effect and increase stress for international students; "Unscheduled breaks [in course load/schedule] have an impact on my eligibility for a post-graduate work permit (PGWP) which I desperately need because I don't see decent prospects for me at home or anywhere else without that additional experience after graduation." By not taking immigration and permit requirements into account when proposing accommodations for students, the "break" students receive may not be a break at all and may raise concerns they did not have before. Thus, it is important that any accommodations offered to international students take their unique social and legal status in Canada, and any plans for permits post-university, into consideration.



## 9. General and Other Concerns

Besides questions about professors, services, and employment, the accessibility survey asked participants about their general experiences on campus as well as if they could provide any other information as a person with accessibility needs at the University of Waterloo.

One question asked students if they feel there is enough awareness for disability accessibility on campus. 52% of survey respondents indicated that no, there is not enough awareness on campus, while 13% said yes, there enough awareness, 29% of respondents were unsure and 6% selected 'no answer.' Subsequently, survey participants were asked if they felt there was enough awareness for different types of disabilities on campus. This question received a similar breakdown of responses as the previous one, where 64% of respondents selected no while only 7% indicated yes, they did feel there was enough awareness of different disability types. For this question, 23% of respondents were unsure and 6% selected 'no answer.'

These questions, as well as many of the lived experiences documented in this report, indicate that students face a lack of knowledge and awareness about accessibility issues on campus. This has the potential to impact their academic experiences and influence the level and quality of support they receive from various university systems. Multiple students have discussed this phenomenon, stating "the disability policies should strive to reduce variance for those that use them. It should not be a big deal, or require you [to] go out of your way to get access to the supports needed. Disabled students should be able to have similar if not the same experience in their education as their able-bodied counterparts."

Overall, students simply want people on campus to understand accessibility needs more and they want people to listen to their concerns and take them seriously. One student explained how they:

**"...wish that the [university] would listen to their students more. With things like bad profs or problems with the curriculum it usually just feels like the students have no power and you just have to deal with it until you're out. Especially in [engineering] when you're in a cohort and don't get to pick your profs and don't get to pick many courses until 4th year."**

There is a running theme of inconsistency with staff members at the university, where equal care is not provided because of a lack of staff knowledge. This has led to negative experiences for students. For example, one student explained that "every time I've attempted to seek help from UW in regards to my mental health, my experience with the staff ended terribly. They don't seem to care, don't provide accurate information, the process itself is very back and forth and it's hard for someone with a mental health disability to maneuver through the process when there isn't clear instructions on how to receive them. it's getting old hearing an institution promote mental health but not make any real changes to better students' lives."

Despite all the negativity expressed in this report about the numerous issues with accessibility at the University of Waterloo, most students have had a positive time at university. They have made friends, joined clubs, and found positive spaces for themselves. But when they have trouble accessing services or systems meant to provide them equitable access to academics, potentially making them feel like university system is stacked against them, their overall experience is severely impacted. Based on the experiences outlined here, there is an incredibly strong foundation for improvements and changes to be made to ensure that all students, but especially those with accessibility needs, are provided with all the resources they need to succeed at the University of Waterloo.

## **10. Recommendations and Desired Activities**

This report has covered numerous areas and systems at the University of Waterloo that students with accessibility needs interact with. The issues mentioned touch all levels of the university system, from individual instructors and advisors, to the policies and protocols for entire services/faculties. The report serves as a holistic, well-rounded piece to provide context for and an introduction to some of the issues students with accessibility needs face. Recommendations for future actions are outlined here to address some of the concerns brought up in this report.

### **10.1 Actions by WUSA**

#### **Promotion of CAPS**

WUSA should raise awareness about Centre for Academic Policy Support (CAPS) through advertisement on WUSA's various communication channels. This service is a WUSA, student-run resource for people who need to file a petition, grievance, or appeal with the university to address issues with University academic policies. The coordinators at CAPS help students complete the correct forms, explain academic policy, and advise students on other available resources.

As highlighted earlier in this report, many students with accessibility concerns have needed to file a petition or appeal during their time at university. Rarely was CAPS mentioned by students themselves even though they indicated help with the filing process would have been appreciated. Increasing awareness about this service would allow more students to utilize and benefit from the support CAPS provides.

Additionally, as some students may not think to file petitions or grievances because of misconceptions about their ability to do so, the promotion of CAPS also serves to educate students about the ways they can advocate for themselves to the university. This may result in students who would not otherwise file a petition, file one because they now know about the service. WUSA is recommended to include CAPS in all communications about the WUSA run services and to highlight CAPS in other communication methods, such as emails and social media, more frequently.

