Multi-Year Accessibility PLAN 2023–2025

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

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MESSAGE
from the Provost

In 2018, we embarked on a journey to assess our status in meeting accessibility standards and legislation. We developed a plan to bring our campus and services to a level that meets the needs of the disability community and honours the spirit of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). We embraced self-discovery and learned about how our systems, processes, and policies can unintentionally perpetuate historical barriers if we do not purposefully design accessible, user-friendly experiences for everyone.

Five years later, we are more informed, more prepared, and more determined than ever to do better. We recognize the importance of creating operational changes and supporting grassroots initiatives, and have been diligently working on a strategy to realize our accessibility goals. Now I am pleased to share this strategy with you in the University of Waterloo's second Multi-Year Accessibility Plan 2023–2025.

The success of this plan relies on the support and commitment of our senior leaders to help strengthen a culture of inclusion and belonging in our community. Accessibility is not a separate venture for the University but rather a core focus, and we will work to integrate universal design into all aspects of the University's operations.

Through this report, I am excited to share both our progress over the past year and our vision for a renewed approach to accessibility in the form of a bridge plan, covering January 2023 through to December 2025. This three-year plan will guide us as we build capacity to create an environment that will support the strength of our diversity and facilitate the success of everyone in our community. As we continue this foundational work, our structures, polices, and processes will evolve to support accessibility. I invite you to join us in helping create an inclusive and accessible University of Waterloo.

Sincerely,

JAMES W.E. RUSH
VICE-PRESIDENT, ACADEMIC AND PROVOST
UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

ABOUT
this Report

This report, prepared by Waterloo's Disability Inclusion team, has two main objectives: to summarize the progress made in 2022 and to present a three-year bridge plan for 2023-2025. Our summary will cover the progress on projects and initiatives identified in the 2018-2022 Multi-Year Accessibility Plan (MYAP), Waterloo's first MYAP, including the remaining five of seven theme areas identified in the original report.

In the remainder of this report we will provide a rationale and description for the new three-year bridge plan. With our renewed approach on accessibility as a core focus for the University, including considerations of the AODA's Postsecondary Education Standard recommendations on disability, we will now align the release of the MYAP and relative Annual Status Reports with the Fall academic term.

For questions about this report, please contact the Disability Inclusion team at aoda@uwaterloo.ca.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The University of Waterloo acknowledges that much of our work takes place on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabeg and Haudenosaunee peoples. Our main campus is situated on the Haldimand Tract, the land granted to the Six Nations that includes six miles on each side of the Grand River. Our active work toward reconciliation takes place across our campuses through research, learning, teaching, and community building, and is co-ordinated within our Office of Indigenous Relations.

