





Accessibility guidelines

Queen Mary Students' Union

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Accessibility guidelines

Disabilities and long-term health conditions can be difficult to talk about, and it can be difficult to know how to approach a student with a disability or long-term health condition. While it's part of the Students' Union's values to be inclusive, supportive and accessible, it can be hard to translate these values into practice when we organise activities for students. The fear of making an (unintentionally) offensive comment can prevent us from offering adjustments and support for students with disabilities and long-term health conditions.

This handbook aims to help Students' Union Staff to understand how we can make our activities for students as accessible as possible. Please note that the handbook does not cover employment law, so the advice in the handbook may not be directly applicable if you are making adjustments for a Student Staff member with a disability.

After reading this document, you will:

- Know why it's important to make our activities accessible
- Be familiar with some of adjustments you can make to make your activities more accessible¹
- Be able to write accessibility statements for your activities
- Feel prepared to talk to students about their access requirements in an inclusive and supportive way

The guidelines in this handbook are based on guidelines from Oxford SU's Students Disability Community, and Ella Harvey (VP Welfare 2018/19) has helped adapt the guidelines to the local context at Queen Mary.

Why accessibility is important

Queen Mary has a diverse student body, and as the Union for all students, we want to make sure everybody feels welcome and valued. This is why accessibility is important. If our activities aren't accessible, some groups of students will not be able to take part in our activities. Students with disabilities and long-term health conditions often meet barriers that non-disabled students don't. When we make our activities accessible, we break (some of) these barriers down and allow students with disabilities and long-term health conditions to take part in the same activities as their non-disabled peers.

In addition to the benefits for individual students, it's also important to make our activities accessible to live up to the promises in our strategic plan. In section 3.3 of the strategic plan, we commit ourselves to staying ahead of legal access requirements, and in section 3.2, we set out to ensure our opportunities, activities and employment are equally accessible for all students.

Making our activities accessible

The first thing you need to know when you begin to make your activities more accessible is that it's incredibly difficult to make all activities fully accessible for all students. Don't despair if you can't make all your activities fully accessible for everyone. The important thing is to make activities as accessible as possible, and to provide information, so students are able to decide whether an activity is accessible for them.

Although the lists below can seem quite overwhelming, they are not exhaustive. There are a wide range of disabilities and long-term health conditions that affect our students, and not all individuals are affected in the

¹ The guidelines are based on materials from Oxford SU's Students' Disability Community. Original guidance can be found here: <https://www.oxfordsu.org/resourcehub/understandingdisability/>

same way. There may be cases where adjustments to accommodate a student with one disability will make the activity less accessible for someone with another disability.

This can all seem very complicated, but don't give up! The point is not that you should do all of these things for every single event. Think of the lists below as a way to make yourself aware of some of the typical requirements students can have. Consider the adjustments you can easily make to your events to make them more accessible, and keep the other points in mind, so you know what to do if a student contacts you to ask you to accommodate their access requirements.

Providing information

Lack of information is one of the most common barriers for participation for students with accessibility requirements. Luckily, this is easy to improve:

- Let people know what they can expect from an activity. Explain what it's all about. Provide an agenda or timetable for events that consist of multiple parts (e.g. dinner and a party/film screening and discussion).
- Include accessibility statements on promotional materials for activities. If it isn't possible to include the information on posters and printed material, it's good practice to tell students where they can find the information (e.g. include something like this: 'Accessibility information can be found on our website qmsu.org/insertlink').
- It's a good idea to either ask students directly what their accessibility requirements are or put into the event/activity description to get in touch if they have accessibility requirements. Be supportive if a student contacts you to discuss their accessibility requirements, and be prepared to make adjustments to accommodate them.

Mobility requirements

Most people will probably think of someone with a mobility impairment as someone in a wheelchair. While this may be the case, a mobility impairment can also include other types of impairments, such as difficulties walking, inability to stand up for a long time or back pain.