## **Physical Accessibility**

It is recommended that WUSA take the data and information provided with regards to the built campus environment and move them to the Student Safety Committee portfolio. The Student Safety Committee has already collected information on physical safety around campus and has established areas of concern which align with the issues presented in this report. The Student Safety Committee will supplement their existing evidence, using the data presented here, for their future actions to ensure all students are physically safe on campus.

### **Areas for the Student Safety Committee to include:**

- (i) Internal Signage within buildings (exits, bathrooms, stairs, etc.)
- (ii) Reliable elevators
- (iii) Ice and Snow clearance
- (iv) Maps of internal building layouts (i.e., where classrooms are)
- (v) Accessible building entrances

## **10.2 Creation of an Accessibility Committee under WUSA**

In order to generate appropriate recommendations and actions for multiple university systems, it is recommended that an Accessibility Committee is formed within WUSA. This committee will draw on the data and experiences highlighted here to establish detailed recommendations and work with other university systems as needed to move suggested changes forward.

As this report is only highlights a few students' lived experiences via video interviews and survey data, it cannot serve as an adequate representation of the entire student community who identify as a person with a disability. Additionally, as many issues brought forward have to do with a variety of university services such as AccessAbility Services, Faculties, Health Services, it is crucial to have conversations with said services to enact meaningful changes that will improve student experiences. Thus, a committee which can collaborate with various stakeholders and gather detailed information regarding current policies and procedures would be ideal.

The rest of the recommendations outlined here serve as areas of interest for the committee to investigate once it has been formed. The committee is encouraged to start with the desired changes as mentioned in this report as these changes have been recommended by the Accessibility Commissioner and the student research respondents themselves.

## **AccessAbility Services**

The new Accessibility Committee developed in the previous recommendation is encouraged to prioritize improvements to AccessAbility Services. This is a crucial area for development to positively improve student experiences. Based on the concerns highlighted in this report, three main aspects of AccessAbility are suggested starting points: (1) Registration; (2) Communication of responsibilities; and (3) Advisor training.

The registration process at AccessAbility Services can be quite complex and drawn-out for students, especially for those which require multiple pieces of supporting documentation from very specific sources. Wait times for medical and intake appointments are often long and affect student ability to receive accommodations at the start of term. These times may be even longer if a student must re-submit documentation because of a technicality. Thus, the committee is recommended to investigate how to streamline the registration process for students. This includes clarifying where students can get documentation and what that document needs to look like, the average enrollment time, as well as what other resources or contacts are available for students as they go through this process. This also includes examining internal AccessAbility processes to ensure that student registration is streamlined for advisors; therefore, ensuring that students would not be required to re-register in a subsequent term for an already documented accommodation.

In conjunction with a streamlined registration process, better communication of services and the student role in the accommodation process is needed. As detailed earlier in this report, the large amount of paperwork and text-blocks presented to students can be hard or even inaccessible to read. Additionally, students were also unclear on where to reach out within AccessAbility to ask for help or clarification on issues, such as which party is responsible for notifying instructors about the student's accommodation plan. The accessibility committee should strive to improve communication from AccessAbility Services to students in a more accessible format while addressing concerns about which entity (the service or the student) is responsible for each part in the accommodation process. This improved communication should also include the scope of AccessAbility services (i.e., what they will or will not help students with) so that students are better informed about what resource is best suited to their needs as well as improved awareness of the variety of accommodations offered. Streamlined communication channels would also allow students to report any inconsistencies of accommodation provisions to the appropriate AccessAbility Services contact, who would then take further action on behalf of the student to ensure all accommodation plans are implemented. Overall, the Accessibility Committee should work to make AccessAbility Services transparent and easily accessible through clear communication for all students.

The third starting point for the accessibility committee involves internal AccessAbility Service structures and personnel behaviours to ensure all students are feel welcomed and included within that space. Allegations of discrimination, ignorance, and

gaslighting from AccessAbility Services employees towards students are incredibly serious and should be fully investigated. The committee is highly encouraged to work with AccessAbility Services on developing improved and more inclusive training for employees as well as better oversight and reporting structures for incidents. It is important for the committee to emphasize this recommendation as front-line employees who work directly with students can have the most impact on the quality of a student's accommodation experience.

