

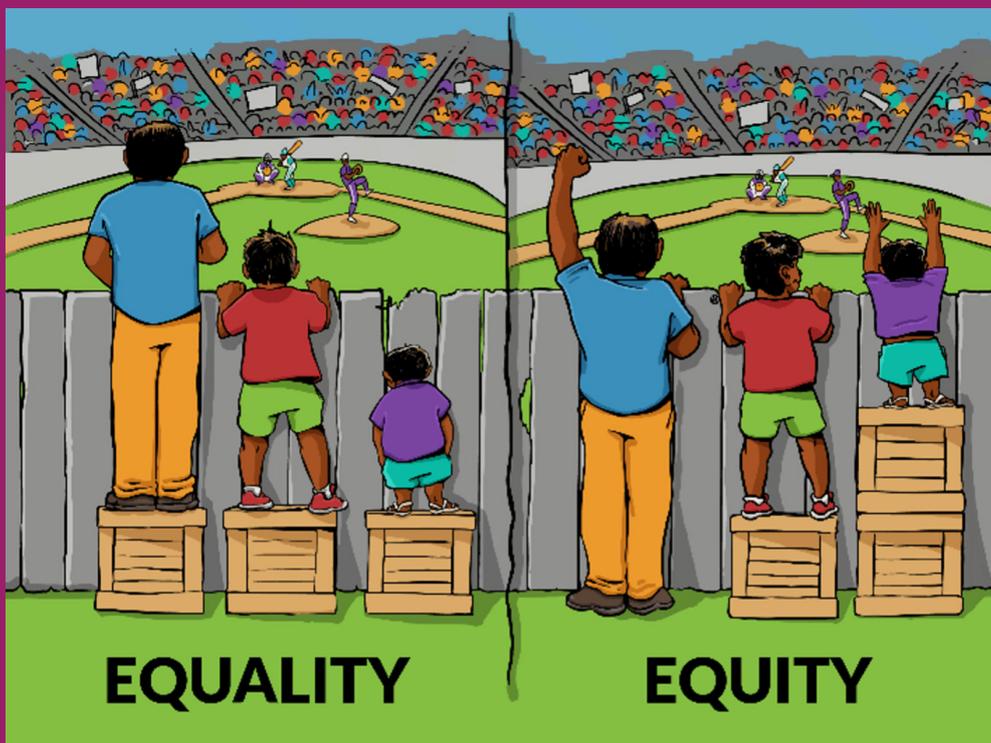
# Student Rep Guide to Equity in Learning and Teaching



As a result of the pandemic, significant changes to learning and teaching have taken place across Scotland's universities and colleges. In some cases, the move to digital has made elements of the student experience more inclusive, and these are changes which institutions may wish to keep as we move out of the pandemic. In other cases, some changes may have made the learning experience less equitable for certain groups and demographics of students.

As we progress through and out of the pandemic, institutions are beginning to make longer-term decisions about their future delivery. It is crucial that students are part of these discussions, and that institutions recognise the impact that decisions have on the equity of learning and teaching.

What do we mean by equity? To understand the term, you may find it helpful to take a look at the cartoon below.



Interaction Institute for Social Change | Artist: Angus Maguire. See [interactioninstitute.org](http://interactioninstitute.org) and [madewithangus.com](http://madewithangus.com) for more information.

In this cartoon, equality means treating everyone the same (in this case, giving everyone the same size box to see over the fence). Equity, which we're focusing on in this guide, means giving people resources based on what they need for their particular circumstances (in the case of the cartoon, giving different sized boxes to different heights). When we're thinking about how to make learning and teaching more equitable, we're therefore thinking about how to make outcomes for students as fair as possible. In some cases, this may mean recognising that 'one size does not fit all' and that different students may require different types of teaching and support that best fits their needs and circumstances.

This guide will consider some of the key topics you may discuss this year in the context of equity in learning and teaching. In your role as a student rep this year, you have an important opportunity to work in partnership with the institution, to identify where issues of equity exist within learning and teaching, and to work together on solutions. This guide is designed to act as a useful foundation and starting point for these conversations.