Summary of Progress

Waterloo utilizes the requirements outlined within the AODA and its standards to measure progress. The five remaining themes from the MYAP and their respective initiatives are included in this report. A status indicator summarizes the qualitative or quantitative standing of the initiative. The progress indicator further identifies whether the current standing of the initiative is meeting the pre-determined timelines for implementation.
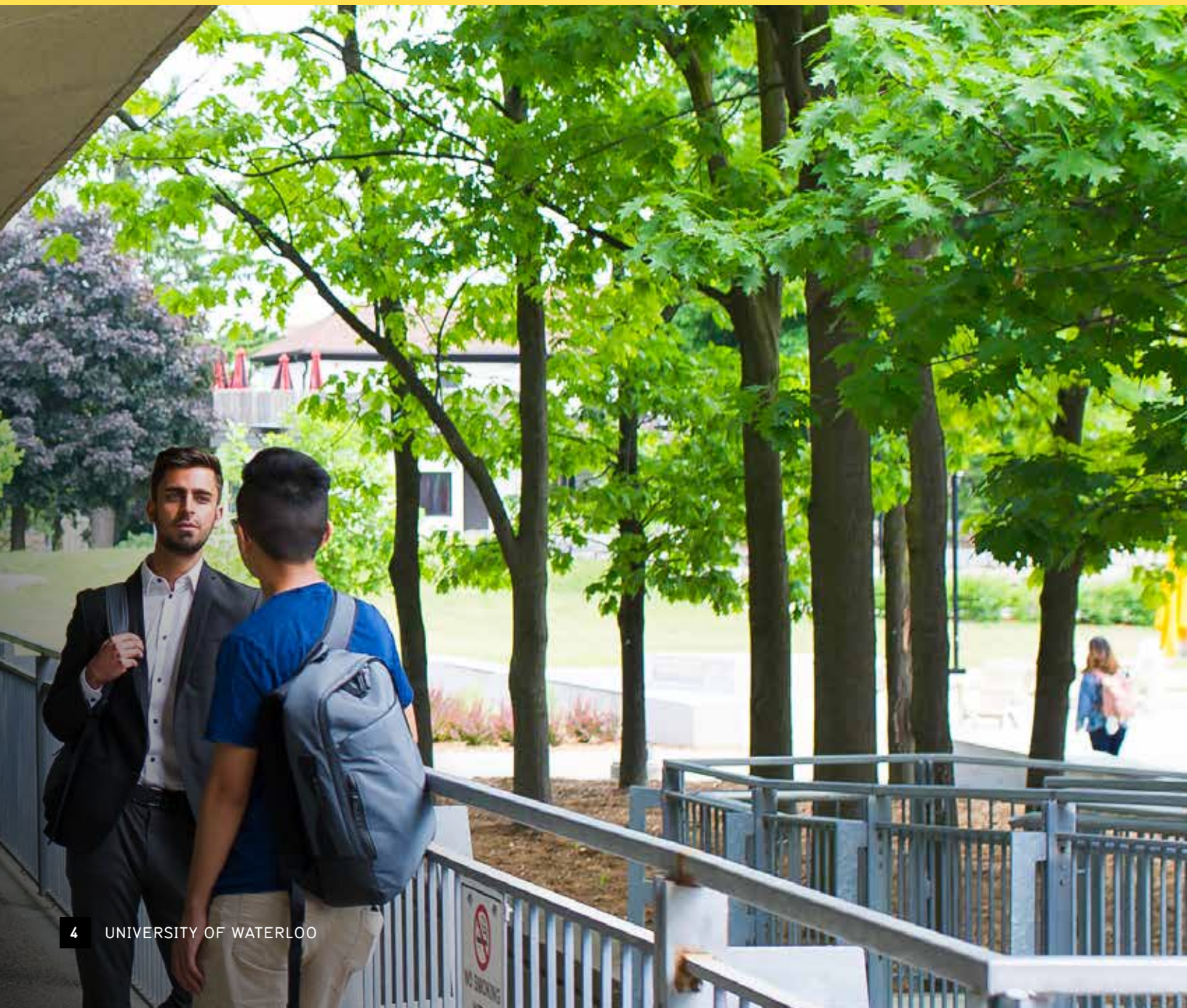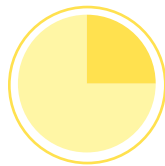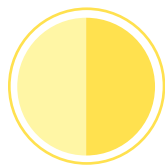
STATUS OVERVIEW

Status Indicator

Not Started

Started

Somewhat Complete

Mostly Complete

Completed

MYAP Themes

Policies and Procedures

Information and Communication

Design of Public Spaces

Employment

Education

Progress indicator: Complete | on track | behind schedule | at risk

Section A

Policies and Procedures

MYAP 2018-2022 set out commitments related to specific policies and procedures, including the following policy regarding employment accommodations.

1. Waterloo is committed to the development of a specific policy concerning accessibility for Waterloo employees.

A1. Policy 57 – Employment Accommodations

Status: mostly complete
Progress: behind schedule

Over the last five years, Waterloo has made considerable progress on developing Policy 57 – Employee Accommodations. Policy 57 will formally recognize Waterloo's duty to accommodate its employees. It is important to have a collegial and consultative approach in developing this policy, as highlighted in our Memorandums of Agreement and University of Waterloo Act. In particular, while the drafting committee anticipates a completion date for Policy 57 in 2024, engagement with a broad range of employee groups requires sufficient time to meaningfully consult and incorporate feedback.

Section B

Information and Communication

Since our progress report of 2021, the website accessibility activity is still in progress.

1. Developing a sustainable strategy to ensure consistency across all publicly facing websites including open and online learning platforms.

B2. Website Accessibility

Status: somewhat complete
Progress: behind schedule

We recognize that digital accessibility is not just about technology – it is about communication. This is why, in 2021, we indicated that we would shift our perspective on digital accessibility to a communication management approach that extends beyond technological requirements.

