

We are pleased to share the McMaster University Review of Student Accessibility Services (SAS) report with our campus community.

The review was initiated after we heard that the sharp increase in the volume and diversity of accommodation requests over a relatively short period of time had created pain points for students, SAS staff and faculty members. This was a recurring message heard during the provost's visits to McMaster's six Faculties over the Winter and Spring 2023 terms and shared with the dean of students' office.

About 11 per cent of McMaster's students registered with SAS in the 2022-23 academic year, that's 4,741 students, and we see no signs yet that the number of requests will plateau.

To adequately address current and future needs, an external expert and selected McMaster staff and faculty members were engaged to gain insight into the efficiency and effectiveness of the academic accommodations process for students with disabilities, and the department's readiness.

We are thankful to the reviewers for ensuring their final report is based on a strong student voice, recorded through consultations with various student groups. Similarly, we are appreciative of the faculty members and staff who shared their first-hand experiences with the academic accommodation system.

The recommendations within the report will serve as guidance for resourcing and adjusting SAS.

The presence of students with disabilities contributes to the diversity of the student population and we see this increase in participation rates as a positive trend. We believe that it reflects increased access, retention, and graduation rates. As such, the Office of the Provost and of the Associate Vice-President (Students and Learning) are committed to working toward operational excellence in this area, as it is tied to ensuring students with disabilities can reach their full potential.



Sean Van Koughnett
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Susan Tighe
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Executive Summary

Preamble

The Provost & Vice-President Academic and the Associate Vice-President (Students and Learning) & Dean of Students initiated a review of the Student Accessibility Services Office (SAS) of McMaster University in May-June 2023. The purpose of the review was to gain insight into the efficiency and effectiveness of the academic accommodations process for students with disabilities, and the department's readiness - in terms of the types and number of roles, expertise, organizational structure, and system(s) - to meet the increasing and increasingly complex demand for academic accommodations.

The number of students with disabilities on Ontario campuses has been steadily increasing. Between 2009-2010 and 2019-20, the number of registered students with disabilities increased by more than 132%, while total enrolment increased by 8.3%¹. Not surprisingly, over the last five years at McMaster there has been a 58.5% increase in the registration of students with disabilities (SWDs) and a staggering 62% increase in students registering with mental health issues as their primary disability³. Last year alone, from 2020/21 to 2021/22, the overall demand increased by 25% (3432 vs. 4280 students); an additional 848 students registered with SAS, which is approximately 11% of the McMaster student population. In 2021-22, mental health-related disability represented 70% of non-physical disability-related accommodations. In addition to these steep increases in students with mental health disabilities, there are growing numbers of students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) requiring complex accommodations, as well as growing numbers of graduate and international students with disabilities and students in clinical/practicum/ placement and research settings who require accommodation in unique learning settings. Wait times and caseloads are now at an unsustainable level resulting in significant delays for students accessing their accommodation(s). This results in increasing contextual complexity in the administration of academic accommodation and has implications for the staff and instructors who support them.

This increase in participation rates for students with disabilities is a positive trend reflecting increased access, retention, and graduation rates for students with disabilities. The presence of students with disabilities also contributes to the diversity of the student population. Disability should not simply be accommodated but should be viewed as a positive identity, a resource. However, increased demand and complexity is putting significant pressure on Student Accessibility Services (SAS), students with disabilities, instructors and student support staff in a medical, legalized service model that has largely remained unchanged and is under-resourced.

¹ Review Team: Heather Kelly, Executive Director, Student Life Programs & Services, University of Toronto; Anne Pottier, Chair, McMaster Accessibility Advisory Council McMaster University Director, Technology, Support & Operations, University Library; Tracy Prowse, Associate Dean Academic, Faculty of Social Sciences McMaster University; Sarah Robinson, Assistant Dean, Faculty of Science, McMaster University; Clare Warner. Senior Advisor, Equity, Inclusion and Anti-racism, Student Affairs McMaster University.

The complexity of mental health disabilities was on the rise prior to Covid-19 and it is expected the number of students requiring academic accommodation for a mental health disability will increase even further. Also, the impact of Covid on the learning and social and emotional needs of students with disabilities should not be underestimated. While it is difficult to generalize how the Covid-19 pandemic affected students with disabilities, the pandemic has heightened anxieties, impacted mental health, as well as amplified existing inequalities⁴.

This has been a very challenging time for higher education in general but especially for students with disabilities and the instructors and staff who support their learning experiences. Yet, the committee was impressed with the overall level of awareness and commitment to supporting students with disabilities across campus. The caring consideration of Covid's impact on managing accommodations and the early engagement with the recommended AODA Postsecondary Standards have created an opportunity for McMaster to be a sector leader in transitioning from a medical to social model of disability and creating a truly accessible campus.

At the same time, there is a need to clarify roles & responsibilities in the academic accommodation process (especially in graduate programs and clinical/practicum/placement and research settings), expand support for targeted and diverse student populations in a holistic student support model (including graduate, international and BIPOC students with disabilities), enhance communication, collaboration, training and outreach to all audiences (students, staff and instructors) most importantly, reconsider and appropriately resource the social disability service model with consideration of moving towards a specialist model to provide more disability-specific expertise and a focus on intake & triage and connecting students and instructors more quickly with the support and services they need.

Strengths

Overall, the community spoke positively about the work of SAS within their current budget, staffing and processes/systems. In fact, the reviewers were impressed with the broader community's understanding of the resource challenges and external factors that are having an adverse impact upon the work such as growing demand, the complexity of accommodating students in clinical/practicum/placement and research environments, as well as staff recruitment and retention challenges. There appears to be a strong institution-wide commitment to supporting and removing barriers for students with disabilities. The committee would like to recognize the work of the McMaster Accessibility Advisory Council (MAAC) which has contributed to the University's efforts to foster an accessible University community and address attitudinal barriers that discriminate against students with disabilities. Also, the review committee would like to acknowledge that many stakeholders commended Mei-Ju Shih, Assistant Director SAS, for her disability subject matter expertise, institutional knowledge, and commitment as a key asset to SAS.