## **Health Services**

It is recommended that the new committee also look into Health Services as they relate to accessibility needs as students have pointed out areas in need of further investigation and improvement. As this service intersects with AccessAbility Services and other departments on campus quite frequently with regards to setting students up with appropriate accommodations, it is important to take student concerns into consideration.

The new Accessibility Committee is encouraged to advocate for the development of a stronger reporting and oversight system for harmful interactions students may experience at Health Services. As evidenced earlier in the report, students have faced ignorance, judgement, and concerning health directives from Health Services professional employees and have not seen any action taken to address their concerns. Improving and clarifying the reporting process for interactions at Health Services will allow students to safely advocate and protect themselves from harmful interactions which may impact a student's ability to meet their accessibility needs.

Coinciding with a stronger reporting process, advocacy for a more inclusive environment, particularly with regards to LGBTQIA+ students is strongly encouraged for the committee. Health Services should recognize and consistently use a student's preferred name, pronouns, and gender on forms and during appointments. Incidents of this nature should be included in the reporting and oversight system suggested previously, to allow for investigation and appropriate subsequent actions to be taken.

Additionally, the committee is recommended to work with Health Services to expand access to long-term, consistent care for students with long-term needs or chronic conditions. This issue has been brought up by multiple students throughout this report, who indicate that receiving care from consistent providers over the course of their tenure at University of Waterloo has been a struggle and potentially detrimental to their health. Expanding access to long-term options within the university system,



or creating a more robust and collaborative network of care options outside of the university, is crucial to the health and wellbeing of students who need it.

### **Counselling Services**

Similar to Health Services, the new accessibility committee is encouraged to work with Counselling Services to improve areas of concern as pointed out by students in this report. Counselling services quite often works with Health and AccessAbility Services to formulate a robust accommodation plan for students and intersects with academic departments throughout the university as well. Thus, it is very important that student experiences at Counselling Services are as positive as possible.

The new accessibility committee should work to clarify the scope and nature of Counselling Services as well as the variety of resources available. In particular, clarification of a session limit per term or per academic year is needed. Students report disparities and confusion on what the limit is and the time frame where the limit applies; prompting the need for clear messaging from Counselling Services about the scope of their services and what level of help students can expect.

On the topic of a 6-session cap, students report that this is not nearly enough time to improve their mental health, especially when students may not see the same counsellor for all 6 sessions. The accessibility committee should advocate for an increased number of sessions per student and work to ensure all students stay with a regular counsellor throughout their time in Counselling Services. The session cap not only hurts students in the short-term, but students with long-term or chronic needs are severely impacted by this limit and inconsistency in care providers.

### **University Wide Inclusion Training**

As a final area the new Accessibility Committee should explore is the potential to have the mandatory disability inclusion training for all university staff be improved. Many students report negative interactions with university employees, such as instructors and academic advisors, because they are unaware of various disabling conditions and do not understand the need for accommodations. This in turn affects students' ability to receive reasonable accommodations as well as the student's perception of the university as an accessible, inclusive place.

Improving disability inclusion training would include added information about more conditions, the need for accommodations, and most importantly, the expectations of student facing staff when presented with accommodation requests or plans from AccessAbility Services. The Accessibility Committee should advocate for these and other changes to be made to the training, especially with regards to expectations of staff, to ensure that all university employees are well educated and trained in serving all students with accessibility needs.

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# 11. Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. I'm in the faculty of:
  - a. Applied Health Sciences
  - b. Arts
  - c. Engineering
  - d. Environment
  - e. Math
  - f. Science
  
2. I'm in year:
  - a. One
  - b. Two
  - c. Three
  - d. Four
  - e. Five +
  
3. Are you an international student?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
4. Do you identify as a mature student? A mature student is typically defined as an undergrad, who has been out of high school for at least 2-4 years when applying for postsecondary education.
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Prefer not to say
  
5. Do you identify as a person with a disability?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Prefer not to say
  
6. What type of disability do you identify as having? Select all that apply. -> if answered 5a
  - a. Physical disability
  - b. Visual disability
  - c. Hearing disability
  - d. Learning disability

- e. Mental illness disability
- f. Prefer not to say
- g. Other, please specify

7. What sort of functional limitations do you experience due to your disability?

Select all that apply. -> if answered 5a

- a. Mobility
- b. Reading
- c. Handwriting
- d. Speaking
- e. Hearing
- f. Ability to focus
- g. Ability to understand social cues
- h. Mood
- i. Technological limitations
- j. Prefer not to say
- k. Other, please specify

8. Do you have a service animal? -> if answered 5a

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Prefer not to say

9. If needed, do you know how to register as a student with a disability with the University of Waterloo's AccessAbility Services?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Prefer not to say

10. Are you registered with the University of Waterloo's AccessAbility Services?

-> if answered 5a

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Prefer not to say

11. If needed, do you know how to submit a Verification of Illness Form with the University of Waterloo?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Prefer not to say

12. Which University of Waterloo services have you used in relation to disability accessibility? Select all that apply. -> if answered 5a.

