DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

Faculty and Staff Guide to
Student Accommodation
and **Student Accessibility**

Accommodation and Accessibility

'Accommodation' and 'Accessibility' are often used interchangeably but they are different.

'Accommodation' is a reactive measure introduced to reduce or remove barriers students experience in their classrooms, course assessments, on-campus living spaces, and co-op or clinical placements as examples.

A barrier, in an academic setting, hinders a student's ability to fully engage. **Barriers can be:**

Physical	theatre-style classrooms with no wheelchair access; lack of gender-neutral washroom availability
Technological	using software that is incompatible with screen readers; assuming all students have the financial means to purchase specialized software
Systemic	degree programs that require all students to take a full course load; scheduling exams on high holidays that fall outside of Christian observances, and/or
Attitudinal	beliefs that might make faculty or staff more or less inclined to support students who experience disability-related barriers to education such as making assumptions about a student's abilities because they have an accommodation; beliefs that might make faculty or staff more or less inclined to support students because they have childcare or eldercare responsibilities that impact attendance.

When a student requires accommodations, this is a signal that some aspect of our university environment excludes students from full participation (whether intentionally or unintentionally) and requires change to facilitate access.

An accommodation is also different from 'special consideration' – also referred to as academic flexibility or relief. Special consideration uses measures to address short-term, non-recurring life circumstances, such as a bus breaking down resulting in a student missing an exam, attendance at a funeral, or flexibility after a significant weather event.

Accessibility is the degree to which our university environment can be effectively navigated. In other words, how fully we can participate. Accessibility is a signal that some aspect of our environment has engaged in proactive measures to facilitate inclusion. Accessibility is aspirational.

One example of a proactive measure is taking an inclusive design approach to learning and teaching. Inclusive design derives from the broader concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL originated in response to built environment accessibility, notably, the challenges associated with retrofitting or redesigning spaces. Retrofit and/or redesign approaches are reactive and often lead to results that are neither functional nor appealing. In comparison, universal design approaches are proactive and designed from the outset functional spaces for the broadest group of users.

Student Accommodation Policy

Dalhousie's institution-wide Student Accommodation Policy (qrco.de/accommodation-policy)

▶ "... forms part of a broader, ongoing commitment to create a fully accessible university community, and acknowledges that, through dialogue, the university can better understand the nature and extent of campus barriers to accessibility" and notes

▶ "It is the responsibility of every member of the Dalhousie University community to be knowledgeable on institutional policies related to prohibited grounds for discriminatory practices and accessibility ..." and

▶ "Students experiencing barriers to participation in a University activity due to a characteristic protected under human rights legislation[1] (qrco.de/human-rights) are entitled to accommodation to reduce or eliminate such barriers up to the point of undue hardship ..."

The Student Accessibility Centre (Halifax) and the Student Success Centre (Truro) are the responsible units for determining student accommodations at Dalhousie regardless of Faculty, program or level of study.

Students initiate a request for an accommodation. Implementation of an accommodation requires the student, faculty and Centre staff to work collaboratively. Steps to request accommodation can be found on the Accessibility Centre's website: www.dal.ca/access

Duty to Accommodate

According to Dalhousie's Human Rights and Equity Services (qrco.de/equity-inclusion), "the 'duty to accommodate' is the right to be accommodated, and the corresponding duty of the University to respond quickly and appropriately to requests for accommodation." In short, our duty to accommodate means we do what is reasonable to facilitate access for our students up to the point of undue hardship.