Community members commented that there are generally positive relationships with SAS staff and that SAS staff are known for adopting a collaborative problem-solving approach when known issues arise and historically, for their expert disability knowledge and advice. Coordinators were viewed as being strong advocates for students with disabilities. Good relationships were mostly reported with academic administrators within the faculties. Individual instructors shared that the SAS team were responsive to queries and provided helpful follow up, although due to demand there were some delays especially when adjustments were needed. The use of MOSAIC to confirm students with accommodation is also working well. The reviewers felt that there was a shared understanding across SAS and staff & instructor

stakeholders that effective academic accommodations are a collaborative process consisting of effective communication among all members despite some role confusion.

While acknowledging that the SAS team has experienced significant turn over in the last several years and is a junior team that would benefit from enhanced training and professional development, the diversity of staff credentials and backgrounds was viewed as a strength (physical therapy, occupational therapy, counselling, and social work), which provides a solid foundation for interdisciplinary accommodation teams in the future.

There was also a sense that students with disabilities are well-served once they are connected to SAS and able to access an intake appointment. Deaf and hard of hearing students reported positive experiences. Students shared that they generally felt comfortable going to SAS but as will be explored below, delays and challenges accessing the intake appointment are significant. Students were generally satisfied with the services and support when they were connected into SAS but also acknowledged the need for more holistic supports and targeted supports for diverse students such as graduate, BIPOC, and international students. Students also commented that the SAS website is helpful and easy-to-navigate although as will be explored below, more interactive, and personalized content is recommended.

Not surprisingly, the reviewers heard that the service model has improved since Covid and that there have been some service innovations. For example, the introduction of extended hours has been well received as this provides more access to students especially students who are off-site or not available during the day for appointments. As well, the hybrid service delivery options have been well-received by both staff and students.

These strengths will serve SAS well as the reviewers felt that overall, the SAS organizational climate is healthy and there was a genuine shared willingness to further identify areas of enhancement. As well, the social disability approach was cited as a strength of the office, as was their awareness and commitment to activating Universal Design for Learning (UDL)⁵. There appears to be a readiness to move away from the medical to social model of disability, both within SAS and among other key service providers such as the Student Wellness Centre (SWC). Providing students with interim accommodation for the first term, pending receipt of medical documentation, was widely recognized as a best practice.

The reviewers would also like to recognize the significant work that has been done by SAS and the McMaster community to identify systemic issues around implementing accommodations for students by the McMaster Accessibility Advisory Council. There is a strong and often shared understanding of pain points and a level of change readiness which should enable McMaster to make transformational change once these recommendations are addressed.

Summary of Strengths:

- Community spoke positively about the work of SAS within their current budget, staffing and processes/systems.
- Institution-wide commitment to supporting and removing barriers for students with disabilities.
- Adoption of a collaborative problem-solving approach when known issues arise and historically, for their expert disability knowledge and advice.
- Program Coordinators are strong advocates for students with disabilities.
- Diversity of staff credentials and areas of specialty.
- Students with disabilities are well-served once they are connected and able to access an intake appointment.

- Website is helpful and easy-to-navigate and the use of MOASIC to confirm students with disabilities is also working well.
- Despite service demands, organizational climate is healthy and there is a genuine shared willingness to further identify areas of enhancement including increased adoption of UDL.
- Service innovations such as extended service hours for students and hybrid service delivery.
- Shared understanding of pain points and change readiness to move from the medical to social model of disability to create an inclusive and accessible campus.

Areas for Enhancement

Overall, the dominant theme is that there are immense pressures on the service. Wait times for students to register with the service and receive accommodation can be a minimum of 3-4 weeks. Caseloads for program coordinators in SAS are above 500 students. While students generally spoke positively of their experience once they were connected, students also shared that the delay in accessing accommodations has a negative impact upon their academic experience and overall well-being. Students shared that late confirmation of academic accommodations was frequent and had a detrimental impact on their academic success and sometimes caused unnecessary friction with instructors. Students shared that some instructors struggled to implement their accommodations. In turn, instructors sometimes felt unable to implement accommodations effectively due to increased volume and complexity and sometimes experienced delays in connecting with SAS. Some instructors felt overwhelmed by the numbers of students requiring individualized academic accommodation plans. Also, both students and instructors were frustrated by the back and forth between SAS and instructor when accommodations required adjustment. It is clear more resources and support are needed for students, staff, and instructors in the academic accommodation process.

Four general themes emerged as areas for enhancement:

(1.) Clarify roles & responsibilities in a shared and collaborative academic accommodation process

There is some confusion among students, staff, and instructors regarding their role in the accommodation process and their rights and responsibilities. There is a need to clarify the overall mandate for SAS with the McMaster community as well as the roles of coordinators and instructors and the broader intersection between SAS and partners in the McMaster accessibility ecosystem (e.g., Macpherson Institute, Equity, and Inclusion Office, Maccess, Disability, Inclusion, Madness, Accessibility, Neurodiversity (DIMAND)). This may be an opportunity to rename SAS to make its mandate clearer (i.e., Student Accommodations Service (SAS) or Student Accommodations Service Centre (SASC)). In particular, the process of disclosure and principles for access to need-to-know information for instructors (including sessionals and teaching assistants) need to be clarified, ensuring that information is shared only with those directly involved in the accommodation process. The reviewers also heard the need for special consideration of disclosure for clinical placement sites, health & safety considerations, and some confusion about who is responsible for communicating accommodations and ensuring they are implemented. While students are encouraged to share their accommodation needs plans with instructors, it is not mandatory. Reviewers heard, consistent with feedback gathered from 2015-2020, that sometimes students experience discouragement from bad experiences in negotiations, often resulting in a reluctance or refusal to communicate their disability in the future. Students who do disclose shared that the negotiation process depends too much on the particular instructor they must deal with. Students with hidden disabilities, such as mental health disabilities, also shared they have low credibility when disclosing. It is also important to encourage students with disabilities to be

knowledgeable about their needs, effectively communicate those needs, and be proactive in having their needs met. In turn, even though instructors receive letters of accommodation, they expressed frustration that modifications to accommodation needs are not discussed until the student is in crisis (e.g., late paper, missed exam). At the same time, it was noted that SAS must adopt a critical approach to student agency and self-advocacy, appreciating not all students are equipped to advocate for themselves and that the process generates persistent uncertainty for disabled students (Bruce, 2021²). It's important to continually remind students, staff, and faculty of the guiding principles of the academic accommodation process (e.g.) as well as the barriers and facilitators to disclosure.

