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Commentary: Covid-19 Proved That Universities Could Make Post-Secondary Education More Accessible, They Are Just Choosing Not To

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This month marks five years since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The viral illness taught everyone the importance of social-distancing and hand-washing and taught university students, faculty and staff, that there are different ways to learn and to be together. Even today, as we approach the end of another academic year, amid a continued increase in respiratory illness, public health officials are asking communities to remember what they learned back in 2020 – wash your hands, stay home if you are sick, wear a mask in indoor settings. Yet, universities are not adopting these policies to reduce the spread of Covid-19 and other respiratory illnesses on campus. Why is it that university administrations are so eager to ignore the lessons learned through the pandemic, as if they know do not know a new, different or even better way of doing things?

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, universities reacted quickly. Instructors started recording lectures at home and posting them online. Office hours were held using Zoom. Even vital hands-on learning had to be adapted to online platforms and labs were performed virtually. Executive administrators were closely watching budgets and operating costs as they quickly found themselves facing the threat of losing a primary source of income; student tuition. This was of particular concern in Ontario and British Columbia, where tuition accounts for the greatest percentage of revenue, 42.9% and 31.9% respectively (Matias, Popovic, & Lebel, 2021). On the other hand, many students faced new

barriers to learning such as losing study spaces and adapting to self-guided learning. Isolation increased for everyone, making it harder to maintain connections to classmates and instructors.

However, in being forced into adapting to a new reality, higher education changed to be more accessible. For the first time, many disabled students were given some of the accommodations they had been asking for for years. Students with mobility challenges expressed relief that they did not have to navigate physically inaccessible campuses year-round, day after day. Students who struggled with being in large crowds, or with sensory processing disorder, found accessing their education could be easier, as they determined where and how they accessed course content and could choose a space that was calmer than a typical lecture hall. Further, many students with visible disabilities were not as self-conscious about sticking out in their virtual classrooms, less conscious of being seen as asking for different treatment. Instructors learned about existing and new barriers that students experience in accessing their courses. Many instructors started to allow more flexible deadlines, taking into consideration the level of stress that all students were experiencing with both the realities of living through a pandemic and the very quick pivot to fully online learning. In-person timed exams weren't possible, so we found alternatives. The higher education research community followed suit to make sure that these 'innovations' were properly documented.

However, any increase in accessibility to disabled students during the pandemic was a secondary and unintentional effect. Services and practices that were put into place so quickly at the start of the pandemic to preserve learning for universities as a whole, and to make education more accessible for many, were denied to individual students with disabilities as we emerged "out of" the (ongoing) pandemic. This was apparent as a return to "normal" on campus and in the classroom, resulted in students with disabilities facing "normal" levels of inaccessibility. Once again, students with disabilities are being forced

into an often draining (Cammy et al., 2021) process that requires extensive documentation and does not necessarily lead to a more accessible education (Hannam-Swain, 2018). Just as it was in 2019, there is rarely an option for students to access lecture content online. Students with a physical disability or chronic illness are once again being forced to navigate inaccessible university environments with few allowances for flexible attendance or participation. The difference now is that students know that universities can accommodate them but are choosing not to.

Elsewhere, we've written about supporting course redesign and student mental health in challenging times (Robertson et al., 2021), and how to continue offering community-based experiential learning project courses during a pandemic (Jacobs et al., 2021). We've written apps (Porter et al., 2022) to increase access and inclusion to experiential learning during lockdowns. We've studied the impact that remote learning has had on our student population (e.g. Ismaili, 2021; Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). In this commentary, we argue that living in a just society includes ensuring that students with disabilities have the same access to education as their non-disabled peers. However, universities are actively hindering efforts towards accessible education for all by placing the burden of proving the need for an accessible education on disabled students themselves, thus undermining their rights.

According to human rights law, disability accommodation must consider each student as an individual with unique needs (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). While this imperative should mean that each student receives the accommodations they need, the broad changes that increased accessibility during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns have not been continued upon our return to in-person learning. When individual students expressed a desire for some of the pandemic classroom changes to continue, universities relied on two special words - "undue hardship."

Though "undue hardship" is intended to mean financial loss to the point of insolvency, there is a disconnect between the intended meaning of the law and its implementation (Prema & Dhand, 2019). For executive university leadership, disabled students present a threat to bottom lines because they are most often viewed as an added expense and not as an investment worth protecting (Dolmage, 2017). Some university administrators see university as a privilege, and as such, something that should not be fully inclusive (Nimante, D., Baranova, S., & Stramkale, L., 2021). And while many university administrations speak publicly about the need for inclusion and diversity on campus, their actions suggestion otherwise. For example, in Ontario, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act requires all public sector employees to receive training about "developing, implementing and enforcing accessibility standards" (Accessibility for Ontarians With Disabilities Act, 2005). However, a study at a medium sized comprehensive university found that 22% of professors who are required to complete such training, have not. The university does not follow up to ensure the training has been completed (Parizeau, 2022).

