Accessibility Town Hall
REPORT
“Together We Are Stronger”

Wednesday March 28th, 2012 (2:00 – 4:00pm)

Robert Sutherland Hall, Room 202
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Section One – **SETTING THE CONTEXT**

The Accessibility Town Hall’s theme - “Together We are Stronger” – was inspired by the current situation at the university; many exceptional staff, students and faculty are contributing towards accessibility at Queen’s, but there is a gap in the area of collaboration. The Town Hall was organized with the intent to address this gap by creating a space where participants could suggest strategies towards creating an inclusive and accessible Queen’s community where collaboration is key.

**Aims of the Town Hall**

- To familiarize people with the AODA and the Queen’s Accessibility Framework
- To identify barriers, and suggest how the university might prevent, identify, and eliminate these barriers going forward
- To brainstorm communication strategies that would aid Queen’s to incorporate advice and recommendations into decisions concerning accessibility
- To affirm the commitment we have to one another to building an inclusive community with a shared purpose

The event was open to all; approximately 50 students, staff, faculty, and Kingston community members were in attendance ready to work together towards creating an Accessibility Strategy that reflects the commitment Queen’s has to meeting the needs of persons with disabilities (PWD) at this institution.
Section Two - PRESENTATION

AODA Overview

- Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005
- Vision of an accessible Ontario by 2025
  - Prevention, identification and removal of barriers
- Queen’s is a large, public sector organization under the Act
- Proactive advancement of accessibility through
  - Customer Service Standards (reg. 429/07)
  - Information and Communications (reg. 191/11)
  - Employment (reg. 191/11)
  - Transportation (reg. 191/11)
  - Built Environment (before the Minister)

- Based on four principles
  - Dignity
  - Independence
  - Integration
  - Equality of Opportunity

AODA & Human Rights

- Ontario Human Rights Commission statement on compliance and enforcement of the AODA:
  - The purpose of the AODA is to address accessibility barriers systemically and avoid case-by-case litigation so individuals with disabilities need only bring a matter before the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal as a last resort

- Recognition of existing legal obligations
  - Nothing in this Act or in the regulations diminishes in any way the legal obligations of the Government of Ontario or of any person or organization with respect to persons with disabilities that are imposed under any other Act or otherwise imposed by law. 2005, c. 11, s. 3.
  - In other words, the AODA is not a replacement for the Human Rights Code, the OHRC takes primacy
Queen’s Accessibility Framework

Rationale

- Comprehensive and strategic framework for meeting the AODA standards that will:
  - Reflect Queen’s commitment to interests and needs of persons with disabilities
  - Provide a mechanism for continual consultation and collaboration with persons with disabilities
  - Provide support to units and departments

Five priority areas have been identified in which to assess compliance and through which to accomplish the outcomes stated above.

1. Customer Service
2. Information & Communications
3. Employment
4. Built Environment
5. Education, Training, & Awareness

1 At the Town Hall, the Framework was briefly described, this Report contains the complete description
**Vice-Principals’ Operations Committee**

Senior leadership commitment is the most important requirement in building the Accessibility Plan to achieve compliance. Senior leaders set the pace, tone, and culture of the organization. To sustain an organization that embraces the principles of dignity, independence, integration, and equality of opportunity, the commitment to these principles must start at the top. Reinforcement of these principles is the responsibility of all levels of management. In addition, there is no reason to believe that the new Regulations will not continue to require that senior administrators sign-off on the Plans. Therefore, the Vice-Principals’ Operations Committee will approve the Queen’s Accessibility Plan.

**Executive Accessibility Steering Committee**

This Committee will comprise of a small team of key university senior management that is charged with the oversight of accessibility compliance in every aspect of university life. The Rector will be on this Committee to represent student interests.

Recommended composition of the committee:

- Provost & VP(Academic)
- VP (Finance & Administration)
- Rector
- Director Human Rights and Equity Offices
- Director Environmental Health and Safety
- Equity Advisor (Secretary)

It is anticipated that this Committee will meet 3 times an academic year and present the Accessibility Plan to the Vice-Principals’ Operations Committee for approval.