1.1. Foster an Accessibility Supportive Culture

Some McMaster students with disabilities have faced ableism when interacting with instructors to access their accommodations. Instructors may not always implement accommodations, leading to frustration for some students. Some instructors expressed frustration that they were expected to provide any accommodation requested without having a role in determining the accommodation needs, especially with the implementation of complex accommodations. Some instructors expressed concern at the number of accommodations they were required to implement. High caseloads are making it challenging for program coordinators to employ a consultative approach.

1.2 Inclusion in Clinical/Practicum/Placement and Research Settings

Feedback suggested there is a need to address accommodation issues related to clinical/practicum/placement and research settings. Clinical instructors advocated for pro-active planning to determine future accommodation needs for students in “lock step” programs where the clinical or experiential program requirements are structured, and this is known early on. The reviewers also heard the importance of mechanisms for monitoring the plan’s feasibility, effectiveness, and continued appropriateness while adjusting as needed.

1.3 Articulate Essential Requirements

The reviewers heard from both instructors and students of the need to address the complexity of accommodating students with disabilities by clarifying essential requirements. Instructors should articulate the essential requirements of their courses and programs, undergraduate and graduate, and be prepared to explain why these requirements are necessary. In professional and clinical programs, requirements must align with licensure requirements and professional competencies frameworks.

1.4 Develop a Graduate Accommodations Framework

Graduate students and SGS also spoke about the need for more awareness of the specific types of graduate-specific accommodations and potential barriers in graduate environments (e.g., accommodations specific to graduate courses and graduate work, accommodations specific to the research phase of graduate programs, and accommodations related to experiential components of graduate study).

² Bruce, C. (2021). Self-Advocacy as Precariousness in University Education. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 9(5), 414–440.

(2.) Holistic support and targeted supports for diverse students with disabilities (graduate, international and BIPOC students)

McMaster University should prioritize support for diverse student populations (international, graduate and BIPOC students with disabilities) by providing targeted resources and support, address intersectional barriers, foster peer learning and mentoring, offer comprehensive transition support and implement additional learning strategy and assistive technology supports to develop critical resiliency supports for students with disabilities. By doing so, McMaster can respond to the community's needs for more holistic support for students with disabilities across multiple aspects of student life at McMaster.

2.1 Support for Graduate Students with Disabilities

The reviewers heard the need to provide comprehensive support for graduate students with disabilities. Reviewers heard that graduate-focused support should cover possible academic accommodations, issues of disclosure, supervisor funding and financial aid, mentoring, career development (academic and alternative academic careers), and professional networking. Reviewers heard the need to strengthen the student-supervisor relationship in graduate education.

2.2. Address the Needs of International Students with Disabilities

International students with disabilities may also face additional challenges due to differences in previous educational settings and varying models of disability support. Reviewers heard that more support for international students with disabilities at McMaster is needed, particularly with respect to anticipatory arrangements.

2.3 Culturally Responsive Academic Accommodation Supports

Reviewers heard from the community the need to apply an anti-racism lens to the work of SAS and to recognize and respond to the differentiated needs of BIPOC students with a trauma-informed approach. Students also shared the importance of SAS staff reflecting the diverse identities of the students they support (i.e., need for more staff from marginalized and equity deserving backgrounds). Collaborating with units like the Black Student Success Centre and Indigenous Student Services can further strengthen support for these populations at McMaster.

2.4 Inclusive Co-Curricular Opportunities

Support for students with disabilities should go beyond accommodation provision. Providing inclusive co-curricular opportunities is vital for students' overall well-being and social integration³. Students shared with the reviewers that many students with disabilities are struggling with engagement and that more efforts are needed to ensure awareness of programs, services, and resources to ensure that students with disabilities can fully participate in the social community. The reviewers noted a strong desire for partnership with SAS within the Student Success Centre (SSC) and an awareness of the need to ensure that students with disabilities can fully participate in campus life appreciating the benefits of co-curricular engagement on academic success.

³ Co-curricular engagement for SWDs supports their social and emotional development (Carter, E. W., Owens, L., Trainor, A. A., Sun, Y., & Swedeen, B. 2009), helps with skill development which are transferable to academic and future employment setting (Hodge, S. R., Reed, W. M., & Strnadová, I., 2015), enhances their motivation and engagement (Shernoff, D. J., & Schmidt, J. A., 2008), builds critical self-advocacy skills (Test, D. W., Fowler, C. H., Richter, S. M., White, J. L., Mazzotti, V. L., Walker, A. R., & Kohler, P., 2009), and promotes inclusion and fosters a sense of belonging (Liamputtong, P., & McMichael, C., 2015).

2.5 Leverage Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring and peer learning programs can also offer valuable support and social integration for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities at McMaster should have access to peer programming and peer support for several reasons including shared experiences, advice/navigation, role models, social connections, and opportunities for advocacy. Maccess provides invaluable advocacy support to students with disabilities. However, there is an opportunity to expand peer mentoring for diverse students with disabilities, at all degree levels, to support community building and skill development through SAS. Reassessing and implementing a revised Peer Support Specialist role in SAS will help to ensure these connections.

2.6 Cross-Coordinated Transition Support

Transition support, including orientation programs, is crucial for a smooth and successful transition for students with disabilities entering McMaster or transitioning between study levels. These programs provide essential information, resources, and guidance, helping students navigate the university environment. They also facilitate connections with disability support staff, instructors, and peers, promoting a sense of belonging. There is an opportunity to expand transition support for graduate and international students with attention to other equity-denied intersections. It is important that SAS and SCC staff are up-to-date and informed about program and service provision across their portfolios to make warm and supported referrals across their units and partner on programs and activities where joint expertise is needed. In the long term, there may need to be a specific role focused on transitioning students with disabilities into McMaster preferably located within SAS but working closely with the Transition Coordinator in the SSC.