- a. AccessAbility Services
- b. Health Services
- c. Counselling Services
- d. MATES
- e. Equity Office
- f. I have not used any of these services in relation to disability accessibility.
- g. Prefer not to say
- h. Other, please specify

13. Have you had any issues accessing any of the services above? This can include physically accessing the buildings, complications completing paperwork to register for the services, or other barriers. -> if answered 12 a, b, c, d, e, h

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Prefer not to say

14. If you answered yes to Question 13, which services have you had issues with? Select all that apply. -> if answered 13a

- a. AccessAbility Services
- b. Health Services
- c. Counselling Services
- d. MATES
- e. Equity Office
- f. Prefer not to say
- g. Other, please specify

15. If you answered yes to Question 13, what difficulties have you had accessing these services? -> if answered 13a

16. Do you feel that Waterloo Residences has taken appropriate and effective action to ensure that residences are accessible to you? -> if answered 5a

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Unsure
- d. Prefer not to say

17. What, if any, physical accessibility barriers have you faced on campus? Select all that apply. -> if answered 5a

- a. Difficulty finding accessible entrances

- b. Lack of accessible entrances
- c. Difficulty finding elevators
- d. Lack of elevators
- e. Difficulty finding wheelchair ramps
- f. Lack of wheelchair ramps
- g. Difficulty finding accessible washrooms
- h. Lack of accessible washrooms
- i. Improper clearing of ice and snow on accessible pathways
- j. Inconvenient accessibility paths between buildings
- k. Small sidewalks
- l. Lack of physical accessibility accommodation
- m. None
- n. Prefer not to say
- o. Other, please specify

18. What, if any, non-physical accessibility barriers have you faced on campus?

Select all that apply. -> if answered 5a

- a. Lack of braille in buildings
- b. Lack of signage in buildings
- c. Lack of understanding and support for disabilities
- d. Lack of recognition for accessibility accommodations
- e. Stigma against disabilities
- f. Systemic barriers in University policies
- g. Barriers related to teaching/learning structure (e.g. workload)
- h. Lack of non-physical accessibility accommodations
- i. None
- j. Prefer not to say
- k. Other, please specify

19. Do you feel that the University of Waterloo campus and its buildings in general have been made accessible for you?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Unsure
- d. Prefer not to say

20. Do you feel there is a particular building which is especially inaccessible? Which building and why?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Unsure
- d. Prefer not to say



21. Do you feel that there is enough awareness for disability accessibility issues on campus?
- Yes
  - No
  - Unsure
  - Prefer not to say
22. Do you feel that there is enough awareness for different types of disabilities on campus?
- Yes
  - No
23. Do you feel that instructors are understanding and accommodating enough concerning disabilities (including mental illness)?
- Yes
  - No
  - Unsure
  - Prefer not to say
24. If there is anything else related to your disability accessibility experiences at the University of Waterloo that you would like to mention but we have not asked about, please tell us now.

## **12. Appendix B: Interview Questions**

1. How do you find services for people with disabilities on campus?
2. What is your experience as an undergraduate student at UW?
3. Do you have any accessibility issues as a student at UW? If so, can you share?
4. How do you find housing to be in the Waterloo community? Do you find any barriers when finding appropriate housing for your needs?
5. How do you find your experience with online learning as someone who identifies with a disability? Is there anything you would like to improve?
6. How do you find the professors in your faculty to be in accommodating your disability?

7. Do you find your disability impacts your access to employment opportunities (e.g. part time work off/on campus, co-op opportunities etc.)?
8. Do you think there ways in which employment opportunities at UW could be made more accessible to people with disabilities?
9. Is there anything you would like to improve about student life at UW? (etc academics, services, landscape, social aspect, residence)
10. What has been your experience with the financial aspect of being a student registered with accessibility services?