# Asynchronous and synchronous teaching

Synchronous teaching is teaching which students access at the same time as one another and that the teacher delivers 'live' e.g. a scheduled lecture at 2pm on a Tuesday. Asynchronous teaching is teaching that students can access in their own time, for example, a lecture that is pre-recorded and students able to watch at a time of their choosing during the week. Other examples of asynchronous learning and teaching are class conversations via online discussion boards and independent research projects.

Asynchronous teaching has several equitable benefits. It gives students greater flexibility and allows them to schedule their learning around other commitments such as part-time jobs and caring responsibilities. Lecture recordings allow students to rewind and listen to content again to improve their understanding of the topic. This type of engagement can have particular benefits for students who do not have English as a first language and want to rewatch content to clarify meaning. Not having to attend a lecture at a specific time may be a particular advantage to students whose capacity to engage with their studies may fluctuate or not align with a traditional schedule. It also means that any student who is unwell or has a sudden unexpected emergency won't miss the class.

There are also benefits to synchronous delivery of teaching. When students all attend at the same time, this gives more opportunity to create a sense of community between students, and for them to make friends with one another. This in turn may have a positive impact on students' wellbeing. Synchronous sessions give greater opportunity for live, interactive activities such as group discussions and may allow for more dynamic and energetic interactions than on online discussion boards. If students are unsure of anything in the course content, they can ask staff or their student peers questions and get an immediate response, which may alleviate some of the anxiety students may feel when they learn asynchronously and can't check in with others for reassurance or clarification. Students may also feel that they are more active partners in the learning and teaching, rather than passive consumers of content.



# Digital Exclusion

The move to online learning highlighted that some students in Scotland did not have access to the equipment and resources needed to engage effectively with their studies, including lack of access to devices such as laptops and to an effective internet connection. During the pandemic, many institutions were able to provide this equipment to students by donating laptops or providing equipment that improved the quality of internet connectivity. Nevertheless, as new students join the institution each year digital exclusion remains a barrier.



Alongside unequal access to equipment, students also have different levels of digital literacy. In the context of learning and teaching, being digitally literate may include being able to confidently use devices and tools such as computers and the internet; interact with the virtual learning environment; and use subject-specific software. Particularly as institutions increasingly introduce new technology, some students may need additional support to ensure they can use these systems and digital tools effectively. Institutions therefore need to ensure not just that they are providing the equipment and software required to study online, but also the support and training to engage with this successfully. There may be specific groups of students that need additional support with accessing technologies, such as some mature students and adult returners to education who may not have used digital tools and equipment in the learning and teaching space before.

# Online Teaching

Institutions continue to make decisions about whether their teaching will be delivered online, in-person, or through a combination of both. There are many variables institutions may want to consider when making these decisions, including the types of courses they offer and feedback from current staff and students on what they would like the approach to teaching delivery to be going forward.