2.7 Additional Learning Strategy and Assistive Technology Support

Finally, the reviewers heard that more learning strategy and assistive technology support are urgently needed for students with disabilities. Such supports help to promote their academic success, independence, and access to educational opportunities⁴. Currently, there are normally wait times of approximately one month to access assistive technology and the reviewers heard that there is no time to follow up with students to see if the strategies are working. As well, there is a need to develop accommodation strategies for note-taking and alternate participation. The reviewers heard that more clarity is needed with regards to the use of assistive technology for accommodated testing, the integration of technologies in teaching environments, more consistency and standards needed with respect to technology in the classrooms, more training about what tools and technologies are available and how to use them especially for complex disabilities as well as neurodiverse students and students with mental health disabilities, whose needs need to be addressed alongside assistive technology.

(3.) Enhance communication, collaboration, training, and outreach (for students, staff, and instructors)

More communication, outreach and training will enable more positive interactions, reduce stigma, challenge stereotypes, dispel myths and create a welcoming environment for diverse students with disabilities. It also enables better coordination of support services, accommodations, and resources for

⁴ Learning strategies and assistive technology can optimize the learning process for students with disabilities, helping them organize information, improve time management, and enhance study skills (see Gregg, N., 2009). Assistive technologies offer necessary tools for accessing course information, participating in classroom activities, and completing assignments. Learning strategies and assistive technology supports also empower students with disabilities to become independent learners and self-advocates, equipping them with the tools and skills to navigate educational settings and communicate their needs.

students with disabilities. Finally, communication, outreach and training will help build an inclusive community by fostering understanding, respect, and empathy among students, instructors, staff, and other stakeholders. This is essential to transition from a culture of compliance to a culture of care for students with disabilities.

3.1 Promote Awareness of SAS

More communication with all audiences is needed to explain what SAS does and what it does not do. There is a real need to communicate about the support and services available through SAS, especially given that some students may feel disconnected from campus post-Covid. This is especially important as students transition back to the campus and may not necessarily be familiar with the full range of supports available. “Student-friendly” communications about the academic accommodation process were suggested. It is also critically important to explain what academic accommodation looks like in a graduate, research-intensive learning environment and specifically within the McMaster context. As well, graduate students indicated that they sometimes felt guilty about accessing support and that there was a need to de-stigmatize support for graduate students with disabilities who may already be experiencing “imposter syndrome”. Reviewers heard that international students are not aware of SAS. Also, students may also not always know they can access mental health accommodations through SAS. Concerns were also raised about the office’s physical location. Overall, there is a need for greater visibility of SAS.

3.2 Targeted, Proactive Communication

There is a need for more proactive, outwards communication from SAS. While students were aware of the service, consultation with students revealed that more personalized and targeted communication is needed. Trusted, local channels should be leveraged to disseminate information about SAS to targeted students which also contributes to cross-departmental staff awareness of SAS (e.g., disseminate information about SAS via SGS, International Student Services, Access Program, Black Student Success Centre, and Indigenous Student Services communication channels, among others).

3.3 Internal Communication

Reviewers also heard about the need for more internal communication between the student learning team (assistive technologist and learning strategist) and program coordinators. It is essential that student learning and skill development be reflected in the advising of students with disabilities and their academic accommodation needs. The feedback loop needs to be closed between coordinators and technologists. Also, more communication is needed with faculty liaison roles and a warm invitation extended to SAS meetings as well as training and professional development.

3.4 Instructor training

Instructors, including sessionals and teaching assistants, play a vital role in supporting students with disabilities and implementing accommodations to foster accessible learning at McMaster University. Instructors reported a lack of clarity regarding appropriate academic accommodations, their role in the accommodation process, effective strategies, and available campus resources. More training and resource development is needed for instructors providing them with the necessary tools and guidance to effectively support students with disabilities in their classroom. At the same time, it is important not to lose sight of the need for SAS program coordinators to provide guidance to instructors on accommodations appropriate to their instructional activity and setting to demonstrate their learning.

3.5 Staff Training

Training is also needed for SAS staff especially as the team is new and still developing their institutional knowledge and expertise. A strong need was identified for SAS staff to have a deep understanding of academic program requirements. Instructors expressed concern that accommodations are not always “threaded into academic requirements” and that there was a lack of understanding of alternate assessments and their impact upon learning outcomes especially with respect to participation, presentation, and group work. SAS staff need to become more familiar with the curriculum and requirements of various academic programs, including the specific challenges and demands graduate students and students in clinical/practicum/placements and research settings may encounter. Additionally, reviewers heard of a need for students with disabilities to receive informed and proactive guidance in planning their academic journey, meeting essential prerequisites, and progressing smoothly through their chosen program. There is an opportunity for more outreach to Faculty Liaisons to learn more about specific academic requirements and local learning environments (e.g., visit practicum/placement sites).

3.6 Enhanced Data and Reporting

As well, it was suggested that more data and reporting on students with disabilities and the operations of SAS would be helpful. Some institutions survey their students with disabilities, which would be an excellent opportunity to better understand their lived experience at McMaster and would provide valuable information to continually improve the service. As well, data on the retention and graduation rates of students with disabilities would help with the development of academic supports. A student accommodations advisory council/board would also help provide just-in-time feedback. This data and insights would also be helpful for instructors in understanding the learning barriers that students face. It also empowers students with disabilities as active participants and stakeholders in their own education. This participatory approach helps to ensure that the services provided align with the needs and goals of students with disabilities.

