



**GRADUATE
STUDENT SOCIETY**
UBC VANCOUVER

Accessibility at UBC from the eyes of students with disabilities

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Canadian universities are bound by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as well as provincial Human Rights Codes to provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities.

In accordance with this duty of accommodation, UBC administration published “An Inclusion Action Plan” in 2018 committing to an inclusive campus to support engagement in work and learning at UBC. This action plan determines five goals of “recruitment, retention, and success”, “system change”, “capacity building”, “learning, research, and engagement”, and “accountability”. In what follows, we explain our results in the context of UBC Inclusion Action Plan goals.

The Study

To investigate the current landscape of accessibility at UBC and identify challenges and successes that students with disability have been experiencing in the implementation of both accommodation approach and Universal Design at UBC, the following study was conducted to investigate the lived experience of graduate students with disabilities.

Students were eligible to participate in the study if they self-identified as having a disability (e.g., physical, mental, cognitive, sensory, visible or non-visible, diagnosed or undiagnosed), were research-based graduate students at UBC, and had experienced both lab work and academic courses. A total of 8 students were interviewed in a mix of individual interviews and small focus groups. Our participants had various roles in their personal lives (e.g., parents, partners, student employee), identified as female (n=5), male (n=1), and non-binary (n=2), and were domestic (n=6) or international students (n=2). Interview responses were audio recorded and transcribed, and thematic analysis¹ was conducted on interview transcripts.

Two major themes, inaccessible campus and non-inclusive culture, emerged from this research, which demonstrate the progress that has been made in delivering the Action Plan, but also the significant barriers that students with disabilities continue to face at UBC. Our results showed that graduate students with disability perceive UBC campus as inaccessible because of the “lack of graduate students’ work safety”, “conflicting policies”, “miscommunication, and “unequitable funding”. They also indicated that UBC’s non-inclusive culture is associated with “lack of awareness towards grad students with disabilities”, “questioning legitimacy of graduate students with disability”, and lack of knowledge regarding “intersectionality of marginalized identities”.

Theme 1: Inaccessible campus

The concept of access through affordability aims to reduce financial barriers to studying and working at UBC. However, high living expense and low minimum salary, in combination with a lack of accessible accommodations for grad students makes it harder for students with disability to live on or visit campus. Students explained:

Lack of Graduate Students Work-Safety

Students with disability are employed while at UBC as graduate students; however, there are no policies or procedures in place to ensure their work-accessibility/safety (e.g., paid sick-days, access to ergonomic equipment, job/student position security and accommodations). Although this is an issue for all graduate students, students with disabilities are more vulnerable to negative consequences. Because it is not clear where student employees fit within the definition of an employee of the university - they do not benefit from paid sick days, access to ergonomic workspace, or even the job security when on leave.

Conflicting Policies

Conflicting policies create inaccessible campus for graduate students. Conflict can occur when a student needs to go on a medical leave, but also needs to maintain their employment to pay for their living and medical expenses. Alex shared: *"I needed a pause from my program, right. I needed to not think about my comps and my dissertation or anything like that for a period of time and not have to worry about it. But I did need like the advantages that being a student afforded me, which was like employment and the access to certain services and things like that."*

Current UBC senate policy on "leave of absence" does not allow student to "undertake any academic or research work related to the program for which they have taken a leave of absence". Although this policy does not specify students work status during their leave, it essentially makes students ineligible for many on-campus employment opportunities. Alex shared: *"The policy is really clear that you can't claim medical leave while at the same time claim to be fit to do academic work such as TA-ing. So I was just like ... I understand from the point of view of the institution. But like for anyone with any knowledge of the nuances of this kind of stuff I just think the policy is really unfair and actually can hinder the recovery and the stabilization of people with illnesses and disabilities."*

Given that under this policy, graduate students are not able to use academic funding while on leave, UBC administration must recognize that students do still have financial needs and can benefit from paid-leaves or the opportunity to continue working on-campus while on leave of absence from their program.