- Consider how the room can be accessed: Are there stairs? Is the lift working? Is there a ramp to bypass steps? Do the stairs have handrails? It's never acceptable to offer to carry someone up the stairs. It's dangerous and lacks dignity.
- Consider the layout of the building and the room: Are the doors wide enough for wheelchair users? Can tables and chairs be moved to make room for a wheelchair? Are there accessible toilets nearby? Are the doors heavy or automatic?
- Is seating available (preferably chairs with backrest)? Are tables available for notetaking/eating? Are the tables in suitable heights for wheelchair users?

Hearing requirements

Hearing impairments include complete and partial hearing loss.

- Are hearing loops available? If so, do you know how it works? (when you book rooms you can ask the timetabling team for advice on what rooms are accessible for what need)
- For students that lip read, you can reserve seats at the front of the room and make sure speakers are turned in the student's direction. Avoid placing speakers in front of a window, as this can make it difficult to see their face. Ensure the room is bright enough to see facial expressions and lip movements.

- Eliminate background noise – don't use background music and choose rooms where doors and windows can be closed to reduce noise.
- For some activities, it may be appropriate to get a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter.

Visual requirements

Visual requirements are not only relevant for people with visual impairments, they can also help students with dyslexia.

- Consider how a visually impaired person can find the room: Are there Braille² signs? Can you offer to meet the person at the building entrance?
- If you need to guide a visually impaired person, you should always offer that *they* can hold onto *your* elbow (not the other way around).
- Please note it's a legal requirement that assistance dogs are allowed to enter public spaces³. Even if you dislike dogs or are scared of dogs, you must accommodate assistance dogs.
- Make slides/materials available in plain-text format (e.g. a standard word document with plain, black text on white background).
- Make slides/materials available on request before the activity.
- Use a sufficiently large font size on slides/materials (appropriate size depends on the font and type of material).
- Use fonts that are easy to read (e.g. Arial and Calibri). Most fonts that mimic handwriting are difficult to read (e.g. Blackadder *and* Brush Script).
- Provide image descriptions on digital materials (or alternative text for images on the website) for screen readers.

Dietary requirements

It's a common misunderstanding that dietary requirements are a matter of personal preference. For students with allergies, eating disorders and conditions that affect the digestive functions, dietary requirements are a question of accessibility.

- If you serve food, you should check whether anyone has any dietary requirements.
- Label food clearly and keep the packaging so you can check the ingredients.
- Provide water or signpost to the nearest water fountain. If alcohol is served, non-alcoholic alternatives should be provided. If tea and coffee are served, decaffeinated alternatives should be provided.
- Make it possible to take part in an event without eating. Don't question it if someone doesn't want food.

Sensory requirements

Students with learning disabilities and epilepsy may have sensory requirements.

- For noisy and/or crowded events, you can provide a quiet space nearby.

² More information about Braille here: <https://www.royalblind.org/national-braille-week/about-braille/braille-facts>

³ More information about assistance dogs: <http://www.assistancedogs.org.uk/law/>

- Minimise background noise whenever possible.
- Requirements for lighting depends on the type of disability, but generally, it's a good idea to have a bright and well-lit room. Avoid flashing lights.

Trigger warnings and content notes

Trigger warning and content notes can make activities accessible for students with anxiety and other mental health conditions.

- Provide trigger warnings for topics that can be upsetting or triggering. This includes, but is not limited to: Sexual assault, illness (physical and mental), violence, war, all forms of discrimination, murder and genocide.
- Provide trigger warnings as early as possible (preferably on promotional materials) and again during the event. If possible, it is a good idea to try to introduce trigger warnings and then either do a group activity or have a break for a few minutes. This is so, if participants want to leave, they are able to without it being obvious.
- Individuals may find other things upsetting or triggering, so it's good practice to provide information about the topics that will be covered during an activity. It's also a good idea to let students know if the activity will include group work, individual work, sharing of personal experiences or presentations in front of a group.
- Be understanding if somebody needs to leave the room or refuses to take part in a certain activity. Don't force anyone to take part in something they don't feel comfortable doing – even if you think it would be beneficial for them (e.g. forcing someone to present in front of a group).

Talking about accessibility

Talking about disability, long-term health conditions and access requirements can feel difficult. Most people recognise that it's important to talk about these things in a respectful way, but knowing how to do it in practice is not easy.

