

University Policy for Student Digital Equity



Summary			
<p>The blended teaching approach the University is adopting for the 2020-21 academic year means that a significant amount of students' total study time will be spent online. This has a number of potential implications relating to equity of access to learning, in the areas of, access to suitable devices and connectivity, access to study environments and library collections, accessibility of online and blended learning to students with disabilities or any additional needs.</p> <p>The University is committed to ensuring that all students have equitable access to digital teaching, learning and assessment and has therefore identified mechanisms to address the challenges arising which are outlined in this Policy. In particular, financial support is available to students who may find it challenging to pay for IT equipment.</p>			
Scope - This document applies to:			
This policy applies to students at all levels of study – Foundation, UG, PGT and PGR.			
Applies to academic year:	2020/21		
Document Control			
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Division	Bristol Institute for Learning and Teaching		
Lead contact	Sarah Davies		
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Related documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Rules and Regulations (which includes the Staying Safe Online guidelines) 		
Keywords	Digital, equity		

Student digital equity policy

The blended teaching approach the University is adopting for the 2020-21 academic year means that a significant amount of students' total study time will be spent online. This has a number of potential implications relating to equity of access to learning, predominantly in the areas of:

- Access to suitable devices and connectivity
- Access to study environments and library collections
- Accessibility of online and blended learning to students with disabilities or any additional needs.

The University is committed to ensuring that all students have equitable access to digital teaching, learning and assessment, we have therefore identified mechanisms to address the challenges relating to the areas identified above.

Access to suitable devices and connectivity

Undergraduate and postgraduate taught students

No student should be impeded from accessing their teaching because they cannot afford a suitable device or reliable connectivity. Incoming students in receipt of funding awards will be made aware that, if they do not already have a suitable device, financial help is available to cover the cost of a laptop and connectivity from the Student Funding Office. Existing students may also need such help if their devices are broken, too old, or no longer accessible to them in their study location. More information is available at: <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/students/your-studies/study-2020/your-course/it/>

For both new and continuing students, those in receipt of means-tested or targeted awards will not need to demonstrate further financial hardship in order to access help. Other students would need to demonstrate financial need in line with normal funding office processes.

Postgraduate research students

Postgraduate research students are regarded as university staff with respect to IT provision, and are entitled to request hardware, peripherals and access to software in line with the provisions put in place to support staff during the 2020-21 academic year. If PGR students are unable to meet the cost of connectivity, support is available through the Student Funding Office – details via the link above.

Access issues which cannot be directly resolved

Where students are unable to come to Bristol to study, and are in a location with no broadband or mobile connectivity signal, there is likely to be nothing the University can do to improve their connectivity. For this reason it is important for unit teams to provide low-bandwidth and/or downloadable options where possible, though such options may not always be available for technical or legal reasons. Specific mitigations may be needed for these students to enable them to participate in assessment. To facilitate this, students who are in this situation should notify their school.

Access to study spaces and library collections

Access to libraries and study spaces will be significantly constrained due to social distancing measures and will be managed safely within Covid alert levels at this time.

Students unable to come to Bristol to study who are therefore studying at a distance may not have access to suitable study environments, and course teams will need to bear this in mind, particularly for assessments.

Key course texts will be made available online to the extent possible within budgets and publishing availability through resource lists to ensure ease and equity of access. Additional ebooks will be made available based on student demand to support wider study, projects and research interests. Library support for specific needs will continue to provide alternative formats and ensure accessibility of course materials.

Accessibility of online and blended learning to disabled students

The greater use of online teaching and digital resources presents a range of potential challenges as well as benefits to our disabled students; the [definition of disability](#) is wider than is commonly understood and may include conditions many might not consider a disability. The University aims to make its teaching accessible to all students in two main ways: by providing accessible websites and resources in anticipation of need, and by making reasonable adjustments where specific needs are identified.

Anticipatory provision of accessible teaching and online resources

The University has a legal requirement that its online websites and materials must meet approved accessibility standards (a requirement that applies to existing as well as new sites and material from September 2020). Guidance on producing accessible teaching and resources is available from the Digital Education Office, and the new Blackboard templates and core standards will help all staff produce accessible courses. The Blackboard Ally tool helps to check accessibility and provides materials in alternative formats.

Tailored support for disabled students

Disabled students may be entitled to support with purchasing any assistive hardware or software which is required for a disability-related need. They can request reasonable adjustments to teaching and assessment to ensure that disabled students can fully participate in education and other benefits, facilities and services provided for all students. The Library can also make learning resources available in alternative formats.

Students can contact [Disability Services](#) or their [School Disability Coordinator](#) for further information.

Student digital capabilities

In order to thrive in a blended learning environment, students need capabilities in digital learning, communication, participation, creation, problem solving and innovation, and strong information and data literacies.

To support all students in developing the skills and confidence they need to engage effectively with the online aspects of their teaching and study from the start of term, we are offering a digital induction in the week before formal teaching starts. This includes familiarisation with the types of activity and tools they are likely to come across in their teaching, as well as with the collaborative participation and/or interaction with peer learning which will help them thrive in blended environments. This will be available as a resource for all students to refer to throughout the teaching year.

The development of digital skills in using discipline-specific software will be embedded into the relevant academic units.

Study skills support will be provided to students in a range of flexible online and blended formats.

Equitable and respectful online behaviours

Interactions online often feel different to participants from face to face/in person interactions, and without visual and body language cues, there is more potential for misunderstanding. Students must behave in accordance with the [Staying Safe Online Guidelines within the Rules and Regulations for Students](#), and should report any behaviour which they feel breaches the Code.

Staff and students have a responsibility to work together to ensure that online sessions, whether live or asynchronous, are inclusive and that all students are encouraged to contribute equitably and their contributions are respected. Training for staff on the design of online learning includes consideration of inclusion in online teaching, and awareness and challenging of any unconscious biases. The digital induction will support students in developing constructive, respectful and inclusive online behaviours.

Assessment

It is particularly important to ensure that students have equity in the preparation, creation and submission of assessed work. All of the areas above may impact on digital equity in assessment: including lack of a suitable laptop or connectivity, accessibility issues or need for reasonable adjustments and alternative exam arrangements, and lack of familiarity with the digital environment and tools used in the assessment.

Schools should seek to mitigate the risk of inequity as far as possible, liaising with IT Services, Digital Education Office, and Disability Services as appropriate. Students who are concerned that they may be disadvantaged by any assessment should contact their school in the first instance to make them aware of their circumstances.

Digital wellbeing

Increased use of technologies and digital services can have an impact – both positive and negative – on people’s mental, physical, social and emotional health. The blended model which the University has adopted is designed to support staff-student and student-student interaction and engagement, in order to mitigate the risk of students feeling isolated. Digital resources to support wellbeing are being provided. A consideration of digital wellbeing will be included in the digital induction, to support students to develop awareness of, and manage, the positive and negative impacts of technology on their own wellbeing. All programmes/schools will also be encouraged to agree ground rules with students for positive and inclusive digital participation at the start of formal teaching.

The University will carry out consultation and co-design activities with students during the first teaching block of 2020-21 to understand the blended student experience, identify issues which are impacting on students, and co-design solutions.