Undue hardship is a legal test assessed against many factors. Undue hardship is about Dalhousie's institutional responsibility and is not applicable to an individual. The most common factor related to classroom, co-op and/or clinical settings is the impact on academic requirements and whether a proposed accommodation will fundamentally alter the course objectives.
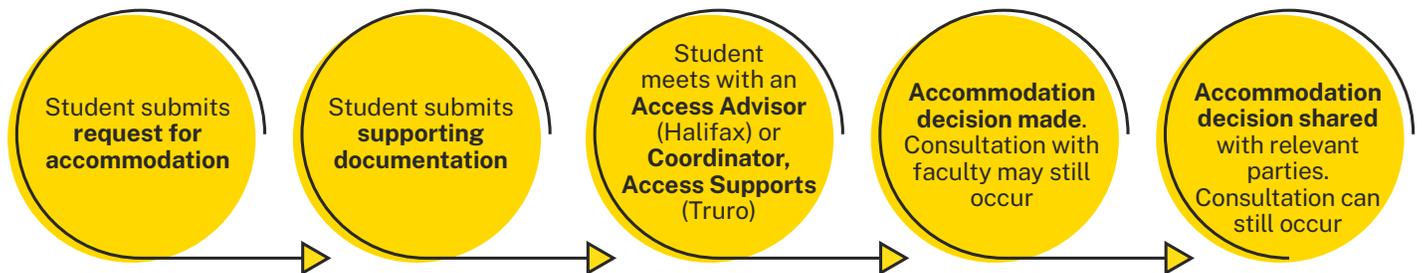
As academic-related accommodations typically address the 'how' – how something is taught or how something is assessed, and not the 'what' – what is taught or what is being assessed (i.e., learning outcome, skill or competency), rarely will the accommodation fundamentally alter the course objective.

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[1] Provincial Human Rights legislation prohibits discrimination for specific protected characteristics including, but not limited to, age, race, religion, gender identity, family status, physical disability and mental disability.

Implementing a Student's Accommodation

A request for accommodation can happen at any time throughout the academic year although students are advised to request accommodation through the Student Accessibility Centre (Halifax) or Student Success Centre (Truro), prior to the University activity in question (e.g. residence move-in, first day of class, start of an internship/co-op) or as soon as a barrier is identified whether that barrier is physical, technological, and/or systemic (policy or practice).

Student requests for accommodation and all processes associated with the request – decisions, faculty notifications, and other service supports such as note-taking and exam scheduling are managed through Accommodate software (qrco.de/accommodate-software).

| Student submits **request for accommodation** | → | Student submits **supporting documentation** | → | Student meets with an **Access Advisor** (Halifax) or **Coordinator, Access Supports** (Truro) | → | **Accommodation decision made**. Consultation with faculty may still occur | → | **Accommodation decision shared** with relevant parties. Consultation can still occur |

Students may choose to seek an accommodation directly from their professor. Principles of fairness and equity must be respected in any decision-making. Professors can also engage with the applicable Centre for assistance (dal.ca/access).

Upon receipt of a student's accommodation plan, accommodations must be implemented. As noted, the student will have already engaged the appropriate processes, providing necessary documentation which describes barriers that impede their learning. At the same time, the student's privacy must be respected and protected. Students are not required to disclose any information about why they require an accommodation.

Accommodations can range from low to moderate levels of faculty and/or staff involvement. Further, a student's accommodations can change and evolve in response to the context – what is required in one course may not be required in another. If you have questions about how to best implement a student's accommodations, visit the Centre's website (dal.ca/access) for assistance, or connect with the Centre directly.

Duty to Inquire

Faculty and staff are often in a position to recognize when a student may be in distress.

In situations where faculty and staff are aware, or reasonably ought to be aware, that there may be a connection between a protected characteristic and a student's level of engagement, there may be a 'duty to inquire' before making an academic decision that would adversely impact the student. This includes providing the student with the information they need to request an accommodation.

Under what conditions would there be a duty to inquire?

Consider the following examples:

▶ A student's behaviour is such a noticeable departure from classroom/university expectations that the faculty or staff ought to have inquired about the student's wellness and a possible need for accommodation; and/or

▶ A student's academic or work performance is so uncharacteristic that the faculty or staff ought to have inquired about the student's wellness and a possible need for accommodation; and/or

▶ A faculty member notices students facing a particular barrier to engaging fully in the classroom environment (e.g., visible discomfort when asked to participate in a class activity; difficulty hearing when a microphone is not in use; difficulty reading low contrast digital materials; visible distress to high-noise or chaotic environments) and ought to have inquired about the student's wellness and a possible need for accommodation.

These can be challenging conversations. Check out these helpful videos (qrco.de/difficult-conversations) on how to effectively have a difficult conversation. Dalhousie's Student Health and Wellness Centre also offers a self-directed course on Communication for Complex and Difficult Situations with Students – available on Brightspace.

If a student says no to a referral:

▶ Respect their decision. Accepting or refusing assistance must be left up to the student, except in emergencies when life is in danger.

▶ Do not force the issue or influence them into going.

▶ Leave the conversation open for later consideration.

▶ Consider whether there is flexibility you can offer to better meet the student's needs in absence of a formal accommodation.