Another example of inaccessible and conflicting policies is the leave of absence or part-time study policies that while allowing students with disability to take longer to finish their studies, students also lose their eligibility to apply for national and university-level funding as time passes. Chantel shared that *“That is not the official policy. But certainly, in my department when I went to my grad advisor and our funding coordinator and asked them about where in the application to put my accommodations of extended timelines, they were basically like “Don’t bother applying, these accommodations don’t apply to your funding... I am like “You know I still have to eat... if you can’t pay me to be here then I can’t be here. Like you are saying I can’t be here, no matter what you are saying on my accommodations officially.”*

These conflicting policies have a huge impact on the financial situations and academic progress of students with disability.

Miscommunication

Another major inaccessible UBC infrastructure that was brought up in this study is miscommunication or lack of communication between departmental staff and faculties, and relevant offices at UBC including the Centre for Accessibility, G+PS, and Equity and Inclusion. This lack of communication results in a lack of awareness and knowledge regarding policies and procedures related to accessibility and disability. Therefore, students with disability have to self-advocate, and put in work to understand relevant procedures in order to navigate the process of accommodation. Emma shared *“I really feel strongly when I am on campus that I can’t just show up, I can’t just expect access, that there is always prep work, and I always have to do a lot of work with a really limited resources, physical, financial, and etc. relatively to my peers that they don’t have to do that extra work ... So I can’t really think of any of space or experience that I actually haven’t had to do that work.”*

Unequitable Funding

Financial stress is a major issue for all students, and this stress is further compounded for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities in this study defined the UBC funding structure as “discriminatory” towards students with disabilities. Chantel shared *“The funding situation at UBC is very discriminatory against people with children, with dependents, against disabled people, and against people who are from poor backgrounds, like it’s a large class filter for UBC ... like you exclude students from poor backgrounds when you pay so little.”*. Emma also shared *“One of my biggest frustrations was attending one of the NSERC presentations and uh, they were saying how their process was equal because they don’t take – they just look at education and how much work you’ve done and how much broad activity you’ve done and I was like those are just, you’re just discriminated by proxy!”*.

Three major funding issues were identified. First, the funding for graduate students (e.g., minimum PhD funding) is substantially lower than living wage in Vancouver (\$38,025 per annum). Second, the extra expenses of students with disability (e.g., medication, treatment, equipment, etc.) are not considered in the calculation of living cost and funding. This low funding minimum means that people with extra expenses due to disability or dependents cannot afford the cost of living in Vancouver, and must either undertake significant financial stress, or are unable to join the UBC community in the first place. Amanda shared *"My visa bill is what keeps going up because I take acupuncture for my lungs and that's horribly expensive and it is not covered by the BC government much."* And John shared *"I have to finish my doctorate in four years because there is no way I can afford to go past that - they don't allow stacking of funding"*. Lastly, during funding applications, students with disability are treated "equally" but not necessarily "equitably".

Theme 2: Non-inclusive Culture

Students in the study expressed that an inclusive culture needs to be developed at UBC to better include students with disabilities. Three sub-themes emerged as steps towards building inclusive culture at UBC.

"You don't belong here" – Non-inclusive Perspectives and Lack of Awareness Towards Graduate Students with Disabilities

Graduate students with disability believe that UBC community needs to better understand and define disability and accessibility. Students shared that they are more likely to have a negative experience at UBC when they self-identify as disabled. Amanda shared *"I get people, who say "Oh, you are too much bother," ... and we have to make special things now because Amanda is here"*. Emma also shared *"the other thing that I get is people say "You don't look like there is anything wrong with you" and I say "Yeah, you know, that there is nothing wrong with me"*.