(4.) Reconsider and resource the social disability service model:

Due to a significant increase in students registering with the service and the growing complexity of their needs, the current service model is facing challenges, resulting in unsustainable caseloads and substantial wait times for student intakes. More resources for staffing are urgently needed, especially with respect to intake & triage functions. The community has expressed frustration with the delays in registering students with disabilities, as these delays not only impact their academic success but can also have adverse effects on their well-being. Additional staffing is needed (e.g., Program Coordinators, Learning Strategist, Assistive Technologist, Peer Support Specialist) as well as immediate (e.g., Intake & Triage Lead Coordinator) and future consideration for role specialization (e.g., Lead Coordinators for discrete health teams), administrative support (e.g., dedicated SAS front desk team) and additional Faculty Liaison support (e.g., SGS Liaison) once a strong central team is established.

4.1 “Right-Size” the Service

As increasing numbers of people with disabilities pursue educational opportunities at McMaster, additional SAS staffing will be needed. While there are some efficiencies to be found with staffing structures, systems and business processes, there will be increasing pressures upon the service as the numbers of registered students continue to rise. More program coordinators roles are needed to align with recommended AODA post-secondary case load standards (250 students per coordinator). Also, it is

important to "right size" the service to allow for planning and identify issues or ideas to improve processes beyond adding additional staffing.

4.2 Add Intake & Triage Roles & Functions

It is crucial to prioritize the implementation and resourcing of intake and triage functions within the service to enable coordinators to prioritize their caseloads and work through them efficiently. This approach aims to reduce crisis situations and address urgent needs promptly.

4.3 Increased Role Specialization

In evaluating the service model, it became apparent that the generalist model does not adequately address the specific and growing needs of students with disabilities, as well as the highly complex requirements of students in clinical placements, practicums, laboratories, or research settings. Also, with growing numbers of students with mental health disabilities (and students with comorbidities) strong expertise in this area is needed as well as for students with ASD and ADHD who are registering in greater numbers.

4.4 More support for front-line and administrative functions

To improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the service, it is essential to establish a dedicated front desk and administration team for the SAS Office. A CRM should also be explored to help track points of contact with students and instructors regarding student accommodation. These dedicated administrative roles could also perform more specialized administrative tasks (e.g., Bursaries for Students with Disabilities applications, organizing referrals) to remove the more administrative tasks from coordinators roles to focus more on academic accommodation planning are also needed.

4.5 Maximize the Learning Potential of Students with Disabilities (Expand Student Learning Roles and Supports)

Another pressing need is to expand student learning services and supports so that students can more actively engage and participate in their own learning. The demand for assistive technologists and learning strategists exceeds the current staffing capacity. Restoring and possibly increasing previous staffing allocations to these roles and expanding support is crucial to ensure that students not only have access to technology-enabled resources but also receive comprehensive learning strategy support.

4.6. Add Additional Faculty Liaison Roles

To bridge the knowledge gap, additional Faculty Liaison roles should be considered once a "right-sized" SAS team is established. A priority need is a Faculty Liaison role for the SGS. While it is essential that these roles be Faculty-based, there is an opportunity to bring these roles closer to the SAS team which will ensure Faculty Liaison roles are appropriately supported in terms of disability specific knowledge.

4.7 Oversight of Testing Services

Although testing services are out of scope for the review, the reviewers strongly recommend that testing services be moved outside of SAS as it is largely a scheduling function. There needs to be strong communication between SAS and the Testing Centre, however, SAS resources should be directed at students and instructors to support, monitor, and adjust testing accommodations rather than the logistics of the process itself. This would also free up-front desk staff to assist with specialized administrative tasks as outlined below. By separating these roles, it allows each office to focus on their specific expertise and provide specialized services.

List of Recommendations

It is recommended that the new Director, Student Accessibility Services (SAS) in consultation with the Executive Director and Assistant Dean, Student Success and AVP (Students and Learning) and Dean of Students, Special Advisor to the President, Innovation & Entrepreneurship determine which are the priority recommendations.

1. Clarify roles & responsibilities in a shared and collaborative academic accommodation process.

Recommendation 1: Clarify student, staff, instructor and partner roles and responsibilities in academic accommodation process and ecosystem, especially related to who is responsible for implementing accommodations as well as clarity regarding decisions concerning disclosure and access to “need to know” information.

Recommendation 2: Consider renaming SAS to make its mandate clearer (i.e., Student Accommodations Service (SAS) or Student Accommodations Service Centre (SASC)).

Recommendation 3: In partnership with SGS, develop graduate academic accommodation frameworks and strategies that take graduate program-specific requirements into account.

Recommendation 4: With support from the MacPherson Institute and SGS, encourage undergraduate and graduate programs to articulate essential requirements.

2. Holistic support and targeted support for diverse students with disabilities (graduate, international and BIPOC students)

Recommendation 5: Provide targeted and culturally responsive support for international, graduate and BIPOC students with disabilities to address the specific challenges faced/barriers encountered by these student populations.

Recommendation 6: Provide holistic support to students with disabilities, including co-curricular programming to contribute to their overall educational experience, personal development, and future success.

Recommendation 7: Expand peer mentoring and transition support in SAS and reassess and implement a revised Peer Specialist Role to help students with disabilities develop a sense of community and belonging.

Recommendation 8: Expand learning strategy and assistive technology support and services, including programs and workshops to enhance learning experiences and academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

Recommendation 9: Develop critical academic resiliency initiatives for students with disabilities with mental health disabilities such as anxiety disorders.

3. Enhance communication, collaboration, training, and outreach (for students, staff, and faculty)

Recommendation 10: Actively promote SAS through diverse communication channels, create engaging and interactive content, targeted messaging, and collaborative partnerships (e.g., similar to the Library Ambassadors and LinkedIn Learning Ambassadors) to ensure a collective effort in spreading awareness and fostering an inclusive campus culture.

Recommendation 11: Include more tailored resources on the SAS website for graduate, professional and international students to help these students navigate their academic accommodations.

Recommendation 12: More internal SAS communication and touchpoints between program coordinators and student learning team (assistive technologist and learning strategist) as well as faculty liaisons.

Recommendation 13: Conduct more training sessions and workshops for instructors (including new instructors, academic administrators, sessionals and TAs) on the importance of accommodation inclusive practices, and the utilization of academic accommodations.

