

Nova Scotia Post-Secondary Accessibility Framework

**COUNCIL OF NOVA SCOTIA UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS
NOVA SCOTIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

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Post-Secondary Accessibility Framework

Message from CONSUP and NSCC

The Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents (CONSUP) and the President of the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) wish to recognize the commitment and excellent work of the Post-Secondary Accessibility Working Group in developing this framework.

CONSUP's member universities and NSCC are fully committed to the development of multi-year accessibility plans, establishment of accessibility advisory committees, and compliance with accessibility standards prescribed for the post-secondary education sector when they are developed.

We look forward to our continued work together to successfully develop and implement accessibility plans across our university and college campuses.

Sincerely,

William (Bill) A. Lahey, Chair
Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents
President & Vice-Chancellor, University of King's College

Don Bureaux, President
Nova Scotia Community College

Introduction

Access to education is a human right, and Nova Scotia's post-secondary sector is committed to ensuring access for persons with disabilities and others who experience barriers to accessibility, such as those who identify as Deaf, or neurodivergent. Accessibility is a collaborative practice, requiring participation from all stakeholders - departments, faculty, staff, students, and partners. It requires understanding the barriers persons with disabilities face accessing education and committing to prevent and remove them through the proactive design and revision of programs, policies, practices, services, and infrastructure.

Nova Scotia's *Accessibility Act* recognizes accessibility as a human right and has a goal of an accessible province by 2030. Through the development of standards and other initiatives, the legislation aims to remove barriers to participation in:

- The Built Environment
- Delivery and Receipt of Goods and Services
- Information and Communication
- Education
- Employment
- Transportation

Under the Act, Nova Scotia's universities and the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) were prescribed as public sector bodies, effective April 1, 2020. This means they must develop multi-year accessibility plans, establish accessibility advisory committees, and comply with accessibility standards when they are developed. The aim is to remove barriers for persons with disabilities in accessing post-secondary education in Nova Scotia and working at our post-secondary institutions.

Work is already underway to improve accessibility at Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions. This framework builds on those accomplishments, and establishes a shared vision and collaborative commitments to remove barriers in the following areas:

- Awareness and capacity building
- Teaching, learning and research
- Information and communication
- Delivery of goods and services
- Employment
- Transportation
- Built environment
- Implementation, monitoring and evaluation

The framework's commitments will be operationalized by each post-secondary institution through the implementation of institutional accessibility plans. Institutions will establish actions, timelines, and implementation plans according to their own priorities, processes, policies, and budgets to meet the commitments outlined in the framework.

This Post-Secondary Accessibility Framework was developed collaboratively by representatives from Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions, in consultation with additional staff, faculty and students with a variety of expertise, including the university and NSCC presidents and other senior leaders.

Purpose

The purpose of the Post-Secondary Accessibility Framework is to establish a shared vision and commitments for accessibility in Nova Scotia's post-secondary sector, and to inform the development of institutional accessibility plans.

Vision

Nova Scotia post-secondary education institutions provide full and equitable access to education, employment, and services within a collaboratively-developed and values-based commitment to accessibility that prioritizes institutional accountability within a human rights framework.

Principles

Human Rights

We uphold accessibility as a fundamental human right and model this in our work. We prioritize the social model of disability, recognizing disability is impacted by environmental, structural, and attitudinal barriers that limit the full participation of persons with disabilities.

First Voice

We value first voice and prioritize it in our work to advance accessibility, recognizing the lived experiences and expertise of students and employees with disabilities or others who experience barriers to accessibility.

Diversity

We understand the diversity of disabilities and how other identities, circumstances, and experiences intersect and impact accessibility. Disability is valued as a category of diversity and reflected in post-secondary diversity policies, programs and services.

Inclusion

We are committed to creating equitable, inclusive learning and working environments, where students and employees are treated with respect and dignity.

Collaboration

We share information and promote collaboration and coordination within and among our institutions, and among sectors, stakeholders, communities and initiatives.

Students, employees and external service providers work collaboratively to foster learning environments, experiences, and services that create opportunities for success for students with disabilities or others who experience barriers to accessibility.

Innovation

We understand that being innovative, proactive, and flexible are essential to advancing accessibility.

Goals and Commitments

Awareness and Capacity Building

Goal

Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions foster a culture of accessibility and equity, encourage and facilitate the prevention and removal of barriers to participation, and build capacity in these areas among employees and students.

Commitments

- Develop and implement awareness and training programs for employees and students to increase knowledge and understanding of accessibility, equity, human rights, disability rights, and barriers to participation in post-secondary education.
- Encourage and support departments and employees to review and integrate areas of accessibility and disability issues into course curriculum of all relevant academic programs.
- Collaborate with the Accessibility Directorate to build capacity and increase awareness about the obligations of the post-secondary sector under the *Accessibility Act*.