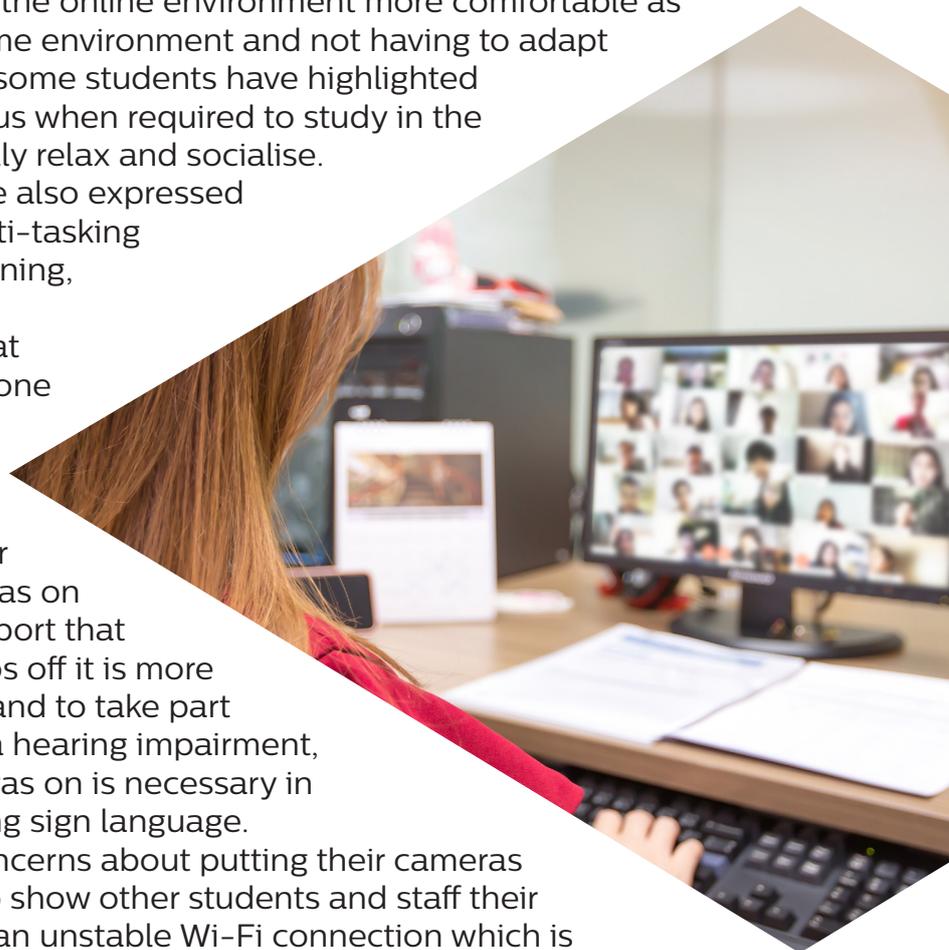
When classes are delivered online, equitable benefits for students include not having to pay for travel to campus and saving on time commuting to and from home. This can be particularly beneficial for students who live in remote and rural locations whose journey to campus may be lengthy and involve multiple modes of transport. Online delivery can also make it easier for students with parental and/or caring responsibilities to access class.

There are also elements of online teaching that can lead to inequity. Not all students have access to a suitable space to study at home and, as discussed above, some may not have access to the appropriate equipment or a wi-fi connection. In addition, some types of teaching may be more suited to an in-person setting, such as more practical courses where students need to practise and demonstrate skills using specialist equipment, or where they need to access a specific teaching space such as a lab or studio.

Some neurodiverse students find the online environment more comfortable as they appreciate being in their home environment and not having to adapt to an unfamiliar space. However, some students have highlighted challenges with being able to focus when required to study in the same place that they would usually relax and socialise.

Some neurodiverse students have also expressed difficulties in undertaking the multi-tasking sometimes required in online learning, such as focusing on the teacher, following conversations in the chat box, and managing their microphone and video in order to contribute orally.

One key discussion point during the pandemic was whether students should keep their cameras on during lessons. Some students report that when classmates have their videos off it is more challenging to get to know them and to take part in group work. For students with a hearing impairment, other students having their cameras on is necessary in order to lipread or see others using sign language. However, some students have concerns about putting their cameras on – perhaps they do not want to show other students and staff their home environment, or they have an unstable Wi-Fi connection which is made worse by sharing their video.



# Hybrid and Blended Learning

Some institutions use the terms ‘blended learning’ and ‘hybrid learning’ interchangeably, and almost all will have their own institutional definitions, which you should familiarise yourself with as a student rep. Both terms involve delivery of a combination of in-person and online teaching, but in this guide, we use:

- **blended learning** to refer to courses which have both online and in-person elements e.g. a course which comprises two online lectures and one in-person tutorial a week.
- **hybrid learning** to refer to a class where students can join in-person or online i.e. some students are in the classroom while other students are joining remotely.

Decisions around which parts of a blended course should be delivered in-person or online are often made based on the types of teaching methods which will be used. The institution may decide, for example, that less interactive formats of teaching, such as lectures, work best online, whereas more practical elements of the course such as learning a skill or taking part in a group discussion may be best in-person. Some see this approach as giving students ‘the best of both worlds’. However, one challenge with blended learning comes when students have a mix of in-person and online classes on the same day. Are there spaces on campus where they can join online classes, such as bookable rooms in the library? If not, then the timetable needs to allow enough time for the student to travel back to their home and they may feel their days become unnecessarily complicated as a result. One option for institutions may be to attempt to schedule only in-person or online classes on any given day for a particular student, so they are not running back and forth.