Recommendation 14: Train SAS staff on how to support the unique needs of graduate students, international students and students in clinical settings, practicum, placements and laboratories.

Recommendation 15: Engage in annual data collection and reporting to provide transparency and accountability, raise awareness, provide data-driven insights, recognize achievements, foster continuous improvement, and promote partnerships with other divisions.

Recommendation 16: Actively seek input from students with disabilities to report accommodation barriers to ensure that their perspectives are included in the ongoing improvement of SAS (e.g., student advisory committee, annual survey).

4. Reconsider and resource the social disability service model

Recommendation 17: Increase program coordinator roles to reduce caseloads to align with AODA post-secondary standards recommendation (250 students per coordinator).

Recommendation 18: Create an intake & triage lead program coordinator role with a background in accessibility to connect students more quickly with program coordinators and ensure that students and instructors receive the necessary support and guidance in a timely manner.

Recommendation 19: Establish a dedicated SAS front desk and administrative team to enable SAS staff to focus on their specialized roles by providing immediate support to students with disabilities.

Recommendation 20: Move towards a specialist staffing model with discrete health teams, as more resources become available, especially in the areas of mental health and neurological disabilities.

Recommendation 21: Ensure that students have access to the latest tools and strategies to support their learning and accommodation needs and instructors are supported in implementing solutions effectively in their learning environments.

Recommendation 22: Add additional Faculty-Liaison roles (prioritizing an SGS Faculty Liaison) to facilitate an understanding of local needs and to assist with Faculty-specific communication, outreach & training once additional SAS staffing is in place.

Recommendation 23: Move oversight of accommodated testing services out of SAS with clear communication and information sharing channels.

Other Recommendations:

Structure and Staffing

A predominant theme which emerged in the review is that the service is under-resourced. It is very clear that the human, physical and financial resources are inadequate to meet growing complexity and demand for the service. High caseloads of approximately 500 students per program coordinator make it challenging for staff to meet their core responsibilities but also may make it difficult to engage in other valuable and needed activities at McMaster such as communication, outreach, training, and programming. One of the most significant pain points for the service is the intake and triage process. Significant time is dedicated to intakes with program coordinators and that in the Fall term, intakes continue into December. To help streamline student registration, an intake role is recommended to ensure that students can be seen quickly and triaged to an intake appointment. This role should have a wide lens on the operations so that students can quickly be triaged through the service. As well, this role could assign cases loads, with input from the Lead Program Coordinator, as the current assignment of students based upon “availability in their schedules” is not an efficient or sustainable caseload allocation model and is a missed opportunity to draw on specializations within the team. As part of the intake & triage functions, it is recommended that the front desk team be dedicated entirely to SAS. The administrative and front desk staff could report to the intake coordinator so that there is a “one-stop” team for all student administrative needs. Furthermore, it is recommended that much of the administrative work which currently resides in the program coordinator roles be shifted to these administrative roles (e.g., Bursary for Student with Disabilities, sign language interpretation etc.) By removing these administrative tasks, advisors may have greater capacity to advise students and instructors. This would address some of the feedback reviewers heard that the administrative team is eager to help but are unclear about how to help and need daily operational guidance. With more resources and additional growth in student numbers over the next decade, McMaster may wish to consider in the future whether distinct teams would be helpful (e.g., neurological team, chronic/physical & sensory team, and mental health team) each with a Lead Program Coordinator. Another opportunity to provide a more seamless service delivery is to consider an expansion of the Faculty Liaison model. Once SAS is appropriately staffed, a Faculty Liaison model is recommended across all Faculties. In terms of expansion, a priority role is that of a Faculty Liaison role for the SGS that could work both within SGS and across the Faculties to provide support to the graduate academic accommodation process, both for graduate students and graduate instructors and supervisors. Another clear pain point that was readily identified by the reviewers was accommodated testing services. Although this was outside of the purview of the review, the reviewers strongly suggest consideration for the transition of oversight of this service to the Registrar’s Office. There must be, of course, regular communication between SAS and the office that coordinates accommodated testing, but such a change would enable SAS to focus on the

identification of accommodations for assessment and evaluation rather than the administrative components. As additional staffing is added, it is important that students with disabilities see their identities reflected among the SAS service providers. With additional staff, there will also be a need to review the leadership structure and ensure clear role definition between the Director and Assistant Director and strong connections between the Lead Programs Coordinator(s) and their teams. As well, attention to onboarding, training and retention is needed. There has been significant staff turnover and the loss of institutional expertise. Finally, there is a need for more structures and systems that support knowledge exchange.

Recommendation 24: Recruitment of new BIPOC program coordinators to offer culturally competent accommodation support.

Recommendations 25: Review the leadership structure and ensure clear role definition and direct communication with staff that cross organizational and functional boundaries.

Recommendation 26: Improve onboarding, training, and professional development for SAS staff by creating an onboarding process, training curriculum, job shadowing and research-based collaborations with instructors especially in health sciences.

Recommendation 27: More knowledge transfer and knowledge management, with attention to the development of institutional knowledge.

Recommendation 28: Consider title change for Program Coordinators (e.g., Student Accommodation Specialist, Academic Accommodation Facilitator, or Student Accommodation Facilitator).

