POLICY 9.31

POSITION POLICY

Accessibility and Accommodations

POLICY INTENT

To outline the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) commitment for the removal of systemic barriers faced by—and affirmation and support of—disabled, chronically ill, and neurodiverse students, as well as those with accessibility needs and those requiring mental health support— in the short-term and long-term.

DEFINITIONS

Ableism is defined as "the intentional or unintentional discrimination or oppression of [disabled] individuals."[1] Specifically, ableist attitudes regard disabled individuals as inferior or "less than" those who are non-disabled. Ableism includes, but is not limited to, assumptions and generalizations, stereotypes, tropes, microaggressions, and language that is derogatory, insulting, and/or negative when speaking of disability. Ableism also includes, but is not limited to, a lack of reasonable accommodations,[2] as well as exclusion from full participation, which includes, but is not limited to, inaccessible venues and activities.

Accessibility is defined as "the design of products, devices, services, or environments"[3] for disabled individuals. Examples of accessibility include, but are not limited to, text-to-speech features, closed-captioning, accessible parking, and ramps.

Accommodations are defined as "making changes to certain rules, standards, policies, workplace cultures and physical environment." Examples of accommodations include, but are not limited to, ramps and accessible hotel accommodations and event venues, closed-captioning at online and hybrid events, inclusive team-building activities, extra time to complete tasks, and breaks.

Chronic Illness is defined as a health condition that lasts for three months or longer; many can be life-long,[4] while some can go into remission. Examples include, but are not limited to, Multiple sclerosis (MS), heart disease, as well as autoimmune diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis (RA) and systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE).

Disability is a complex and wide-ranging term that can be defined as limitations that significantly affect an individual's life.[5] Types of disabilities include, but are not limited to, mobility, psychiatric, auditory, cognitive/developmental/intellectual, speech, environmental, and medical.[6] Disabilities can be both visible and invisible. It is important to note that not all individuals with accessibility needs identify as disabled, and disability can have differing definitions for individuals. Always defer to how individuals self-identify, including the use of identity-first language (disabled person) or person-first language (person with a disability).

Disability Justice is defined as the way in which disability cannot be separated from an individual's other intersectional identities, including, but not limited to, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or class. This means that the ableism faced by disabled individuals cannot be separated from the other forms of oppression that they may encounter in their daily lives, including, but not limited to, racism, homophobia, and/or transphobia.[7]

In this policy, intersectionality is applied to how disability cannot be separated from race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious/faith-based beliefs, age, size, and/or class.

In addition, in this policy, ableism cannot be separated from other forms of oppression including, but are not limited to, racism, homophobia, transphobia, faithism (discrimination based on faith, religion, and/or faith-based beliefs), sizeism (discrimination based on size), ageism (discrimination based on age), and classism (discrimination based on socio-economic class).

Intersectionality is defined as a social justice theory that recognizes "the complexity of overlapping identities, oppressions, and privileges."[8] The term, as originally developed by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to discuss race and gender, has been expanded to include gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability.[9]

In this policy, intersectionality is applied to how disability cannot be separated from race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious/faith-based beliefs, age, size, and/or class.

Neurodiversity is defined as the different ways that individuals' brains operate.[10] In particular, neurodiversity refers to the "belief that differing neurologies are a natural part and form of human diversity," the "belief that atypical or divergent neurologies are not indicative of disease, defect, disorder, or illness," and the "philosophy that neurological difference should be celebrated and accepted as natural and normal."[11] Some examples of neurodiversity include but are not limited to, ADHD, Dyslexia, and Autism. It is important to note that not all neurodiverse individuals use these definitions, and it is best to defer to how individuals self-identify.

Oppression is defined as the "combination of prejudice and institutional power which creates a system that discriminates against some groups (often called 'target groups') and benefits other groups (often called 'dominant groups')."[12] In other words, oppression can be seen as the "[s]ystematic disenfranchisement due to actual or presumed membership in a particular group as a result of the power exercised by the analogously privileged group."[13] Some examples of forms of oppression include, but are not limited to, racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and/or transphobia. Often, these forms of oppression overlap and intersect.

Plain Language and Plain Design refer to the strategy of ensuring that communications, including text and imagery adheres to principles of inclusivity and accessibility, including being easily understood by all AUSU Members, including Members with low vision, disabilities, low literacy, and those whose first language is not English.

In particular, the purpose of Plain Language "is to convey information easily and unambiguously."[14] This means choosing straightforward vocabulary and sentence structure and avoiding jargon, so that the message of the communication can be understood by all readers.

Plain Design refers to ensuring the accessibility of webpages and content design, including checking contrast, choosing appropriate typefaces, and using open space. In this policy, Plain Design also includes the use of alt text for images and graphics, Pascal case for hashtags (ex: ThisIsAPascalCase), and captions for videos, when possible.

