What We Heard: A Summary of Feedback from the Accessibility Plan Consultation Sessions in Fall 2021

Executive Summary

In November 2021, StFX University conducted a series of campus-wide feedback sessions with the university community to solicit ideas for what to include in an Accessibility Plan. The objective was to solicit specific actions that could make StFX a more equitable, inclusive and accessible campus. This is the first in a series of consultations that will help to inform the development of the StFX Accessibility Plan. The following report is a summary of the findings from these feedback sessions and the ideas shared.

A total of three feedback sessions took place for members of the StFX community, which were open to faculty, staff and students. Throughout this phase of the consultation process, we sought feedback across seven broad themes. These themes are critical because they cross over multiple priority areas (i.e., employment, educational programs and services, information and communications, etc.). They also impact all StFX stakeholders (students, faculty, staff and visitors):

- Goods and Services
- Information and Communication
- Employment
- Built Environment
- Transportation
- Awareness and Capacity Building
- Teaching, Learning and Research

This report has been organized by these themes and includes the aggregated feedback of those who contributed to the process. It provides a summary of the feedback received across each of the seven high-level themes, as well as an overview of comments received about StFX's approach to fostering accessibility. This feedback has been examined and assessed to help inform the creation of the StFX Accessibility Plan.

The findings form a starting point for understanding the current landscape for accessibility at StFX, and will be important for the initial drafting of the StFX Accessibility Plan. However, it is important to note that the consultation process reached a small sample of the StFX community and may not be representative of all voices, particularly those that are directly affected by barriers to accessibility. The consultation process will continue in Winter 2022, with an open online form (available 24/7) and targeted consultation sessions with students, faculty and staff with disabilities and those who experience barriers to accessibility at StFX.

For questions about the StFX Accessibility Plan, the consultation process, or this report, please contact AccessibilityPlan@stfx.ca

Background

In 2017, Nova Scotia passed the Accessibility Act, becoming the third Canadian province to adopt new accessibility legislation. The Act recognizes accessibility as a human right, and outlines how the province will improve accessibility by preventing and removing barriers. The Act sets a goal of an accessible Nova Scotia by 2030.

To guide StFX's commitment toward a fully accessible and inclusive campus, we are embarking on the development of an Accessibility Plan. As a result, StFX is putting an accessibility lens on several areas of campus activity, including built environment, goods and services, information and communication, transportation, employment, teaching, learning and research.

A lack of accessibility is a larger social and structural issue that StFX is not immune to, and as an engine of social change the university can be part of developing innovative, equitable solutions.

As part of efforts to develop the StFX Accessibility Plan, the Office of the Vice-President, Finance and Administration convened a diverse group of stakeholders to form a StFX Accessibility Advisory Committee. The Committee provides advice on identifying, preventing and eliminating barriers to people with disabilities in programs, services, initiatives and facilities. Members play a pivotal role in helping StFX University become an accessible, equitable and inclusive and meet the requirements outlined in the Nova Scotia Accessibility Act.

Using the definition of accessibility and the proposed areas of focus for improving accessibility outlined in the Nova Scotia Accessibility Act (2017) and Nova Scotia Post-Secondary Accessibility Framework (2020), the Committee offered the first in a series of campus-wide consultations for members of the StFX community in November 2021 to solicit ideas that would inform decisions around what actions should be included in an Accessibility Plan. This report highlights the findings from those consultations and provides a summary of all the ideas shared.

Engagement Process and Next Steps

Three feedback sessions were hosted in November 2021. Two sessions were hosted in person, and one session was hosted online. The feedback sessions reached 35 students, faculty and staff. Because of the open and flexible nature of most of the in-person and online consultations, it was not possible to capture demographic information from participants.

All of the sessions were transcribed verbatim. Contributions with multiple ideas were broken down into individual ideas.

The feedback sessions were the first in a series of campus-wide consultation strategies used to gather input to inform the development of the StFX Accessibility Plan. However, it is important to note that the consultation process reached a small sample of the StFX community and may not be representative of all voices, particularly those that are directly affected by barriers to accessibility. The consultation process will continue in Winter 2022, with an open online form (available 24/7) and targeted consultation

sessions with students, faculty and staff with disabilities and those who experience barriers to accessibility at StFX.

