# What happens to accessibility?

The transition to remote learning has the potential to exacerbate the accessibility issues experienced by an increasingly diverse HE student population. Disabled students and students from widening participation backgrounds are more likely to be adversely affected by the move of university courses online.

For disabled and vulnerable student groups, remote delivery presents additional challenges to learning as their strategies may not translate to online spaces. Support staff and non-medical helpers may be furloughed or unable to carry out their work with the students remotely. Social distancing means that many students have been separated from their usual support network; vulnerable students and care-givers may be finding this especially challenging. Some students are experiencing the financial strains of lost part-time work, isolation in private accommodation, or living in a difficult environment. Limited access to campus means that some are without a quiet workspace, suitable equipment, and/or a secure internet connection.

Prioritising accessibility at the design stage means that students can gain access without unnecessary delay and complication. (It's also important to be aware that many students with learning disabilities only receive a diagnosis upon coming to university.) Accessibility strategies often benefit the wider community (including abled and neurotypical students), so the benefits of a proactive approach are far-reaching.

**Things to think about**

- **Asynchronous and manageable chunks.** Provide as many opportunities as possible for students to engage in asynchronous learning. This mode of delivery mitigates many access issues that could occur with the shift to remote teaching. Many people report heightened fatigue and concentration difficulties after switching to home-working (Zoom fatigue, for example). Additional screen-time and remote interaction have a cumulative effect; the result is mentally and physically draining. Try to include offline activities in your course planning, add breaks into your synchronous contact time, and find ways to break down materials into manageable chunks.
- **Low bandwidth methods.** Message boards and fora are a valuable low-bandwidth method of encouraging students to exchange ideas with one another. Be careful about imposing the norms of academic English with respect to spelling, grammar, and register: a casual tone, GIFs, memes, and informality can help under-confident or dyslexic students to feel comfortable engaging in writing that is visible to others.
- **Use a variety of formats.** Vary the formats of engagement, allowing students to respond to materials through a blend of text, image, audio, and video.

**Things to watch out for**

- All public sector websites, including HE institutions, will have to conform to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines from September 2020 (note: under the terms of the 2010 Equality Act, **we are required to 'make reasonable adjustments' to enable all students to access their studies**). These regulations ensure that online content is accessible by requiring accommodations such as captioning for videos, making transcripts available, and formatting that supports document readers.

- **Use a checklist** to ensure that your resources are accessible and support assistive technology. Strategies such as limiting colour schemes to two colours, using 12-point font, or inserting alternative-text descriptions for images, can improve accessibility significantly. The handout [10 Tips for Creating Accessible Content](#) from the Georgia Tech Web Accessibility Group offers a useful overview of inclusive formatting. The [Digital Accessibility Checklist](#) from Oakland University is also useful.
- **Remote learning can exacerbate barriers** related to socioeconomic status or personal circumstances that may have been hidden in the face-to-face classroom. Students may have limited access to quiet workspaces and/or suitable equipment, or unreliable internet connections. Promoting [asynchronous learning for low-bandwidth requirements](#) helps students to engage with material whatever their circumstances.
- **Always provide transcriptions of audio and video content.** This ensures that deaf students, students with limited mobility to take notes, or students without a quiet workspace are not disadvantaged by the mode of delivery. Captioning must also be used for video content. You can find guides to captioning PowerPoint presentations [here](#) and YouTube videos [here](#), or on the website for your preferred platform.

**Further Reading**

1. [Widening Participation with Lecture Recording Video Playlist](#) - The output from a series of three workshops held as part of a research [cluster on lecture capture](#). Especially useful is the [first video](#) which focuses on inclusive remote learning. The [second video](#) from the University of Glasgow's Widening Participation (WP) team outlines the barriers faced by WP groups. The [final video](#), 'Ten Simple Rules for Supporting an Inclusive Online Pivot', offers a clear list of guidelines. (Fuller discussion can be found in an OA pre-print [here](#).)

2. [Teaching in Higher Ed Podcast: Inclusive Practices Through Digital Accessibility](#) - this 30-minute interview with Christina Moore, Virtual Faculty Developer at Oakland University, explores [simple habits](#) that can make a significant impact on accessibility.

3. [Impact of the Pandemic on Disabled Students and Recommended Measures](#) - a report published by Disabled Students UK ([@ChangeDisabled](#)) that outlines the concerns that many disabled students have regarding the shift to remote teaching.

4. [Accessible Teaching in the Time of COVID-19](#) - this blog post by Aimi Hamraie observes that disabled people have for decades been using technology as a means of navigating higher education, so there is much to learn from listening to their experiences.

5. [Video paper: 'On Accessibility'](#) - Andrea MacRae's excellent ten-minute flash paper recorded as part of the [English Association Shared Futures](#) series explores what accessibility guidelines mean in practice. The paper begins at 0:38:03.

6. [Media and Materials for Universal Course Design](#) - infographics and links to additional resources make this guide from [CAST](#) both comprehensive and easy to navigate.

7. [QAA Scotland: Enhancing Inclusion and Accessibility Resources Page](#) - a list of resources broken down by medium. Of note is the sharable short [video](#) from Jill Mackay (Edinburgh) on the essential considerations for accessible remote course design.

8. On the History UK Blog, read Louise Creechan's [Accessibility in Remote Learning – why does it Matter?](#).