Teaching, Learning, and Research

Goal

Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions are leaders in inclusive and accessible teaching and learning, and collaborative research on accessibility.

Commitments

- Ensure access to and use of accessible technology in teaching and learning.
- Build capacity and implement supports for faculty and other employees to remove barriers to learning through inclusive practices and equitable assessment, such as principles outlined in universal design for learning and culturally responsive teaching and learning.
- Identify and adopt a common standard for ensuring students have access to resources, including accommodations, to support academic success, wellness, and transitions from high school and to employment, the community, or further study.
- Support the growth of research and scholarship on accessibility and disability studies, including collaborative accessibility research initiatives among Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions, led by first voice researchers.
- Expand and improve access to inclusive post-secondary education options for students with intellectual disabilities.

Information and Communication

Goal

Information and communication at Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions is accessible.

Commitments

- Ensure the communications policies, procedures, and practices at post-secondary institutions facilitate accessibility.
- Ensure institutional communication is delivered in formats that are accessible.
- Adopt a common standard to ensure the accessibility of post-secondary institution websites (e.g. WCAG 2.1 AA).

Delivery of Goods and Services

Goal

Students, employees and visitors with disabilities or others who experience barriers to accessibility have equitable access to goods and services provided by Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions.

Commitments

- Develop and provide accessible customer service training for employees.
- Provide customer service physical spaces that are conducive to positive accessible customer service experiences.
- Embed accessibility into procurement processes, including creating common accessibility language, accessibility requirements and criteria in tenders for goods and services purchased by Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions.
- Ensure services provided by Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions are accessible to persons with disabilities or others who experience barriers to accessibility, including accessible communication, supporting the use of assistive technology, accessible digital content and technologies, and welcoming service animals and support persons.

Employment

Goal

Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions are accessible and equitable employers, support the careers of employees with disabilities or others who experience barriers to accessibility, and ensure their employees reflect the diversity of Nova Scotians.

Commitments

- Ensure processes, policies and practices facilitate and encourage the recruitment, selection, transition, career growth and advancement of persons with disabilities or others who experience barriers to accessibility.
- Build capacity among employees and senior leadership to cultivate a culture of inclusion and equity that supports, retains, and provides opportunities for career growth to employees with disabilities or others who experience barriers to accessibility.
- Ensure institutional policies and procedures provide inclusive, adaptable accommodations and adaptive tools for employees with disabilities or others who experience barriers to accessibility and appropriate and supportive leave practices and return to work plans.

Transportation

Goal

Transportation provided to employees and students is accessible.

Commitments

- Collaborate with local municipalities, the Nova Scotia Community Transportation Network, and community transit service providers to ensure accessible, affordable

public transportation to and from campuses, including bus stop infrastructure, sidewalks, and signage.

- Ensure accessible parking (that meets a standard such as CSA Group, Rick Hansen Foundation, or provincial built environment standard, when developed) on campuses is available to students, employees and visitors with disabilities or others who experience barriers to accessibility.

Built Environment

Goal

Buildings and outdoor spaces on Nova Scotia's post-secondary campuses provide meaningful access for intended users.

Commitments

- Adopt common accessibility standards to ensure meaningful access to existing buildings, new construction, and major renovations. At minimum, institutions will comply with the Nova Scotia Building Code, and the *Accessibility Act's* built environment standard, when implemented, aiming to exceed them when feasible. New construction will be considered an opportunity to exceed minimum accessibility standards; for example, by meeting Rick Hansen Foundation Gold Rating.
- Develop recommendations for common priority areas (i.e. building features, phases) in which to identify, prevent and remove barriers to accessibility.
- Develop and utilize a common accessibility auditing tool to assess the accessibility of campus buildings and outdoor spaces. Integrate institutional accessibility audits within facilities management inventory and budgeting processes. Ensure the *Accessibility Act's* built environment standard can be integrated into this tool, when developed.
- Develop a common reporting tool for facilities management employees to track and report progress on improving accessibility as part of each institution's accessibility planning process. Ensure the *Accessibility Act's* built environment standard can be integrated into this tool, when developed.
- Collaborate with local municipalities to integrate accessibility of municipal and post-secondary infrastructure.
- Establish and implement processes to ensure accessibility during temporary disruptions with building infrastructure and outdoor spaces, such as construction or seasonal related elements (e.g. snow removal).
- Ensure all emergency evacuation systems, policies, procedures, communications and training enable the safe and efficient evacuation of persons with disabilities or others who experience barriers to accessibility during an emergency.

- Seek a partnership with government to develop a system-wide cost assessment for complying with the *Accessibility Act's* built environment standard.

Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

Goal

Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions regularly monitor and evaluate progress to remove barriers to accessibility, and the impact on students and employees, and continue to identify opportunities to improve access to education.

Commitments

- Ensure the commitments outlined in this framework are reflected and operationalized in institutional accessibility plans required as public sector bodies under the *Accessibility Act*.
- Develop a common monitoring tool and evaluation framework to regularly assess and report on progress toward meeting the commitments outlined in this framework, and their impact on accessibility in the post-secondary sector.
- Review this framework at least every 3 years and update as required.
- Recognizing the significant additional costs of implementing aspects of this framework and meeting the requirements of the *Accessibility Act*, seek adequate funding from the provincial government above the regular operating grants for Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions to comply with the legislation and implement the commitments under this framework.

Glossary of Terms

Accessibility – The prevention and removal of barriers (physical, attitudinal, technological, or system) to allow equitable participation for persons with disabilities or others who experience barriers to accessibility.

Accessibility Act - The provincial legislation enacted in 2017 to prevent and remove barriers to accessibility for people with disabilities. It has a goal of an accessible Nova Scotia by 2030. The Act outlines some responsibilities for municipalities, universities, and other entities, including developing accessibility plans and establishing an accessibility committee. It allows Government to develop and implement standards (regulations) in education, the built environment, the delivery and receipt of goods and services, transportation, information and communication, and employment.

Accessible Employer – Reducing and preventing barriers in hiring, retaining, career development and advancement for employees, and addressing employee needs with individualized, flexible accommodations.

Accessible Customer Service – Ensuring all persons have the same opportunity to seek, obtain, use or benefit from the service. Accessible services are easy for all people to use, interact with, and understand.

Barrier – Anything that hinders or challenges the full and effective participation in society. Barriers can be physical, attitudinal, technological, or systemic (policy or practice). Accessibility barriers may be related to areas such as employment, education, the built environment, transportation, the delivery and receipt of goods and services, or information and communications.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) – A teaching method that acknowledges the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and frames of reference of students and uses it to make learning more relevant and effective. It ensures that students from diverse cultures have equitable opportunities and supports for success within school systems and that design is reflected in pedagogy, not just additional targeted services.

Deaf - A sociological term referring to those individuals who are medically deaf or hard of hearing who identify with and participate in the culture, society, and language of Deaf people, which is based on Sign language¹.

¹ Canadian Association of the Deaf

Disability – A physical, mental, intellectual, learning or sensory impairment, including an episodic disability, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders an individual’s full and effective participation in society.²

Employees – Administration, faculty, and staff employed at a post-secondary institution.

Equity/ Equitable – Equity is fair treatment of individuals, acknowledging and making provisions for their differences by ensuring that employment and educational processes are free from systemic barriers. Equity does not mean ignoring differences and treating everyone the same. Instead it means recognizing and valuing differences, removing systemic barriers and accommodating individual differences, as needed.³

First Voice – First voice perspectives generally refer to the knowledge generated by persons with disabilities and others who experience barriers to accessibility that emerges from lived experience, community connections, knowledge traditions, and scholarly activities that are typically under-valued and under-represented.

Inclusion - The process of improving the terms of participation in society, particularly for individuals or groups of individuals who are disadvantaged or under-represented, through enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights. This creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, fights exclusion and marginalization and offers the opportunity of upward mobility and results in increased social cohesion.⁴

Meaningful access – When referring to the built environment, meaningful access is the intent to meet the needs of all users of a site (a building or outdoor space) regardless of their ability. It means that not only individual features of a site, such as an entrance or washroom, must be accessible, but the entire experience throughout.

Neurodivergent – Neurodivergent means having a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of “normal”. It recognizes diverse neurologies and ways of being, as variation of human experience, rather than deficiency in need of remediation or cure. It includes those who identify with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, Tourette’s syndrome, and dyslexia, to name a few. ⁵

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) - An educational approach to designing instructional goals, assessments, methods and materials, and policies that work for a diversity of learners. It employs flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual student needs.

² Nova Scotia Accessibility Act

³ Nova Scotia Community College Educational Equity Policy

⁴ Nova Scotia Community College Educational Equity Policy

⁵ Scorgie, K. & Forlin, C. (2019). Promoting Social Inclusion: Co-Creating Environments that Foster Equity and Belonging. P. 153.

Appendix A: Framework Contributors

The Nova Scotia Post-Secondary Accessibility Framework was developed by the Post-Secondary Accessibility Working Group, in consultation and collaboration with numerous students and employees of Nova Scotia's universities and the Nova Scotia Community College. Thank you to those who contributed their experience and expertise to this work.

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