In January 2022, StFX will convene a first meeting of the new StFX Student Accessibility Advisory Committee. The Student Accessibility Advisory Committee will provide an opportunity for students with disabilities to inform the StFX Accessibility Plan, and will ensure that their vices and lived experiences are reflected in the design of our supports, programs and services.

What We Heard

The ideas contributed during the feedback sessions were organized into seven overarching areas of focus. These areas of focus match those identified in the Nova Scotia Accessibility Act (2017) and Nova Scotia Post-Secondary Accessibility Framework (2020). This report focuses on the action suggestions, as this was the main objective of the consultation process, but discussion of the other groupings follows. While best efforts were made to separate out ideas, in some situations the ideas flowed together and were put into multiple categories.

Goods and Services

This theme refers to ensuring that students, employees and visitors with disabilities or others who experience barriers to accessibility have equitable access to goods and services provided by StFX University.

The following feedback was received regarding the Goods and Services theme:

- Diversify methods and modes of programming and service delivery including additional platforms and extended hours considerate of students' schedules.
- A barrier is the lack of access to mental health services, including long waiting list. Offer evening hours and drop-ins to provide students with more flexible delivery options.
- Establish a process for students, staff and faculty to provide feedback on their experiences accessing goods and services and whether these services meet their needs, are accessible, etc.
- Formalize coordinated, wrap around supports and services for students with disabilities (SWDs) and students who may experience barriers to accessibility, including students who experience temporary and/or episodic disabilities.
- Consider creating a new staff position dedicated to assisting students with disabilities access information, resources, supports and services. Having a dedicated case manager could help connect experts with students on campus seeking support and guidance. This role could be positioned within Student Services and advocate and champion the needs of students with disabilities.
- Need to optimize resources to be responsive to the growing needs of students with disabilities. Consideration should be given to creating some specialist roles, especially in the area of mental

health and neurological disabilities. This includes an increasing number of persons with learning, mental health, chronic medical and autism spectrum disabilities on university campuses.

- Clarify policies, practices and procedures within the Tramble Centre for Accessible Learning.
- Diversify methods of student support and alternate communications strategies within the Tramble Centre for Accessible Learning, such as group sessions and the provision of written instruction.
- Establish peer mentorship programs and group advising to build additional capacity and support for students with disabilities in the StFX community.
- Students with disabilities (SWDs) must be integrated into all aspects of the student experience. Ensure that existing co-curricular and extra-curricular programming at StFX is made accessible to SWDs by ensuring that all staff and peers who work with students are trained in working with SWDs.
- Consider the development of group programs designed for students with disabilities (ex. mentorship programs, workshops and support groups, 1:1 coaching, parent information hubs, sensory spaces, therapy dogs and paid work/study opportunities, supports and programming) - Example: York University Pilot Program: https://accessibility.students.yorku.ca/pilot-project-strengthening-transitions-for-students-with-autism-spectrum-disorders.
- Consider the development of engaging high impact practices designed for students with disabilities.
- Create co-op programs to support future employment for students with disabilities.
- Adopt an intersectional lens to enhance the design and delivery of co-curricular experiences (for example, activities, events, orientation and transition programming) and inform continuous improvement based on the needs of our diverse student body.
- Increase capacity within the Tramble Centre for Accessible Learning to provide transitional resources, supports and programs for students with disabilities over the summer, as well as their parents/supporters.

Information and Communication

This theme refers to ensuring that all people can receive, understand and share the information provided by StFX University.

The following feedback was received regarding the Information and Communications theme:

- Implement assistive technology software/screen reader function to facilitate access to all web content and materials.
- Evaluate the accessibility of the current StFX website. JAWS should be used as the standard.
- Ensure accessibility in all knowledge creation and sharing (each faculty/staff/student creates documents, presentation, websites, etc.)
- Communicate resources, supports and services available on campus to support people with disabilities; make the resources easier to locate and access.
- Ensure all communications materials, including print, electronic and digital, are accessible.