- Be mindful of the language you use to talk about disability. There's not one right way of talking about disability – most individuals will have a personal preference. If an individual asks you to refer to them in a certain way, you should respect this and use the terminology they prefer. In general, it's better to talk about 'students with disabilities' than 'disabled students'. Never use disabilities or long-term health conditions as slang (e.g. don't say 'You're so OCD' or 'He's a psycho').
- Be as honest as possible. Don't claim an event is accessible if it isn't.
- Be willing to learn. Different people are affected by their disabilities in different ways. You might know someone with a disability, but that doesn't mean that everybody else with the same disability feels the same way.
- Don't change the way you talk to a student with a disability, unless they specifically ask you to do so. Don't speak slower/clearer/simpler than you normally would.
- Avoid talking about disability in a negative way (e.g. don't say 'suffer from a disability'). Don't assume a person is unhappy about their disability (e.g. don't say 'it must be so difficult for you').
- Don't ask invasive questions – even if they're well intentioned. If someone has disclosed that they have a disability or long-term health condition, you can ask general questions like 'How can I support you?' or 'Is there something I can do to make this activity more accessible to you?'
- Be accepting if somebody doesn't want or need your help.

- Apologise if you get it wrong. Don't be afraid to admit you've made a mistake. If you think it is appropriate in the situation, it can be a good idea to ask for advice on how you can improve.
- Remember that many disabilities are invisible, different people are affected by their disabilities in various ways and someone can be disabled even if they haven't received a formal diagnosis (yet). If someone asks for adjustments, you shouldn't question it or ask for proof of their disability.

How to write an accessibility statement

Providing information is one of the simplest ways to improve accessibility. By providing information, you enable students with accessibility requirements to assess whether an event will be accessible for them. In this way, you allow students to be well-informed, so they don't have to turn up to an activity only to realise that it is inaccessible for them.

A good accessibility statement should include:

- Description of the activity including the topics that will be covered, how students are expected to engage (e.g. group work, presentations, dancing in pairs) and if food/drinks will be provided
- Where the event will take place and basic information about physical accessibility
- Link to AccessAble's venue guide⁴
- Trigger warnings (if applicable)
- How students can get in touch with you if they have access requirements they would like to discuss with you

The following statement covers some of the common points you could include in an accessibility statement. Depending on your activity, it will be necessary to adapt the statement so it fits with your activity.

In this interactive training session, we will focus on time management. You'll learn about the barriers to good time management and why it's important to manage your time well. By the end of the session, you'll be familiar with a range of techniques you can use to improve your own time management. The session will include group work and individual reflections. You'll be encouraged to share your own experiences.

Please note that the session will include a brief discussion of perfectionism and mental health issues. Please feel free to get in touch if you think this may be upsetting or triggering for you.

We'll provide biscuits and fruit, but please feel free to bring your own snacks and drinks.

The event will take place in Blomeley Room 1 in the Students' Union Hub. The building has step-free access, accessible toilets and gender-neutral toilets. For further information about accessibility, please refer to AccessAble's guide: <https://www.accessable.co.uk/venues/students-union-hub>

If you have any access requirements you would like us to know about, you can contact Marianne Melsen on m.melsen@qmul.ac.uk.

What do I do now/Top tips!

So this is all great and good, but how do you apply it to your role? Here are some ideas for how you can get started and begin to make your activities more accessible:

⁴ Guide to Queen Mary can be found here: <https://www.accessable.co.uk/organisations/queen-mary-university-of-london> (scroll to 'Sites' to get specific information for your venue)

- Check that the descriptions of your activities clearly explain what the activities are and what students can expect (you probably do this already).
- Provide information about the accessibility of the venues your activities take place in – it's fine to provide some basic information and then signpost students to AccessAble for further information.
- Add your contact details to promotional materials and encourage students to contact you if they have any access requirements.
- Ask for advice if you don't know how to accommodate an access requirement. Often, the best thing you can do is to ask the student what they would like you to do. They know their disability and will be able to give you advice.
- Think about your mindset and attitude when you talk to students with disabilities and long-term health conditions. Be willing to learn and apologise if you don't get it right.
- When you book a room with the University, you can say you have a participant with x requirement and you need a University room that caters to it and they should be able to advise you on the best way to do that.

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