**Accessibility Coordination Team**

This Team will consist of the Director of Human Rights and Equity and the Director of Environmental Health and Safety as Co-Chairs, and the Priority Working Group Leads (Customer Service, Information & Communications, Employment, Built Environment, and Education, Training & Awareness). This Team will be responsible for the development of specific elements of the Accessibility Plan. The Equity Advisor will serve as Secretary to the Team.

It is anticipated that this Team will meet as often as necessary to provide a harmonized effort toward the development of a comprehensive and integrated Accessibility Plan.

**Priority Working Groups**

The five Groups will comprise of members with direct responsibility of their area as it pertains to the identified priorities. Critical to the success of these Groups is the involvement and commitment of staff and student administration and faculty. Participation of members of the Queen’s community living with disabilities will be especially encouraged as the university has an obligation to consult persons with disabilities. Each Group will invite persons with disabilities with a particular interest in the Group’s area of priority to consider becoming a member-at-large.
Members will develop and implement plans to assess current accessibility compliance in their respective areas and propose action items to address short and long-term accessibility areas of focus.

As these five priority areas are in various stages of accessibility compliance, and given that the built environment standards are yet to come into force, it is expected that both the workload and composition of membership will alter accordingly. There will be times that the Groups should meet monthly, and times when this is not necessary.

**Consulting Persons with Disabilities and Communication of the Accessibility Plan**

Queen’s has a duty to consult persons with disabilities in preparing our Accessibility Plan, hence the member-at-large position on each of the five Working Groups.

Other disability stakeholder groups outside the Queen’s community should also be given the opportunity to participate; such groups include, but are not limited to:

- Parent of students who have disabilities
- Alumni
- Visitors to campus and/or our websites (including contractors)
- Individuals who receive services from the university, and/or their family members
- Representatives from disability organizations

Methods for wider public consultation and feedback include, but are not limited to:

- Community forums
- Focus groups
- Invitations to community members to attend specific meetings of the Working Groups
- Website presence specific to accessibility initiatives at Queen’s

**Accessibility Coordination**

To ensure consistency and continuity in the preparation and implementation of the Accessibility Plan, responsibility for its coordination and development rests with the Equity Advisor, Equity Office.
Section Three - COLLABORATION

After the presentation individuals were encouraged to congregate - according to personal interest - in one of the five break-out groups addressing each of the working groups under the new Accessibility Framework.

1. Built Environment
2. Employment
3. Information & Communication
4. Education, Awareness & Training
5. Customer Service

With the exception of the Employment Working Group, which had only two members, each group consisted of approximately ten or more persons. The groups were asked to engage in a brainstorming exercise grounded in their personal and lived experience and from the perspective of the focus of the group, (e.g., built environment, customer service, etc.). Three questions were proposed to act as a guideline to focus their discussion.

**QUESTION #1**: Is there a barrier to accessibility from your “lens” and “experience” at Queen’s?

**QUESTION #2**: Do you have a suggestion for preventing, identifying and/or eliminating this barrier?

**QUESTION #3**: How many communication strategies can you suggest towards enabling Queen’s to incorporate advice and recommendations into decisions concerning Accessibility at Queen’s

Reporting Back to Larger Group

A representative from each group reported back to the larger group. Below is an accounting of each of the five discussions based solely on the verbal report back, and what was written on the sticky notes and flip charts.

**BUILT ENVIRONMENT**

**BARRIERS**

*Washrooms* – not all the washrooms on campus have at least one accessible stall. Further, even if there is an accessible stall, sometimes the main doors are not automatic. These kinds of inconsistencies make accessible add-ons (such as a washroom stall) moot.
Accessible Entrances – The existing accessible doors on campus are often on the back/side of buildings, which is neither convenient nor easily visible. This is not only a problem of access but also adds time onto travel for persons with disabilities. This also generally sends the wrong message about accessibility.

Snow Removal – Often the snow is not removed from all sidewalks in a timely manner, making access for persons with mobility issues problematic.