- Develop a communication strategy to inform the StFX community and stakeholders of accessibility supports and services.
- Improve communication and outreach to explain what the Tramble Centre for Accessible Learning actually does, and why. This could include information on how to register, how to activate accommodation, supplemental information (including financial assistance, adaptive technology and co-curricular programming) and student responsibilities. It is also critically important to explain what an academic accommodation looks like in a post-secondary learning environment and specifically within the StFX context.
- Review all digital content and materials (including web, email and social media) with consideration given to accessibility and diversity across campus.
- Create a campus-wide communications strategy to manage the volume of communications received by staff and students. It is difficult to filter and decipher the information, especially if you are approaching the information with a reading disability and/or using assistive technology.
- Consider not just information and communication from an information technology perspective, but also an information management flow. How is information being disseminated?
- Make information about supports and services for persons with disabilities available through the recruitment process and communicate this information as part of the transition to university.
- Ensure ASL and remote CART captioning services are provided in all programs, events, activities and service delivery on-campus.
- Establish best practices for accessibility in all knowledge creation and sharing (e.g., documents, presentation, websites, conferences), which are shared internally and externally.
- Provide information and communications on the website and recruitment materials that clearly indicate what IS and what IS NOT accessible (including residence buildings, Living-Learning Communities, etc.)
- Provide clear communications and instructions to students registered with the Tramble Centre for Accessible Learning around the use of Clockwork, where students can book appointments for intake, renewal of services, etc.

Employment

This theme refers to ensuring that all people can receive, understand and share the information provided by StFX University. The following feedback was received regarding the Information and Communications theme:

- No designated accessibility resource/support/system in place for employees. Need formalized processes. New employees do not know where to go for support.
- Simplify and streamline communications for new employees as part of the onboarding process.
- Develop an ongoing professional development plan for university staff to engage in anti-oppression, anti-ableist ways of knowing and practicing their work with internal and external experts.
- Create a specific policy for concerning accessibility for StFX employees.
- Develop an HR plan to diversify staff to reflect the diversity of the university population.

- Engage in an HR audit to review barriers within the hiring process (including requirements, postings, interview process and questions, etc.).
- Examine the current interview and onboarding process for new staff and faculty to ensure accessibility. Formalize procedures for asking for accommodation during the hiring process (ex. provide the interview questions in advance).
- Currently, there is not a formalized process for requesting accommodations during the student staff hiring process; it is the discretion/responsibility of the supervisor. These processes should be formalized as part of on-campus employment opportunities.
- Ensure that faculty and staff are trained in UDL standards for the provision of their own supports and services.
- Ensure communication of StFX's commitment and ability to accommodate are included at every stage of the recruitment process.
- Formalized procedures for accommodations during the interview and hiring process.
- Integrate accessibility training as part of the onboarding and professional development program of new and existing StFX staff and faculty.

Built Environment

This theme refers to ensuring that buildings and outdoor spaces on StFX University campus provide meaningful access for intended users.

The following feedback was received regarding the Built Environment theme:

- Built environments are not fully accessible (e.g., automatic door openers, inaccessible bathrooms, very loud hand dryers, elevator doors should sense someone, high taps and deep sinks in washrooms, not every floor having an accessible washroom, automatic door buttons located too high/too small, etc.)
- There needs to be increased focus on making all environments more accessible, instead of relying on individuals to identify a need for accommodation.
- There is a need for more garbage cans on campus, near the residence buildings and other highly trafficked locations on campus (for service animals, etc.); not a question of aesthetics.
- Complete and make publicly available the Audit of the Built Environment initiated in Summer 2021. Provide intentional follow up to faculty, staff and students to inform them of outcomes of the review process and next steps. Involve as many diverse perspectives in the process as possible.
- Establish guidelines to determine priorities for which buildings and spaces on campus to address first; develop a multiyear implementation plan to address additional barriers in the built environment.
- Make the Annex accessible
- Make the Celtic Studies building accessible
- Review and update existing emergency procedure, plans and public safety information. Ensure that the appropriate policies and procedures are communicated broadly.

- All stairs and sidewalks should be cleared and maintained, especially the removal of snowbanks in the winter.
- Ensure new builds meet universal design for learning standards; and, ensuring that individuals with lived experience of disability are engaged in the planning process from the beginning.