Systems and Business Processes

The reviewers would like to recognize the excellent work underway with respect to the student accommodations journey map. This map represents the collective efforts of a team of accessibility and accommodations service providers and is an excellent example of the systems and business process re-design already underway. Many of the system and business process issues raised during the review are being actively considered by SAS. That said, there is also a strong identified need for documented business processes. Processes should be well-documented for SAS staff (e.g., handbook for program coordinators). Documentation of office procedures will help with on-boarding and training. The reviewers also heard the need for more consistency with respect to the provision of academic accommodation from all stakeholders. Accommodations are, of course, individualized and accommodations are not a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. However, guidelines and frameworks can provide a framework for consistent accommodation provision, while allowing flexibility for individualized adjustments. Both students and instructors shared that they were overwhelmed by the amount of information needed to activate and implement accommodations. Instructors raised concerns about the length of Letters of Accommodation (LOA) and a "templated approach" to accommodations. It was frequently heard that there was "too much detail" in LOA and that instructors did not always understand the language being used. Also, because of the templated or one size fits all approach instructors shared that some of the accommodations don't even apply to their courses. It is recommended that once the service is "right sized" that a more personalized approach be taken with the LOAs. There are systems and business processes to consider which may alleviate some of the pressures upon SAS, but the reviewers would like to reiterate that there are insufficient human resources. Advisors noted that they spend a lot

of time responding to email and phones. A customer service management (CSM) platform like ServiceNow may be useful to consider helping with email and phone call management. The CSM should also be integrated into the new system, Accommodate, which is currently being implemented in SAS. With a dedicated SAS front desk team, more administrative support can be provided to SAS staff and student/instructor enquiries can be dealt with more quickly. Another pain point identified in the review is re-activation/registration. The reviewers question whether it is always necessary to require students to activate accommodation each term. Not only are there significant wait-times to access appointments at SAS, especially for intakes, but the intake process continues into December for the Fall term. The duration of intakes (one hour) and follow up appointments (45 min) are standard in the sector. However, efficiencies may be found with respect to the communication of processes, deadlines, and timelines. To address the challenge of front-loaded service delivery, SAS has instituted deadlines to encourage students with disabilities to submit their documentation to receive academic accommodation for the upcoming academic year. More promotion of this deadline through a variety of channels is recommended (e.g., website, newsletter, social media) occur in admissions, orientation & transition, and general communications to ensure students with disabilities are encouraged to submit their requests for academic accommodations as early as possible. Consultation with graduate students and graduate instructors indicated a need to provide support for academic accommodations year-round. SAS has a strong interim accommodations process and the one-term grace period for students seeking accommodation to provide their documentation was appreciated by students. However, a concern was raised that students are delayed in providing this documentation which jeopardizes their accommodations moving forward beyond the first term. Until more resources can be allocated, SAS may wish to consider an expedited intake process whereby basic accommodations are assigned at the time of intake for students with straightforward and or well-documented disabilities. Given the individualized nature of academic accommodation, one-on-one advising is an important and necessary element of support. However, in addition to a 1:1 appointment, SAS is strongly encouraged to consider more group support, especially for students with ADHD and ASD, two growing demographics at McMaster. In addition to group support and clinical coaching, workshops especially in the area of learning skills and assistive technology would also help students with disabilities develop learning skills, as well as create community and a sense of belonging. Other service efficiencies may be realized through the targeted use of accommodation peer mentors. Another best practice in service delivery is the use of drop-ins to address students' questions and concerns that do not necessarily require an appointment. The reviewers heard from some community members that the medical documentation form is onerous. It is a frequent critique of accommodation offices that students need "accommodation for the accommodation process" and that the "accommodation apparatus" can be a barrier for students in accessing accommodations or supports. A preliminary review of the McMaster medical form suggests that it is like other forms in the sector and is more succinct than many. Often it is not the form per se which is a barrier, but it is the information required or the struggle to reach an SAS staff member. Interestingly, the handling of complex cases did not emerge as a pain point as might be expected given the increasing complexity of academic accommodation and student well-being. That said, the reviewers heard that sometimes it was difficult to find time to discuss complex cases, which is not surprising given the demands upon the service. The role of Faculty Liaisons in complex accommodations also requires consideration as there was confusion as to their level of involvement. The reviewers would like to suggest a team approach for consultation on complex cases and more integration with Student Support and Case Management (SSCM) and the Student Wellness Centre (SWC) for more complex cases.

Recommendation 29: Document business processes to assist with knowledge management and staff onboarding and training.

Recommendation 30: Develop guidelines and frameworks to guide decision making for retroactive accommodation and other types of accommodations (e.g., testing assessments) and strategies (e.g., UDL) to ensure more fairness and consistency with the provision of accommodation.

Recommendation 31: Implement a CRM at the front desk to enhance efficiency, communication, collaboration, and data management.

Recommendation 32: Consider whether term registration/activation is needed for all students with disabilities or only for those with more complex accommodation or who require reassessments.

Recommendation 33: Rigorously promote registration deadlines recognizing that there will be exceptions and special cases.

Recommendation 34: Provide year-round support for graduate students with disabilities and end of term transition for students in professional/clinical programs.

Recommendation 35: Consider an express registration process for less complex disabilities.

Recommendation 36: Establish support groups for students (e.g. ADHD and ASD) and drop-ins to build additional service capacity and support student skill development and community building.

Recommendation 37: Adopt a team approach to consultations for complex cases with disability-specific expertise.

Policy

The McMaster Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities Policy (the “Policy”) was originally approved in 2001 and was most recently updated in 2020. The reviewers find the policy to be thorough, if not exemplary, when considered alongside other Canadian post-secondary institutions. Most strikingly, McMaster is one of the few institutions to affirm its commitment in its Policy to “*work towards a campus community that adopts the social definition of disability*”. There is more work to do with respect to actualizing McMaster’s institutional aspiration. So, while there may be some adjustments to be made to the Policy in the future, it is the reviewers’ opinion that the most pressing need is to socialize and operationalize the Policy, ensuring that the policy be well-understood and embedded in university-wide communication, training, and outreach. The reviewers also heard a need to clearly communicate roles, responsibilities, timelines, and a clear process for both interim and retroactive accommodations. It may be useful to also review the Policy to ensure that graduate student’s needs are adequately addressed, especially with respect to the impact of disability on graduate funding supports. As well, there was a reflection that the Policy was developed pre-pandemic and prior to the more widespread adoption of hybrid or virtual instruction. It may be helpful to remind the McMaster community that this Policy applies to all instructional and delivery modes, appreciating that additional resources and training may be needed to ensure technology-enabled instruction remains accessible and supports UDL principles and that a clear framework developed for the consideration of on-line learning. There are a few other considerations for the Policy and related processes that the

reviewers would suggest. McMaster should consider applying an intersectional lens to its Policy and more clearly recognize how grounds such as sex, race, or disability, to name just a few, may intersect and together produce unique discriminatory effects. Also, it is recommended that the Policy recognizes, and provides mechanisms, to resolve potential competing interests. Although the process for appeals and complaints is clearly outlined in the Policy, the reviewers heard that it would be helpful to clarify for students where to go if they feel their accommodation is not being fairly or appropriately implemented. Finally, although these are considerations largely outside of the policy, it is recommended that there be intersectional data collection to better understand the intersectional identities of students with disabilities. This will enable McMaster to move forward to identify ongoing barriers which may be addressed in Policy and/or practice and to truly live its commitment to creating a learning environment that is accessible to all students.