Institutions may also choose to set up ‘hybrid’ teaching spaces, which simultaneously deliver teaching to some students in-person and others online. The benefit of this approach is that it allows students to choose the mode of delivery that most suits their own individual circumstances. It also gives some flexibility to students if their situation changes unexpectedly, for example, if childcare suddenly falls through and a student parent is no longer able to make it to campus. The challenges of hybrid teaching include the difficulty of creating a ‘whole-class’ community when students are joining through different mediums. There is also sometimes a risk with hybrid delivery that both sets of students feel that they are not getting a full experience, as the teacher has to accommodate the needs of both groups at the same time. However, well-designed hybrid teaching, which considers the whole group dynamic and builds in activities that work for all students regardless of their mode of engagement, can alleviate many of these challenges.



# Online and In-Person Assessments

During the pandemic, the majority of assessments in universities and colleges moved online. There have been many examples of innovative alternatives to practical assessments. Art schools moved final-year degree shows online; film students were asked to submit scripts, storyboards and commentaries where filming could not take place; and electrical engineers undertook programming tasks that could be completed online.

Undertaking assessments online means that students do not have to travel to campus, saving money and time. This may be particularly beneficial where a student needs to retake an assessment over the summer and is already back at home, especially when the student lives abroad and a return to campus would be significantly costly. Some students may find taking assessments online in the familiar space of their own homes less anxiety-inducing than taking an exam in a more formalised institutional space. Students who have a disability may prefer to take assessments in a space they have configured for their own needs, which is already comfortable, accessible and designed specifically for them.

However, challenges of equity are also present in the online space. In an in-person exam hall, the conditions can be kept standardised and the exam conditions are therefore kept consistent between students. This is not always the case when students are taking exams from home – some will not have access to a quiet, private space to take the exam; some will have parental and/or caring responsibilities that may lead to disruptions during a timed assessment; and others will have an unstable internet connection. Institutions continue to consider ways to mitigate these challenges and design assessments which can alleviate these disparities as much as possible. One option, for example, could be for institutions to have bookable spaces on campus, so that students without a suitable place to complete an online exam could choose to undertake it in an institutional space.

The pandemic has prompted students and institutions to ask wider questions about the nature of assessments. Do exams always have to be timed? Is a closed-book exam always necessary? Can students be offered a choice of diverse assessment methods and be given the opportunity to select the approach they feel will best suit their needs and allow them to demonstrate their learning most effectively?



# Online and In-Person Guidance and Support

Many institutions have offered online options for guidance and support for several years, but unsurprisingly this offering has developed over the course of the pandemic. Examples of support and guidance that may be offered in an online format include careers advice, mental health support such as counselling, and academic support, including online meetings with a personal tutor/academic advisor or equivalent. Many students' associations also offer alternative options to access their advice hubs on campus, such as the opportunity to speak to an advisor on the phone, via email or through an online meeting.

Many of the equitable benefits highlighted in the rest of this document also apply to accessing support and guidance, such as removing the need to travel and therefore saving time and money. Some students also report that online systems make it easier to book an appointment for a specific time that works for them, rather than accessing support through drop-in systems, which may involve waiting for a long time to be seen. For some students, accessing support online, rather than having to travel, makes them feel less anxious and more comfortable to discuss the issues for which they need support.

However, some students may find accessing certain types of support online challenging. For example, if a student wants to speak about a sensitive subject during a counselling session which they wish to keep confidential, this may not be possible if they live in a house share with family or friends. Some students may be accessing support which is related to their personal circumstances, but which they have not shared with those in their household, such as an LGBT+ student who has not come out to their family.



# What can you do as student reps?

The student body is diverse, and a particular decision may make the learning experience more accessible for one student while the very same decision makes it more challenging for another. As a student rep, you have a key role in ensuring that these diverse student voices are heard, so be sure to capture all experiences, even if they do not match your own. You should share with the institution examples of where learning and teaching approaches are affecting a specific cohort of students (positively or negatively).

As we move through and out of the pandemic, institutions have significant decisions to make about the future of learning and teaching. As student reps, you have a key role to play in these discussions. As the commentary above highlights, these decisions will have a significant impact on the equity of students' learning experiences and institutions should be using the evidence that you bring to them directly from the student body to inform their choices.