Transportation

- Offer a shuttle service for students, faculty and staff with a temporary or permanent disability requiring transportation support between main campus buildings.
- Improve signage on campus. Highlight accessible entrances, clear pathways between buildings, accessible washrooms. Avoid putting signage and obstacles in front of doors with automatic buttons, etc.
- Create ways for campus community members to provide feedback on barriers they face and suggestions for change

Awareness and Capacity Building

- Identify persons with disabilities as an equity-deserving group that is central to the University's commitment to advancing equity and inclusion.
- Integrate accessibility throughout our campus culture and community, looking at the broader systemic issues and structural barriers.
- Attitudinal barriers and culture around persons with disabilities must be addressed.
- Review current programs, policies, services, supports and practices from an accessible, trauma-informed lens and develop an approach to addressing gaps in policies, processes and procedures with respect to accessibility. The current policy regarding academic accommodation for mental health concerns was identified as an area of focus.
- Engage persons with disabilities in the design and daily work of our institution; including the review or programs, policies and practices to ensure that they meet diverse needs.
- Diversify the leadership body, and in particular, include efforts to include persons with disabilities in leadership positions, including senior leadership and at the unit/department level.
- Raise awareness and understanding of accessibility as more than physical accessibility.
- Provide comprehensive training and ongoing professional development for faculty and staff to ensure our teams function from a place that aligns with principles of EDI-A, and that also keeps them informed on how they can support persons with disabilities. Training should be contextualized to individuals and groups.
- Educate faculty about their roles and responsibilities concerning academic accommodations, and the duty to accommodate. Discussion around brought forward several examples of interactions between faculty and students that were identified as sources of undue stress. Participants expressed concern that these negative interactive could impact the mental health of affected students.
- Increase training for student volunteers and students staff around accessibility to mitigate the need for persons with disabilities to have to always communicate their needs.

- Address attitudinal barriers by offering training on equity and accessibility topics, including microaggressions. Respondents suggested a wide variety of potential training interventions, including presentations, workshops, online training modules, curriculum integration, and presentations by internal and external experts. There are also suggestions around who needs this training: people in leadership, everyone during onboarding/orientation, all StFX faculty and staff, etc.
- Create opportunities for knowledge sharing networks and/or internal communities of practice to help engage like-minded colleagues and increase collaborations across the institution. For example, leverage the knowledge of StFX faculty with expertise in inclusive teaching practices, including practices to support students with specific learning disabilities and attention-based disorders as well as mental health disorders.
- Include persons with disabilities as part of inclusive decision-making processes and practices. Ensure that they are compensated for their time and contributions.
- Build capacity within the Tramble Centre for Accessible Learning. Establish a vision and clarify strategic directions for the unit, as they manage considerable growth in the number of users.
- Increase understanding of ableism and uncovering our own unconscious biases in curricular and co-curricular learning experiences. This could be integrated into the series of pre-university online preparation modules for all students.
- Ensure the university is aware of our institutional lag in addressing accessibility. Increase understanding and awareness to cultivate greater urgency around the need to address barriers.
- More involvement and integration with CACL volunteer opportunities through service learning, increased communications of Best Buddies programs.

Teaching, Learning and Research

This theme refers to ensuring that StFX University is a leader in inclusive and accessible teaching and learning, and research for all students.

The following feedback was received regarding the Teaching, Learning and Research theme:

- Increase research funding, visibility and leadership.
- Foster opportunities for students to work together with community.
- Improve teaching across all units and departments. Students should be able to expect that StFX is making serious efforts to provide accessible and inclusive teaching and learning environments.
- Develop tools and resources for instructors to increase awareness of accessibility and Universal Design for Learning (URL) principles in their classrooms and contexts.
- Enable the creation of accessible information and educational materials (including digital accessibility within the online learning environment).
- Engage the Tramble Centre for Accessible Learning (TCAL) and Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) in helping faculty design their courses using an accessibility lens.
- Accessibility of course materials (such as textbooks, journal articles, course packs, videos, podcasts, print content, etc.) must be prioritized.
- Instructors should implement flash warnings with the use of instructional videos.