Recommendation 38: Continually educate the University community on the Policy and reference McMaster’s aspirations to operationalize a social model of disability.

Recommendation 39: Ensure a robust understanding of the Policy and its application for students in shared institutional programs (e.g., Mohawk and Conestoga).

Recommendation 40: More clarity in Policy with respect to process and principles for retroactive accommodation.

Recommendation 41: Consider a separate Accommodation Policy for Graduate Students or section within current Policy on graduate specific accommodations and processes.

Recommendation 42: Include a process for competing rights in the Policy.

Recommendation 43: Reflect an intersectional discrimination lens in the Policy.

Recommendation 44: Engage in intersectional students with disabilities data collection.

General Feedback

There is an opportunity for SAS to build stronger relationships and partner with other co-curricular units across the Student Affairs portfolio, especially the Student Success Centre (SSC). A key issue in providing these co-curricular supports is that accommodations services offices in Ontario are funded to provide academic accommodations, but not accommodations in other learning environments. For students with disabilities at McMaster, the potential for significant barriers to accessing the co-curricular learning environment exists. Once SAS is right-sized and more resources become available, consideration should be given to a focus on accessibility and universal design across the McMaster co-curricular experience, but especially in the career education/career transition space given the barriers students with disabilities face in securing employment⁵. Advising students with disabilities is another area for future enhancement McMaster. Skilled advising can go a long way towards ensuring the success of students with a disability. SAS staff members are seen as “disability experts,” yet they may or may not be “advising experts.” As such, it is imperative to work with academic advisors to achieve competency in advising students with disabilities and develop specific knowledge about advising students with specific

⁵The employment rate of Canadians aged 25 to 64 with disabilities was 49%, compared with 79% for Canadians without a disability. (CERIIC/NEADS, 2017).

disabilities such as ADHD and ASD⁶ given that the prevalence of these diagnoses is rising. It was also flagged during the review that further consideration needs to be given to how on-line accommodation will be managed moving forward. Also, the reviewers heard that advances in technology including generative AI will both help and hinder students with disabilities and will require careful consideration (McMutrie, 2023: May 26)⁷. Finally, creating an accessible campus is not only about service delivery but fundamentally is a teaching and learning conversation. As noted above, stronger connections are needed between SAS and the MacPherson Institute.

Recommendation 45: Provide students with disabilities with access to co-curricular activities, especially career support.

Recommendation 46: Equip all academic advisors with strategies to advise students with disabilities.

Recommendation 47: Develop a framework to guide future decision-making regarding remote and hybrid learning for SDS.

Recommendation 48: Deepen partnership between SAS and MacPherson to ensure an accessible educational environment.

Conclusion

There has been a fundamental shift within the field of Accessibility Accommodations Services from a medical model of disability to a social model of dis/ability and given this, it stands to reason that accessibility accommodations service providers must focus beyond individual level accommodations and direct attention toward proactive accessibility (Griesmeyer-Krentz et. al, 2022⁸). It is the reviewers' hope that McMaster will "double-down" on its commitment to the social model of dis/ability and that accessibility will become a core tenant of institutional culture and practice.

Despite this paradigm shift, the fundamental service model remains unchanged for most accessibility accommodations services offices including SAS. However, there is an opportunity for McMaster to be a sector leader and change agent in establishing and operationalizing a social model of disability. To do so, it is recommended that SAS prioritize collaboration and partnerships across campus to promote inclusive practices and foster a culture of accessibility. SAS will require dedicated staff who are knowledgeable about both accommodation and UDL principles, as promoting a UDL approach throughout the institution is essential. Ensuring the involvement of students with disabilities in decision-making, policy development, program evaluation, and service provision is also vital for creating an inclusive service model. Finally, ongoing professional development and training for faculty and staff addressing dis/ability awareness and inclusive teaching practices is critical for successfully implementing a social disability service model. This will require change management leadership in SAS and significant campus resources within SAS and beyond, including teaching & learning support but also within the broader Student Affairs portfolios. Faculty and staff will need to be provided with resources and support to implement accommodation and create inclusive learning environments. Lastly, it should be

⁶ NACADA has a community of practice dedicated to advising students with disabilities and excellent resources (see "[Advising Students with Disabilities: Striving for Universal Success](#)").

⁷ McMutrie, B. (May 26, 2023). How ChatGPT Could Help or Hurt Students With Disabilities. The Chronicle of Higher Education. https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-chatgpt-could-help-or-hurt-students-with-disabilities?cid=gen_sign_in

⁸ Griesmeyer-Krentz et al., Institutional Access through a Culture of Accessibility. CJDS 11.3 (December 2022).

acknowledged that these campus culture-based recommendations are not easy solutions (Toutain 2019: 307⁹). SAS will likely find themselves increasingly taxed as the number of students with disabilities increases. The medical model of individual accommodation may not leave much time to engage in the work necessary beyond SAS in order to impact the campus culture regarding disability. The first step towards operationalizing a social disability model requires an appropriately resourced SAS. To ensure SAS continues to meet its mandate and is resourced to do so, it is recommended that SAS be reviewed again in five years to assess effectiveness of these proposed changes, address any shortcomings, and plan for further improvements. By embracing inclusivity, collaboration, and the principles of universal design, McMaster will foster an environment that supports the diverse needs of its students with disabilities and ensure their full participation and success.

⁹ Toutain, C. (2019). Barriers to Accommodations for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education: A Literature Review. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, v32 n3 p297-310 Fall 2019.