The attitudes reported by students show a failure of the UBC community to look at disability as a source of diversity and value. Students shared that hiring a person with disability experiential knowledge as a TA helps to accommodate and include students with disability. Holly shared *"I had disabled students in my class. my teaching review is always like: I am so grateful to have a TA who gets it. This had made a huge difference for me in my time in university."* Masha confirmed how having a staff/faculty with disability help students with disability; she said *"It all depends if you have a good adviser. I have to say that because I came from another country, he comes from [name of the country] and his experience is similar to mine, like he walked*

me through how he got into Canada .. great ... first he was a recent immigrant, second, he has a visual disability."

The current model of accommodating disabled students on a case-by-case basis operates on the assumption that disability is an issue that the disabled person has to deal with, not others. Nicolas said *"I would say I define accessibility as showing up and knowing that your needs will be met, that you don't need to do all the prep work to an existing space, and it seems like when you bring that expectation its often treated as a negotiation or I am being entitled which shocks me because like what is access by entitlement."* Chantel also shared *"I have also heard this thing from other students, disability is kinda like a "YOU" problem and they are doing you a favour with your problem."* Accommodation is believed as equal to accessibility and is treated as a "favour" at UBC. Holly said *"I feel like UBC is doing me a favour, or anybody in the department would be like makes the little effort to do me a favour, which I think it is weird. It is gross, like I am not here by charity. Like I am here because I am good enough to be here, like I am good for my department, I am good for my students, I am producing interesting work."*

However, accessibility is a human right. Students expressed that UBC should shift towards a universal approach to achieve accessibility. Masha said *"Above and beyond from being accommodated, I don't want to be accommodated at any level, I just want things to be re-designed so I can participate from the get-go."*

Students in this study also expressed that UBC has progressed in promoting awareness of inclusion immensely over years. Our results indicated that smaller departments and departments within specific fields of study or staff who are working directly with students with disability are more likely to provide accommodations, consider a universal approach to learning, and create accessible jobs for students with disability. Contrastingly, some departments are perceived as less helpful in providing accommodations. Department names are not disclosed here in order to maintain participant confidentiality. Nicolas said *"My accessibility counsellor person - uh, (laughs) I don't know - the person that works there (name) lovely guy - anyways, he's been really helpful in the sense of just when I had access issues has been really good for resources"* Daisy said *"It's just a smaller faculty that I communicate and see, and I work with them as well and so they're just more um, it's a smaller group so I just feel more comfortable telling them, you know."*

However, there are still students, faculties and staffs who do not properly understand the concepts of inclusion, diversity, disability and accessibility. For example, Masha shared *"When a TA or professor don't want to accommodate you, and when that happens, it is not clear what to do where to go, it takes me the entire semester to get accommodations, and like the semester I got nothing done, and I lost a good part of the summer just for recovering, because professors just don't want to do the accommodations, so you kicked up to the head of the department who didn't know where to go with it, they didn't take it seriously, it is not a big deal or something."* Emma had a similar experience and said *"Like certainly, certainly, the access office at UBC was helpful and um, though there is always this complexity where like they don't always know what's going on with*

like, they're like 'Oh but I'm not sure how it works with graduate students.'" Holly also shared an ironic experience and said "It is amazing, so they had kind of like "teaching with disability" course [as a TA] after the first semester last year, and then going into 2nd semester they are just not gonna give you [as a student] those accommodations."

Taken together, lack of inclusive culture at UBC and limited understandings of disability and accessibility can lead to isolation and lack of sense of belonging among students with disabilities. Chantel shared *"It seems like you have to put in a lot more effort in order to get that belonging instead of everybody else. No one is reciprocating...But even with my own lab it has been very difficult... I skype into meetings as much as I can if there is someone who can bring their laptop and skype me in. I have tried to supplement with electronic communications, so like I set up a slack channel for the grad students in my lab to hang out, but really there was only one other grad student who used it and all the rest basically ignore it"*