Inclusive Classrooms

While an accommodation is a signal that some aspect of our university environment is not barrier-free, inclusive design takes a principled approach to reducing barriers to student learning including students with disabilities.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (qrco.de/about-udl) is one approach to remove or reduce barriers in how our courses are taught or structured. A universally designed classroom or program acknowledges that variability among learners is the **rule**, not the **exception**, and maximizes the level of engagement and access for the broadest group of learners.

At Dalhousie, we are committed to inclusive excellence. We want students to engage, research, and work without facing barriers to their learning. There are many low cost, low tech, and low effort strategies faculty can implement to move towards an inclusive classroom. What follows are some recommendations on using UDL in your courses.

Provide multiple means of **Engagement**	Provide multiple means of **Action & Expression**	Provide multiple means of **Representation**
the 'why' of learning	the 'what' of learning	the 'how' of learning
Outline the learning outcomes and course objectives, give meaning and identify the relevance of the content for the student. Where possible, introduce concepts and examples that resonate with students.	Use different types of assessments that rely on varied approaches for students to demonstrate their knowledge. Consider how you are using technology in the classroom (e.g., clickers) and whether students are enabled or hindered by its use.	Be intentional about the many ways students can access course content (e.g., textbook, slides, course website, videos, audio). Use different mediums to acknowledge how students differ in the ways they comprehend the material.

These examples were sourced from the Transforming Practice: Learning Equity, Learning Excellence publication (qrco.de/transforming-practice), produced for faculty and professional staff in Nova Scotia post-secondary institutions.

Other promising practices to make informed choices on implementing UDL include:

▶ Review average data on student accommodations to identify where UDL might increase accessibility and achieve efficiencies by reducing institutional effort in facilitating multiple, individual accommodations. For example, if 30-40% of students in a course require extra time for an assessment, consider designing your assessment to take 1.5 hours and schedule it in a 3-hour window. Note that this has been done on your course syllabus to ensure it is clear that extra time has been built in.

▶ Consider low-investment, high-impact opportunities to increase course accessibility through the many tools we learned about and used during the pandemic – Microsoft 365 to check course resources, PowerPoints, etc. for accessibility; record lectures on Teams (even when lecturing in person) with captions and live transcript enabled to make it available to all students – meeting needs for multiple means of representation.

▶ Build some flexibility and choice into your syllabus (e.g., format of learning assessments; automatic 3-day grace periods for late submissions; greater number of low-stakes assessment) that will ultimately reduce the need to provide formal accommodations.

While UDL can remove barriers to student learning, it does not necessarily remove the need for individual student accommodations within a given course or program.

To learn more about Universal Design for Learning, visit Dalhousie's Centre for Learning and Teaching website (qrco.de/accessibility-udl) and make an appointment to explore what you can do in your course. Have conversations with colleagues and peers who are introducing UDL principles into their work with positive results.

Student Supports - Make an Informed Referral

Here is a list of student supports for more information:

▶ **Academic Advising** – *including a "where to go" section*
dal.ca/advising
Halifax: 902-494-3077 | advising@dal.ca
Truro: 902-893-6729 | ssdalac@dal.ca

▶ **Assistive Technology Lending Library**
qrco.de/assistive-technology
Halifax: 902-494-2836 | access@dal.ca
Truro: 902-893-6672 | scc@dal.ca

▶ **Financial Aid**
qrco.de/financial-assistance
Halifax: 902-494-2836 | access@dal.ca
Truro: 902-893-6672 | scc@dal.ca

▶ **Student Health and Wellness**
dal.ca/studenthealth
Halifax: 902-494-2171
Truro: 902-893-6300

▶ **Student Success Centre (Truro)**
qrco.de/student-success
902-893-6672
ssdalac@dal.ca

▶ **Study Skills and Tutoring**
dal.ca/studyskills
Halifax: 902-494-3077 | sfs@dal.ca
Truro: 902-893-6672 | ssdalac@dal.ca

Questions?

Faculty and staff are encouraged to reach out with any questions or for more information. Contact information is as follows:

Halifax:

Student Accessibility Centre

▶ Phone: 902-494-2836

▶ Email: access@dal.ca

▶ dal.ca/access

Truro:

Student Success Centre

▶ Phone: 902-893-6545

▶ Email: scc@dal.ca

▶ qrco.de/accessibility-ac