Heritage Buildings – Queen’s campus consists of a great number of old, beautiful, limestone buildings, though aesthetically pleasing can pose issue to access. Many of the doorways and hallways are smaller than more modern buildings, and retrofitting is often costly and not always effective.

Pedestrian versus non-Pedestrian Spaces – Often there are spaces on campus where Physical Plant services or delivery vehicles will invade pedestrian spaces. We need a better format for shared space, and knowledge of alternate routes if accessible travel paths are blocked.

IDENTIFICATION/ PREVENTION /REMOVAL

1. More visible signage: identifying areas that are accessible/inaccessible would help to coordinate a better “travel path” (through multiple buildings/areas on campus) for persons with disabilities (PWD)

2. Use PWD on design team (proactive versus reactive approach): When PwD are included from the beginning of the planning stages, extraneous costs are avoided with re-planning or retrofitting areas with access instead of creating a space based on access.

3. Underground Tunnel System (e.g. Carleton): Inclement weather often poses a risk to PwD and other individuals (traveling with supplies, projects, etc.); other institutions have used underground tunnels as a solution to this.

4. Ramps at multiple entry points (dignified): Accessibility is more than just ramps, but ramps benefit a larger population than simply persons with severe mobility impairment.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES:

Education: the removal of physical barriers aids far more than simply those with mobility impairments: students carrying supplies, persons with strollers (carts, exams!), community members with strollers/rolling backpacks. There is a need to emphasize this.

Notifications: “Accessible entry point” (on websites/doors etc.) Part of “Travel Path,” including notices for blocked/out-of-service accessible entrances (e.g. for scheduled deliveries, non-emergency work being done by Physical Plants Service and out of service elevators and lifts – following actual regulations on timelines/contact information)
EMPLOYMENT

BARRIERS

During the Hiring Process – it is difficult for a PwD to get the necessary accommodations to facilitate the hiring process; there is fear of stigma that gets associated with disclosure.

Privacy – in order to get the correct accommodation after an individual is hired, someone in the company needs to have direct knowledge of their disability, however public knowledge is a violation of their basic rights.

IDENTIFICATION / PREVENTION / REMOVAL

1. Accessible Formats – all interview materials should have a series of optional alternate formats. Therefore, when there is a request by a potential candidate making materials available in multiple formats eliminates the extra costs and “hassle” that is often associated with facilitating an accessible hiring process.

2. Individual Needs – not all persons with a similar “type” of disability will require the same accommodations, therefore it is necessary to ask the individual about the accommodation they require (THIS DOES NOT REQUIRE DISCLOSURE OF SPECIFIC DISABILITIES ON THE PART OF THE INDIVIDUAL)

3. Attitude – proactive measures towards making the hiring process accessible eliminates issues (human rights violations) and enables the best candidate to be selected regardless of “diagnosis.” A culture of openness and flexibility permits ease in facilitating a safe and equitable process.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Notify job candidates – businesses should have a general notification when individuals are brought in for further interviewing that they already have a policy/procedure on accommodation. This demonstrates to all involved that there is a culture of openess about accessibility. This will attract prospective individuals to a job that they may have thought would not appeal to them because of access issues.

Training – all staff require further training in the area of accessibility, especially sensitivity training (regularly) Supervisor and Managers. Through fostering greater awareness throughout an organization the hiring process can easily be established as accessible and equitable (attracting more individuals)

INFORMATION & COMMUNICATIONS

BARRIERS

Website – is currently too cluttered, and full of jargon, this makes it difficult for a number of individuals (both persons with disabilities and those with English as a second language) to navigate the website, this also detracts from the University’s appeal to prospective students/staff/faculty.
**Weak Collaboration** – lack of communication between accessibility services; it is hard to get information on a wide variety of services in one place, often an individual is required to go out of their way to get basic information on accommodation rights.

