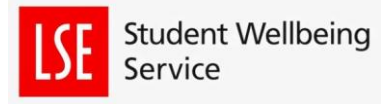


# Ensuring Online Teaching is Accessible to Disabled Students



As LSE shifts to a flexible approach to course delivery it is important to consider how these changes may affect the learning experiences of disabled students. A more widespread use of online teaching will present both opportunities and barriers to our diverse student body, and an understanding of potential issues can inform the design and delivery of online methods to ensure disabled students get the most out of a blended learning experience. Indeed, many of these principles should help improve the learning experience of all LSE students.

This guide will introduce good general practice which will benefit all disabled students, as well as specific guidance for teaching those with sensory impairments who may experience the most significant access barriers to online learning where proper consideration is not given.

## General guidance

### **Provide recordings of all teaching sessions, synchronous or asynchronous, wherever possible.**

Unless there are issues around sensitive data, or anything else which may mean it is inappropriate to record a session, recordings made available to all students will be invaluable. To varying degrees, the majority of disabled students face issues with things such as concentration, fatigue and pain, making it more difficult keep up with sessions in real time.

Having recorded materials which students can work through at their own pace can help combat these issues. Not only will this help students with access issues, but those who encounter inevitable lags in internet connection, technical difficulties etc. will be able to revisit the material.

### **Establish a clear structure and ground rules for online sessions.**

Remember that for many students the experience of online learning will be entirely new. This is particularly important for students with autism or anxiety who may struggle if they do not know what is expected of them, or how the session will work, though it is pertinent to all students.

Establishing ground rules and a clear structure will help students feel more comfortable with navigating this new experience. For example if someone needs to be excused, how should they let you know? If they have a question, how do they ask? Use of the 'chat' facility for this purpose needs to be carefully considered as it can have advantages for those who prefer written communication, but also serve as a distraction or a barrier for some students. It may seem obvious to establish these rules, though a failure to do so can create anxieties and other issues in a setting where norms are not as universal as traditional teaching sessions.

## Visually impaired students

Someone with a visual impairment may have some useable vision, or none at all. This in turn affects the way they will access written material. They may be able to read large print texts and use magnification tools to access digital material, others may use braille and/or a digital screen-reader. In order to provide appropriate support to the student, and to deliver teaching and course materials in an accessible way, it is important to know what they need. If you are unsure about this, do not be afraid to ask them.

**Key considerations:**

- Read out what is being shown on screen and describe any graphs, pictures or other visual media.
- The chat pane may be difficult to access. If any important information is contained in the chat, consider sending this out to all students afterwards.
- If you use pre-recorded video, ensure that information is not conveyed in a purely visual way. If it is, a visually impaired student may need a version which includes audio description, or you may need to describe what is happening as the video is playing.
- Remember that visually impaired students may not be able to read facial expressions or visual cues, and those who can might find this very difficult in an online videocall setting. Carefully consider your communication and make sure to verbalise information.
- When introducing class discussions, consider using a defined structure or speaking order. The challenge of following a discussion, knowing who is talking and when to input can be challenging in any setting for someone with a visual impairment, and is even more so on a videocall.

## Deaf or hard of hearing students

The term “deaf” covers a wide range of hearing loss, along with differing communication needs. Students may wear hearing aids or have a cochlear implant. Some prefer to lipread, and others may use British Sign Language (BSL).

**Key considerations:**

- Use a good quality headset with a microphone to allow your voice to be heard with clarity.
- Ask students to turn off their microphones when not speaking in order to minimise background noise.
- Ensure your face is well-lit and clearly visible. A plain background is best, and remember to not sit with your back to a window.
- Focusing intensely on the speaker within a small area of the screen in order to lipread adds difficulty to following conversations, which can lead to concentration fatigue. Build in regular breaks to help minimise this.
- Utilise the chat pane where appropriate to avoid difficulties with verbal communication.
- Side conversations and people talking over each other can be difficult if not impossible for a deaf student to follow. In seminars and group discussions, ensure that people speak one at a time.
- If a student uses lipreading, other students will need to be aware of this and will need to think about their visibility when speaking also. Consider asking the student beforehand how they would like to broach the subject to ensure others are aware.
- Raising hands before speaking makes things easier to follow by providing a visual indicator of who is speaking.

Opaque, tight-fitting masks muffle your voice and obscure your mouth from view. Where face coverings are required for in-person teaching, the use of a transparent mask or visor may be more appropriate.