

University Policy for Student Digital Equity



Summary			
<p>For the 2022-23 academic year, on most campus-based courses the University is offering an in-person teaching approach enhanced with the best of blended learning. This means that all students will need to spend time online, working through structured learning activities and course materials, and carrying out independent reading and research. Many will also need to engage in online taught sessions. 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, and accessibility of online sessions and materials 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.</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:	2022/23		
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Related documents	Student Rules and Regulations (which include the Staying Safe Online Guidelines)		
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- Access to suitable devices and connectivity
- Access to study environments and library collections
- Accessibility of online sessions and materials 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 our [Digital Support Fund](#). Existing students may also need such help if their devices are broken or too old to run the programmes they need for their study and assessment.

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.

Students who are temporarily without a suitable laptop may be able to obtain a loan laptop from IT Services for a period of up to one month.

Postgraduate research students

Postgraduate research students on campus are provided with a laptop (or desktop if there is specific need) plus access to other hardware, peripherals and software. If PGR students are unable to meet the cost of connectivity, support is available through the Digital Support Fund. PGR students are not eligible for home equipment provision.

Anticipating connectivity challenges

For students studying outside of University-managed accommodation and University buildings, there is little the University can do to improve students' connectivity: 63% of Bristol students reported experiencing some kind of connectivity issue in a survey carried out in November-December 2020. For this reason it is important for unit teams to provide low-bandwidth and/or downloadable options

where possible, give alternatives to live participation in high-bandwidth sessions (eg by providing recordings), and give flexibility about when study or participation in online activities needs to occur, to enable students to work around any connectivity issues.

Access to study spaces and library collections

Access to libraries and study spaces may be constrained due to the need to manage occupancy levels to reduce the risk of Covid transmission. A proportion of study spaces will be bookable, with others available on a drop-in basis, and the balance between these will be flexed according to the time of year and associated study space needs.

Key course texts and additional ebooks to support wider study, projects and research interests will be made available online to the extent possible within budgets and publishing availability through resource lists (where applicable) to ensure ease and equity of access. 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, which includes provision of captions on recorded audio and video material. Key tools and services should include accessibility statements, outlining the level of web accessibility that tool aims to achieve. Guidance on producing accessible teaching and resources is available from the Digital Education Office, and the Blackboard templates and core standards will help all staff produce accessible courses. Automatically generated captions are added by default on audio and video materials in Replay. The Blackboard Ally tool helps to check accessibility of resources, provides tips for authors to improve 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. Disabled students who require captions should request hand captioning through Disability Services. 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 Digitally Ready, a digital induction, 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. Returning students will also have access to a resource to help them refresh and upskill on the tools which they will need for engaging with teaching, study and collaboration.

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](#) and should report any behaviour which they feel breaches the guidelines.

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. Guidance is available on good practice in the design and management of digital exams. It is important to ensure that students have opportunities to practice and check that assessment formats work for them prior to a summative assessment. For centrally managed exams these are built into the Blackboard packages. Spaces suitable for taking online exams will be provided on-campus at appropriate points of the academic year. 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 Digitally Ready, 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 continue to carry out consultation and co-design activities with students to understand the student digital experience, identify issues which are impacting on students, and co-design solutions.