**IDENTIFICATION/PREVENTION/REMOVAL**

1. **Alternate Formats**: provide information e.g. website in alternate/accessible formats (captioning, large text options, podcasts, video etc.,)
2. **Centralized Information** – if all resources are centralized in one location it makes it easier for students, staff and faculty to access them. Further information can be offered in a variety of ways (accessible formats)

**COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES**

Avoid “front-loading” information – instead of doing a single training module there were suggestions surrounding the creation of small amounts of information spread out over long periods. Some of the formats were:

- e.g. PSAs (e.g. BC’s Safety@Work campaign)
  [http://www2.worksafebc.com/Topics/Violence/Resources-DomesticViolence.asp](http://www2.worksafebc.com/Topics/Violence/Resources-DomesticViolence.asp)

- YouTube Videos:
  1. “How to talk to an employee who might be experiencing domestic violence. (1 min 50 sec):
     LINK: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeJDtv1NtQ&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeJDtv1NtQ&feature=youtu.be)
  2. How to develop a personal safety plan for time at work. (1 min 30 sec)

**EDUCATION, TRAINING & AWARENESS**

**BARRIERS**

Training – training does not normally include mandatory training about accessibility (other than very basic Customer Service Training). There is a necessity to give the relevant training/information to all educators (including graduate students and front line staff). There is little incentive for educators to go out of their way to get extra training (e.g. Mental Health First Aid)

**IDENTIFICATION/PREVENTION/REMOVAL**

1. **Statement of Accommodation** – to be included in all Classroom syllabi, so that students feel comfortable approaching their educator about their needs in the classroom. This also eliminates issues around students lack of knowledge about their rights to accessibility/accommodations

**EXAMPLE: SURP 870**

**ACCOMMODATION: ACCESS and DISABILITY**
Students requiring disability accommodation must make every effort to provide the course director with official documentation from the Health, Counselling and Disability Services at Queen’s ideally at the start of the semester so that accommodation arrangements can be made in an effective, sensitive, and timely manner. For more information on your rights and responsibilities regarding accommodation, please refer to:
http://www.queensu.ca/hcds/ds/students/accommodations.html

2. Disclosure – after students have registered with the DSO, faculty, staff and students must recognize that there is no responsibility on the part of the individual to justify their needs. Therefore further education about disclosure and privacy rights is required

3. Incentives (for completing training) – accessibility training should be reviewed when individuals are being evaluated, those who demonstrate an average or above average commitment to accommodation should be rewarded, whereas those who are below-average are encouraged to pursue further work in that area (Carrot Principle...)

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Just In Time Model – not all needs for accommodation are similar, therefore, the more information is at the disposal of the staff, faculty and other students, the more likely the individual will get the assistance required to succeed. Including emergency preparedness information on who/where one can get in contact with in a situation that they are uncomfortable/unknowledgeable about.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

BARRIERS

The Bad First Experience – often when students/staff/faculty engages in a poor experience they are reluctant to return to ask for help in the future.

IDENTIFICATION/ PREVENTION /REMOVAL

1. Alternate Formats – sign-language, less jargon on website (international students have the same problem e.g. time ticket – versions “appointment” e.g.2 “shopping cart”

2. Smaller Training Modules – such as monthly training tips (imbedded in newsletters etc.) or PSAs. Through creating a consistent stream of information the cultural shift required to create a more inclusive atmosphere is established.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Mastering First Impressions – there is a need to educate frontline staff about fostering a culture of openness. A single bad experience can often deter a student from seeking help, even when they really need it. First Impression management (encourage frontline staff to be more accessible), support those who want/should take an HR course & integrating accessibility into current curriculum
**Tangible Awareness Program** – visual representation of awareness (on the wall, pin/button) E.g. Tangible program like Positive Space indicating you are a provider of accessible customer service. Awareness: button, sign campaigns, which encourage discussion/breaks down fears of self-disclosure

**Section Four – EMERGENT THEMES**

There are a number of themes that emerged from the Town Hall, which reflect a deeper set of issues that require special attention.

**#1 ATTITUDINAL BARRIER**

Each and every small group identified attitude as the barrier that is most likely hardest to overcome. There is a need to create and foster a “Climate of Openness” where accommodation, accessibility and inclusion become a mainstay on Queen’s campus. This can be achieved through a number of initiatives including awareness campaigns (e.g. PSAs or Campaign – Accessibility Benefits ALL), statements of accommodation on syllabi, continuing, constructive conversations (such as the Town hall or the Panel on Accessible Teaching during Inquiry@Queen’s). Through multiple initiatives students will become more comfortable asking for accommodations. If the environment becomes completely accessible, and we respect the different styles of learning of all individuals, the need for special accommodations will eventually dissipate.