This lack of follow-through when it comes to supporting students with disabilities is concerning given that the pandemic has been a mass disabling event (Bonuck, 2023), and given the number of disabled students enrolled in post-secondary programs in Canada has been on the rise. Self-reported data of first-year undergraduate students indicates that current rates increased from 24% in 2019 to 31% in 2022 (CUSC, 2019; CUSC, 2022). About one-third of these students indicated that their disability impacted them daily (CUSC, 2022). Despite the growing need, and even though disabled students continue to require and deserve accommodations that will help them succeed in their academic careers, budget lines to support disabled students are not growing proportionately.

One way that universities could continue to support disabled students through our return to campus would be to hire instructors and/or support staff for the specific purpose of continuing the accessibility of course content that was established during the pandemic. Pandemic modifications to course design (e.g. recording lectures) required technical

support to process, transcribe, and post content, all of which was possible in models of pandemic remote learning because it was deemed necessary for all students. Much of this work by instructors was rushed and technical skills were learned on the fly out of necessity. And so, not all instructors were able to adapt well. With the shift back to "post-pandemic" in-person learning, we cannot de facto expect that instructors will be able to maintain that level of post-production service while they teach in person and many professors are reusing shoddy recordings and notes to fulfill their teaching duties even now (Kneese, 2021; Druce 2021). Further, it is not fair to instructors and staff to continue to put in unpaid hours to deliver courses on multiple platforms; hybrid, in-person, online. Hiring instructors and/or support staff who would be dedicated to ongoing accessibility would help solve this issue. However, this requires investment on the part of institutions, and, unfortunately, university administrations have proven that they do not see disabled students as worthy of investment. This then creates an increasing level of burden back onto disabled students..

Being disabled in higher education already comes with additional labour designed to support the executive administration in reducing 'undue hardship'. A 2022 report written for Employment and Social Development Canada found that: "The process of acquiring accommodations is often fraught with challenges related to assessment, documentation, implementation, cost, and feasibility" (Parekh et al., 2022). Disabled students are often required to provide updated and specialized medical documentation and can be denied accommodations if the wording is not standardized or if the documentation is "too old". The process is not standardized across different institutions or provinces. Also, much of the decision making about what paperwork is acceptable and what accommodations are granted is left to an individual who may not have formal training in disability studies or human rights and education legislation. Some universities require that a student be assessed by a physician, one who will make judgements on a student's disability status based upon a 30 minute assessment. Students must cover the costs of these appointments, which can exceed $100 (Campus Wellness, n.d.). When students miss

tests, exams or hand in assignments late, they may be required to submit a form verifying their illness. These forms can cost between $20 and $50, again something the student is responsible for. It should be noted that according to the Ontario Human Rights Commission's "Policy on accessible education for students with disabilities," under section 8.6, "Duties and responsibilities in the accommodation process, it notes that "the education provider has a responsibility to [...] bear the cost of any required medical information or documentation (for example, the education provider should pay for doctors' notes, assessments, letters setting out accommodation needs, *etc*.). On campus, students must negotiate an uneven and often inequitable experience across multiple 'microclimates of access' created by different instructors (Parizeau, 2022). These microclimates can range from welcoming to dismissive to openly hostile (Parizeau, 2022). For students with physical disabilities, course schedules may not allow enough time to physically move from one end of campus to another fast enough to attend classes.

Further evidence can be found system-wide. Many disabled students require assistance with notetaking but will be denied access to this service for many weeks if an unpaid volunteer notetaker is not immediately found. Executive administrations are behaving as though starting a semester with a paid notetaker presents "undue hardship." Is this the case? Being without the accommodations that a disabled student needs is the true hardship. And, if disabled students want recourse for accommodations denied, they must engage the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal.

People with disabilities are a marginalized group and face barriers that abled people often do not have to consider. On a university campus, the barriers that can exclude students from full participation in post-secondary education reinforces an unconscious, but pervasive belief that people with disabilities do not belong on university campuses (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). For reasons of social and ethical justice, and increasing innovation and productivity of a society, disabled people have the right to access the same services that abled people can, especially given that higher education is

a social determinant of health and happiness (NEAD, 2018). Having a university degree mitigates some of the negative social and financial impacts a disability can have on a person. Further, the workforce benefits when people with disabilities are included, as profitability and work culture improve (Lindsay, Cagliostro, Albarico, Mortaji & Karon, 2018). Yet our "normal" levels of inaccessibility perpetuate the notion that it is acceptable for disabled people to be less likely to obtain post-secondary degrees and more likely to live in poverty (Chatoor, 2021). Adding to the financial burden of university education, disabled students are more likely to take longer to complete their studies which delays their entry into the workforce (Schimmele et al., 2021).

Though not a comprehensive solution, many of us were hopeful that we could bring with us the tools and the more flexible ethos that we developed during these pandemic years to teach (and learn) more inclusively and accessibly, allowing more students with disabilities to access a post-secondary education. As institutions where the CEOs, politicians, journalists, scientists, teachers and doctorsof tomorrow build the foundation of their careers, it is important that university students understand the value of accessibility, inclusion and the inherent worth of all students, including those with disabilities. That is a lesson that cannot be truly taught through a lecture, but must be modelled within every level and department of the university. Instead, university administrators decided that maintaining these tools presents 'undue hardship' to institutions; institutions that are mandated to provide accessible education to all, but simply choose not to.

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