Questioning Legitimacy of Graduate Students with Disability

Students with disability are required to go through a legitimization process to receive accommodations. This imposes hardship and emotional burden on students that non-disabled students do not have to deal with. Students with disability have to cope with the extra pressure of identifying themselves as disabled, and must put in significant work to achieve accessibility. Students expressed frustrations with this process, and shared feelings of self-blame, self-doubt, and of being unsupported. Masha expressed her feeling saying *"It is also very demoralizing to constantly be proving to people, having to justify your existence in a space."* Holly talked about how long the formal legitimization process takes and how frustrating it can get. She said *"Sometimes these disabilities are obvious, are we just to highlight it on the paper?"*

This process can be even more burdensome when students are experiencing an episode related to their condition. Alex said *"My condition is also unpredictable and going on medical leave has been very challenging as I have had to do it in the middle of term and do like weird off-sets and stuff and it is a lot of paperwork and really screws with any funding you have, and it is like 20 hours of paperwork and meetings getting aside."*

The above barriers and hardship that students with disability face result in the development of emotional, social and financial burdens. Students with disabilities felt that they were perceived as trying to make excuses, or as taking advantage of others due to their inability to be as productive as their peers. Students described stress over requiring accommodation or needing to take leave or other breaks. These mentalities become internalized over time. Students in our studies expressed that they rely on external support from family and friends in order to be able to continue their study. Emma shared *"My lack of productivity and I just internalized it- Oh, I am terrible, a terrible person."* Chantel said *"Thankfully I've been fortunate enough that I have enough support, but that's outside support, not UBC support."*

A shift to a universal design approach throughout UBC administration would remove this burden of self-advocacy, and result in benefits for all students. Masha shared *“We are early identifiers of problems because many of the issues that we face as disabled students are issues that other students face as well. We just sort of hit the barrier sooner. And so, when you address the needs of disabled students, you improve campus for everyone.”* Students shared their experience of how a universal design can actually help everyone in a class. Emma said *“In the sense of uh, yea I think a great example of – that has been in my graduate studies was one of my first classes, this was a huge interdisciplinary methodology course, and um, some of the accommodations that I was used to were just extended to everyone. In the sense of – teacher being like, ‘I’m flexible with due dates, people have lives, you have complexity, if you can’t show up for class let me know, we’ll figure it out. Um, here’s the reading list, select what you want to learn, and we’ll talk about the rest as well”*

Intersectionality of Marginalized Identities

An important aspect of our study that did not fit into any of Inclusion Action Plan goals is the intersectionality of disability with other marginalized identities including LGBTQ-IA students, international students, and student parents. Experiencing multiple marginalized identities adds an extra layer of difficulty during graduate studies, and in making the choice to attend graduate school. A few of our participants shared:

“I was pretty actively warned away from the hard sciences, like just in the sense that I had options of which departments I go to, um and so they were like education seems to be better uh, public health is pretty okay, interdisciplinary studies is pretty okay – I did screening there as well in the sense of sitting down with the head of the departments and just being like ‘I’m queer, I’m also disabled. How are you?”

“I am also an international student, which further limits the pool of money I am eligible for. I am just not eligible for any funding for any equipment because I don’t qualify for BC student loans because I am not a Canadian citizen.”

“I heard that ... they have a lot of funding for domestic students, but not that much for international students because it comes from the government and government doesn’t support international students and the only portion that is for international students comes from UBC itself and not the government. That’s why it is so limited for international students.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

UBC Inclusion Action Plan has a goal of systems change. This refers to the need to change structures, policies, and procedures to enhance inclusion, diversity and equity. Students with disability in our study pinpointed conflicting policies and procedures, as well as limitations in the UBC infrastructure that have caused difficulties in their journeys as graduate students and requires UBC administrators' attentions.

Reference

1. Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V. and Braun, V. (2017) Thematic analysis. In: Willig, C. and Stainton Rogers, W. (*The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 2nd. London: Sage Publications Ltd