**#2 NEED FOR CENTRALIZATION**

There are many approaches to centralization (seen at other institutions including Brock, Carleton and the University of Ottawa). Overall those in attendance at the town hall thought that different departments are working separately on similar issues and there is a lack of communication between them.

Some of the solutions to this is creating collaborative groups (such as Equity Reps within each department) as well as fostering staff, student and faculty collaboration. Further, there was a great amount of discussion around the lack of a central space to access resources related to accommodation/accessibility. Some suggestions included a centralized database/website easily accessible by prospective students and Queen’s students.

**#3 TRAINING vs. EDUCATION**

The current training module for Customer Service is an effective tool in getting individuals up to speed in a short amount of time, however, there is a necessity to go beyond training – “we do not want to be trained, we want to be educated.” Instead of a single module (aforementioned) there is a need for consistent information about “good accessibility” and “creating an accessible environment” to remind those in the community of day-to-day tasks that can be made more accessible.
#4 FEEDBACK MECHANISM
There is currently no formalized feedback system to report issues of general inaccessibility from built environment to discriminatory actions towards persons with disabilities.

#5 ORIENTATION
Accessibility needs to be emphasized from the moment individuals become part of the Queen’s Community. This includes orientation for new faculty and staff, as well as making students aware during Frosh Week of the needs of persons with disabilities and the AODA. Further, this orientation process should be re-affirmed each year through departmental channels, within TA and RA training to maintain salience.

Section Five - OTHER QUESTIONS THAT AROSE
1. Who is responsible for Accessibility? (where does it start and end?)
2. Where can you find information about Accessible Housing for students?
3. Queen’s was worst for accommodating a deaf student for touring (when compared to Carleton and Ottawa). How can we learn from other’s successes?
4. What is the Policy/Mandate of Adaptive technology Lab (who funds, where they can get more money?)
5. Where is the feedback system (especially built environment?)?
6. What about accessible issues for students whose first language is not English?
7. What about accessible issues for individuals who identify as trans-gendered?

Section Six – NEXT STEPS
- Participants interested in continuing assisting the university in reaching its accessibility goals were asked to provide their contact information
- Participants were encouraged to go back to their workplaces and talk about incorporating accessibility into their office’s day-to-day operations
- The job of the Equity Office is to analyze the rich information that arose from the Town Hall, this Report being one example
- It is expected that the working groups under the Accessibility Framework will be operational soon
- The Equity Office, in partnership with Queen’s Communications, is committed to developing a robust communication strategy in regards to accessibility to ensure there are multiple avenues for the Queen’s and broader community to remained informed, consulted, and collaborated with
Section Seven – CONCLUDING REMARKS FROM THE EQUITY OFFICE

The Equity Office would like to thank the students, staff, faculty, and members of the broader community for participating in the Town Hall. We hope that you left recommitted to a sense of purpose around building an inclusive community with a shared purpose and responsibility in regards to accessibility for all. It is our intent to maintain an ongoing conversation on campus through more town hall meetings of the same nature and other additional communication strategies as well. Our goal is to keep the community informed, and to provide on-going opportunities for consultation and collaboration.

Being a centre of academic excellence requires the fullest participation of the best and the brightest, unimpeded by arbitrary barriers. The challenge is to ensure that, in addition to our exceptional academic programs, we are able to provide the kinds of support which will allow our students, staff, and faculty to obtain the greatest educational, employment, living, and recreational opportunities possible. This sentiment holds equally true for members of the broader community that access our campus and services.

Our continued efforts, combined with a strategic Accessibility Framework, will aid the university in achieving access, equity, and meaningful inclusion for individuals living with disabilities. The engagement demonstrated at the Town Hall is an example of socially responsible “corporate” practice that moves beyond simply complying with the AODA and its standards. Together we are stronger.