Universal Design - Universal Design can be defined as "the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people."[15] With respect to education, Universal Design in learning refers to "a teaching approach that works to accommodate the needs and abilities of all learners and eliminates unnecessary hurdles in the learning process."[16] This can involve "developing a flexible learning environment in which information is presented in multiple ways, students engage in learning in a variety of ways, and students are provided options when demonstrating their learning."[17]

Social Model of Disability vs. Medical Model Of Disability refers to ways of framing disability.   The Social Model frames the difficulties encountered by disabled individuals as the result of systemic barriers to participation, not their disability, as opposed to the Medical Model, which treats disability as something inherently negative and in need of curing. As a solution, the Social Model states that society needs to become more accessible through the removal of these barriers to participation.[18]

This policy applies the Social Model of Disability as its framework, as opposed to the Medical Model of Disability. The Social Model frames the difficulties encountered by disabled individuals as the result of systemic social and physical barriers to participation, not their disability, as opposed to the Medical Model, which treats disability as something inherently negative and in need of fixing, curing, or eliminating. As a solution, the Social Model states that society needs to become more accessible through the removal of these barriers to participation and calls for the end of discrimination and oppression.[19]

POLICY RESEARCH

Despite increased commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), in many cases the needs of disabled, chronically ill, neurodiverse, as well as members who have accessibility needs, and those who require mental health support, both in the long term and the short term, are not met. In many organizations, disability inclusion falls short.[20]

This is also seen in the post secondary sphere. Many of these learners face systemic inequities in the form of visible and invisible barriers to—and while—pursuing post-secondary education (PSE), including inadequate funding, physical inaccessibility, inadequate accommodations processes, discrimination and stereotypes, and issues with dispute resolution. In addition, many of these students are also part of historically marginalized groups[21] and face intersecting oppressions.

Disabled students often take less courses, which results in longer periods to complete their education,[22] while some may not be able to complete their degrees.[23] Disabled students "are the least likely to participate in any type of postsecondary program, especially programs at or beyond the bachelor's level. Postsecondary [disabled] graduates . . . also report significantly worse labor market outcomes compared to those without a disability across several metrics."[24]

In addition, "[y}outh with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed or not in school and more likely to be living in poverty than those without disabilities."[25] In Canada, disabled adults are unemployed at a rate of 26% compared to the average of 5%.[26]

Disability can also be incredibly expensive, including when discussing basic needs. According to the Canadian Disability Policy Alliance, the average lifetime cost (disability depending) of disability is between $100,000 and $3 million CAD per person.[27] Despite federal[28] and provincial grants,[29] tuition and cost of living continue to rise.

AUSU also acknowledges the existence of systemic barriers that prevent disabled, chronically ill, neurodiverse learners, as well as those with accessibility needs and those requiring mental health supports, from accessing PSE;[30] these issues remain of importance even when not directly affecting current members. In particular, "[s]ystemic or institutional discrimination consists of attitudes, patterns of behaviour, policies or practices that are part of the social or administrative structures of an institution or sector, and that create or perpetuate a position of relative disadvantage for students with disabilities."[31] For Indigenous learners, these barriers can begin earlier, with "lack of special education and disability supports on First Nations reserves."[32]

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to ensure the full and safe participation of disabled, chronically ill, and neurodiverse learners, as well as those with accessibility needs and those requiring mental health supports, in the post-secondary learning environment.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will ensure that a disability justice lens is applied when advocating for disabled, chronically ill, and neurodiverse learners, as well as those with accessibility needs and those requiring mental health supports, in the post-secondary learning environment. In this policy, this approach is defined as the way in which disability cannot be separated from other parts of an individual's identity, including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious/faith-based beliefs, age, size, and/or class.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to ensure that inclusive and disability-affirming language is used throughout courses, including study guides, reading materials, assignments, and exams.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to include a critical disability studies lens in the development of courses, as well as the development of courses relating to disability.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) for the use of plain language and design principles when designing courses, as well as universal design.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) for increased funding and staffing of Accessibility Services.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) for simplification of the Student Financial Aid processes.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to increase accessibility during ProctorU sessions, especially for students who use assistive technology.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to allow students to opt-in for accessibility needs to be shared directly with tutors and academic experts to relieve student burden, while also protecting privacy concerns and avoiding stigma and situations of ableism.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to implement training for deans, faculty, course coordinators, tutors, and staff in relation to disability and accessibility.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) and the government to not require medical notes for accommodations.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University to provide increased funding for psychoeducational assessments.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to various levels of government and external stakeholders to ensure that the needs of disabled, chronically ill, and neurodiverse learners, as well as those with accessibility needs and those requiring mental health supports, are considered.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to various levels of government and external stakeholders for increased funding for disabled, chronically ill, and neurodiverse learners, as well as those with accessibility needs and those requiring mental health supports, are considered.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University and external organizations that require AUSU event attendance, such as conferences, to ensure the full and safe participation of disabled, chronically ill, and neurodiverse AUSU Members, as well as those with accessibility needs and those requiring mental health supports. This includes, but is not limited to, accessible event spaces and disability-affirming hybrid events.

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