- Instructors should ensure that resources provide closed captioning, especially for use of mandatory instructional videos.
- Provide exam accommodations, including additional time on exams that ensures the accommodations provided are reasonable (I.e., at reasonable times, etc.)
- Ensure accessibility is integrated into the Academic Plan and Research Plan.
- Grow the research capacity in accessibility, including increasing the number and retention of researchers, research funding, research infrastructure and community partnerships.
- Develop information resources and regularized training to assist faculty and staff in understanding the academic accommodation process and how to liaise with services to support their students.
- Provide assistive learning technologies (ex. laptops, applications) to those students who need them in order to be successful in the classroom.
- Strengthen collaboration and coordination between the Tramble Centre for Accessible Learning, Centre for Teaching and Learning and Academic Office to provide training and resources for instructors on best practices that would support the creation of inclusive and accessible teaching and learning environments.
- Equip faculty and staff with the knowledge and capacity to diversify learning and assessment strategies in ways that reflect diversity in student learning and engagement.
- Develop information, resources and training that assist faculty in understanding the academic accommodations process and how to integrate accessibility into courses, practicums, placement, fieldwork and laboratories.
- Evaluate the accessibility of online and distance learning courses, including courses transitioned online due to COVID-19. Resources must be allocated to improving the accessibility of our learning management systems (LMS), especially if StFX intends to diversify online learning opportunities for graduate and distance learning students.
- Provide accessible teaching and learning materials to students (ex. use of images and graphs)
- Offer information readily available to staff and faculty about how to enhance accessibility in the classroom and make their content more accessible (i.e., toolkit that provides accessible templates, checklist and instructions to produce accessible materials)
- Adjust course curricula to include a broader diversity of ideas and thinkers, and especially voices and worldviews of accessibility scholars and practitioners that have traditionally been excluded from spaces of higher education. Include positive examples that portray the situations of persons with disabilities in academic courses and curriculum.
- Professors/instructors should indicate a time range in which students should be able to complete their various assignments
- Accessibility of course materials (such as textbooks, journal articles, course packs, videos, podcasts, print content, etc.) should be considered
- Consider the role of well-being when creating inclusive learning environments. How do we proactively create conditions for well-being in learning environments as part of designing inclusive spaces? Consider the work being done at Simon Fraser University (Healthy Campus)

Additional Feedback

There was a subset of ideas shared during the consultation sessions that did not fit into the above themes. The three main categories of this feedback are further discussed in the sections that follow.

Who is Involved in this Work

The first sub-theme, which asks who is involved in this work, refers to the many different groups who should be involved in informing priorities and addressing accessibility issues on campus. Participants spoke to the importance of ensuring that the voices of persons with lived experiences of disability are centered in the development of the StFX Accessibility Plan, as well as the ongoing implementation process. However, there were also respondents who cautioned about not overburdening those who this work purports to serve, or asking people to do it 'off the side of their desks'. Respondents felt that in order to be successful this work needs to be appropriately resourced, and the people doing it need to be supported. Finally, respondents asked how this plan will recognize and support inclusion efforts already in place at this institution – how will it learn from the challenges faced, and support and/or amplify successes.

Taking Action

Another sub-theme was the need to go beyond planning and get to action to make StFX more accessible and inclusive. There was a sense that in order to be successful, this plan needs to move beyond words, and will involve considerable investment in order to make the necessary changes. Participants also flagged that putting this work into practice should not be easy. That the institution will need to be bold to make changes that really matter.

Recognizing Complexity

Finally, there were comments which recognized the importance of acknowledging the complexity of this work. Participants described the experience of working at this institution for many years and hearing these issues come up again and again without seeing any meaningful change. They shared that it is hard to keep raising these issues without seeing any action come out of their efforts. Others described the many complexities and conflicting realities that exist within accessibility work and asked the University to be transparent about these challenges and admit all the places where it does not have the answers. In this vein, respondents asked the University to ensure that the implementation process is an iterative one, where it can systematically and routinely re-evaluate what it is doing and whether that is moving the University in the right direction.