

Introduction to Accessible Education

Does your teaching maximize student learning?

Accessible Educationⁱ is the process of designing courses and developing a teaching style to meet the needs of your learners from a variety of backgrounds, abilities and learning styles.

There is no single way to teach. Research on best practices in teaching and learning shows that people learn in a variety of ways; using different instructional methods helps meet the needs of the greatest number of learnersⁱⁱ.

The Educators' Accessibility Toolkit provides guidelines and tips on how to make your courses and your teaching style more accessible to students. These tips are in line with research on best practices in teaching and learningⁱⁱⁱ.

Characteristics of Accessible Education:

- Takes into account a variety of student characteristics within the student body, including ethnic backgrounds, race, abilities, disabilities, age, gender, language abilities and preferred learning style
- Does not compromise academic rigour
- Is a proactive and inclusive way of teaching and designing courses and curriculum for students
- Removes barriers up front.
- Reduces the need for specialized accommodations
- Identifies and clearly expresses the essential course content, while recognizing that there is flexibility, or multiple methods in the way that students can express understanding of the essential course content
- Is consistent with universally recognized principles of good teaching^{iv}
- Is consistent with the spirit of the Accessibility of Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005

Advantages of Accessible Education for Educators

- Improves student learning
- Reduces the work associated with arranging for individualised and specialised accommodations
- May improve student engagement since it reaches a broader audience.
- May improve course evaluations
- Creates increased ownership over your learning environment

Advantages of Accessible Education to Students

- Less time spent figuring out individual accommodations and more time focusing on course content
- Increased inclusion of students from a variety of backgrounds and abilities
- May increase student retention
- Students are not singled out for being different

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Accommodation Approach vs. Accessible Education Approach

Accessible Education aims to reduce dependence on the Accommodation Approach and move towards inclusion^v.

Accommodation Approach	Accessible Education Approach
Access is a problem for the individual and should be addressed by that person and the disability service program	Access issues stem from inaccessible, poorly designed environments and should be addressed by the designer
Access is achieved through accommodations in and/or retrofits of existing requirements	The system or environment is designed, to the greatest extent possible, to be usable by all
Access is reactive	Access is proactive
Access is often provided in a separate location or through special treatment	Access is inclusive
Access must be reconsidered each time a new individual uses the system, i.e. is consumable	Access, as part of the course design and curriculum, is sustainable

More resources on Accessible Education:

[Center for Applied Special Technology \(CAST\)](#)

[Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology \(DO-IT Centre\)](#)

[National Centre on Universal Design for Learning](#)

[University of Guelph, UID Project](#)

[UDL- Universe](#)

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ⁱ There are two frameworks for implementing Accessible Education: Universal Instructional Design (UID) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Both were informed by the architectural concept of Universal Design, which is “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (Centre for Universal Design, [The Principles of Universal Design](#). “UID is not just about accessibility for persons with a disability – it’s about truly universal thinking – maximizing learning for students of all backgrounds and learner preferences while minimizing the need for special accommodations.” (University of Guelph, [UID Project](#))

“UDL is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn. UDL provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone--not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs.” ([National Centre of Universal Design for Learning](#))

The term “Accessible Education” has been adopted in order to capture the value of both of these frameworks in improving the accessibility of university education.

ⁱⁱ Nilson, Linda B. Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors. 3rd Edition. John Wiley and Sons, 2010. Available at: <http://www.carlosmoreno.info/upn/pdf/133332445Teachin%20at%20its%20best.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ University of Guelph, [UID Project](#) and the [National Centre on Universal Design for Learning, Research Evidence](#)

^{iv} Chickering and Gramson in University of Guelph, [UID Project](#)

^v University of Ottawa, Access Service, Student Academic Success Service. (no date) [A Guide for professors: Minimizing the impact of learning obstacles.](#)