



Catherine Fichten, Theme Leader

Accessibility and Students with Disabilities

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The number of students with disabilities is increasing in most postsecondary institutions; current estimates suggest 10 -11 % of students are affected by some form of disability. Moreover, half to two-thirds of students affected by a form of disability —physical disability, learning disability, traumatic brain injury, temporary disability, etc.— remain unidentified.

The overall goal of the Accessibility and Students with Disabilities theme group is to obtain a better understanding of the conditions that affect the inclusion of individuals with various disabilities in order to ensure the accessibility of college and university education. This is done by determining best practices and raising the issue of universal instructional design as a way to prepare instructional materials for Canadian postsecondary education. A large part of this undertaking is to widely communicate the fact that people with disabilities can effectively use computers and new information technologies, and that such technologies, when appropriately designed, can begin to create more equitable learning conditions. Additionally, greater attention to universal accessibility accommodations in educational materials and practices will engender a general improvement in the quality of teaching activities, better facilitating education for all learners. In other words, this is not a restricted research focus: whatever works for students with disabilities also works for everyone else to improve the accessibility of learning practices.

Through the use of questionnaires, focus groups, and structured interviews, researchers in this theme area developing appropriate testing instruments, collect and analyze user data, and disseminate their research findings to the community of disability service providers, policy-makers, instructors, and other end-users.

Another significant aspect of this theme group's objective is to increasingly sensitize the researchers of the CSLP/CEAP to the importance of ensuring that accessibility issues are represented in their various research efforts; of the abilities of learners with disabilities, as well as the tools and accommodations that can assist them; and to highlight the importance of including participants with disabilities in their research, both as research assistants and as subjects.

The past year saw intensive research and progress on three main projects dealing with student disabilities and accessibility to postsecondary education.

The first, a recently completed PAREA-funded investigation of students with disabilities at Dawson College, considered facilitators of and obstacles to learning through the use of a questionnaire developed in variously accessible alternate formats. A significant secondary objective of this short study was to develop and test the psychometric properties of the questionnaire itself in order to assure reliability and internal consistency.

Once refined, this measurement tool was then re-applied in a second large scale study funded by the FQRSC réussite scolaire and its partners. Building on the PAREA findings, this research looked at the same variables, but applied the questionnaire across the entire CEGEP network to access a broader, bilingual sample of CEGEP students and graduates both with and without disabilities in order to ascertain the validity of the testing tool. The aim is CEGEP-wide deployment of the tool as an ongoing means to assess obstacles and facilitators, and collect crucial postsecondary educational data for dissemination to practitioners in charge of institutional evaluation, as well as to front-line disability service providers. This "knowledge mobilization" will inform policy formation, teaching practices, and the evaluation of current and future services.

Having recently completed two SSHRC research grants —one focused on adaptive and assistive technologies for postsecondary learners with disabilities, the other on policy recommendations concerning future research on people with disabilities— the third major research initiative pursued by the theme group this year focuses on issues related to the accessibility of e-learning in colleges and universities across Canada. Theme researchers, having now completed the first of three years in this SSHRC (INE) funded study have approached Key Informants (subject matter experts) in order to develop a bilingual, alternate format questionnaire that will be further developed this year. The third year of this study will see the application of this questionnaire in order to disseminate and help guide the development of best practices for five identified user groups: postsecondary students with disabilities, postsecondary disability service providers, postsecondary professors, postsecondary e-learning specialists, and educational publishers and e-vendors.

The college and university focus of this theme offers clear collaborative connections for **Catherine Fichten** and **Rhonda Amsel** to the work of the Postsecondary Education theme group. In order to better fulfill their role as sensitizers for the research efforts of the other theme groups, members of the Accessibility and Students with Disabilities theme area have also been busy participating this past year in CSLP/CEAP theme meetings and retreats, and will be presenting to the Second Language Proficiency, Critical Thinking, and Numeracy, Scientific Reasoning and Inquiry themes in the near future, with reciprocated lab visits also being planned at Dawson College. **Richard Schmid** will be exploring data on university faculty perceptions of technology and learners with disabilities in the coming year.

The coming year will see the continuation of several studies and collaborative efforts, as well as the initiation of an exciting new research collaboration with the University of Toronto CulturAll Network fund by Heritage Canada to develop hardware and software to aid in the accessible delivery of bilingual cultural content.