As such, on November 25, 2022, a website accessibility plan was drafted by our University Relations team, with executive sponsorship from the Vice-President, University Relations. The goal of this plan is to bring together digital accessibility experts and web leads from across campus to work to advance web and social media accessibility best practices. Additional administrative support mechanisms, such as web accessibility monitoring, training audit/enhancement, and updating web creation processes are also being contemplated in partnership with Information Systems & Technology. The aim of this work is to support the needs of digital content creators and the sustainability of accessible content in an ever-changing digital environment. The University is committed to working towards a coordinated approach in our information and communication delivery, within and beyond the classroom.

Section C

Design of Public Spaces

In 2018, we recognized the limits of the Ontario Building Code in creating an accessible campus and the work we must do to manage accessibility within our existing spaces. We also knew that some of these activities would not be initiated until the latter part of our five-year plan, and that the completion of these initiatives would move beyond 2022. We had committed to the following objectives:

1. Develop a consistent design strategy to address those limitations or building elements where it may be feasible for Waterloo to exceed legislative requirements.

2. Catalogue existing physical space elements on Waterloo campus, identifying spaces with accessibility considerations.

3. Support the space and asset management strategy to embed accessible elements and integrate it with Waterloo's standard facilities management protocol.

C1. Design Strategy

Status: somewhat complete
Progress: on track

Following the successful application to the EnAbling Change program, Waterloo's Plant Operations, Sustainability, and Disability Inclusion teams have been partnering with third-party consultant, Human Space, in creating an Inclusive Physical Space Framework. With advice from a cross-institutional advisory committee, this framework is unique on several fronts: it addresses the unique uses and requirements of a university campus; coordinates design principles of accessibility, sustainability, and wellness; and addresses the unique decision-making and collegial governance structure in space design, space allocation, and space use within an academic environment.

As of December 2022, the strategy is 75% complete. Over the next two years, we look forward to sharing this resource broadly and creating a consultation pathway within the Waterloo community to understand how to apply the Framework to our current and future physical space planning projects.

C2. Cataloguing Accessible Elements

Status: somewhat complete
Progress: on track

The University's commitment to catalogue physical space elements on Waterloo campus requires a coordinated and ongoing approach across every office that impacts the built environment. This can be anywhere from small scale renovations or retrofits, to large construction projects. While we continue to work on a centralized process, we are leveraging opportunities to catalogue accessibility elements as they arise. For example, through the Inclusive Washroom Project we have been able to identify where accessibility features exist in our washrooms.

C3. Facilities Management Protocol

Status: complete
Progress: complete

The Infrastructure, Maintenance & Utilities Team in Plant Operations has been reviewing their workflow documents and improving language within preventative maintenance (PM) protocols to explicitly require a review of all accessible elements within the space. For example, within washroom maintenance, a specific review of power door operators, grab bars, etc. (where available) is noted within the PM protocol. In 2022, 17 University campus buildings were reviewed utilizing the PM protocol's new template. Leveraging previously completed accessibility audits, we will find opportunities to include audit findings with maintenance and construction processes to maximize accessibility within our existing built environment to the degree it is available.

Section D

Employment

In 2018, the University committed to developing a centralized and standardized process for managing accommodation requests for disabled people (active or prospective employees, students, and cross-over populations).

The priorities for this centralized body are to uphold the privacy and confidentiality of individuals in need of accommodation (to prevent real or perceived bias against an individual based on their disability), as well as to ensure that funding is provided for accommodation solutions regardless of an individual's faculty/department affiliation.

### D1/D2. Centralize Management of Employment Accommodation Process

Status: somewhat complete
Progress: at risk

There remains an ongoing commitment by the University to establish a central office that will manage employee accommodation requests, including funding for accommodation solutions. This will be articulated through the anticipated Policy 57 – Employment Accommodations.

At present, accommodation requests are responded to directly by the employee's department. Disability-related employment accommodations are facilitated by our Occupational Health Services. Recognizing that disability cannot be considered in isolation of an individual's intersecting identities and workplace environment, the University will explore options to integrate an intersectional lens in our current accommodation and return to work processes, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders as needed (e.g., Occupational Health, Disability Management Team, Human Resources, etc.).
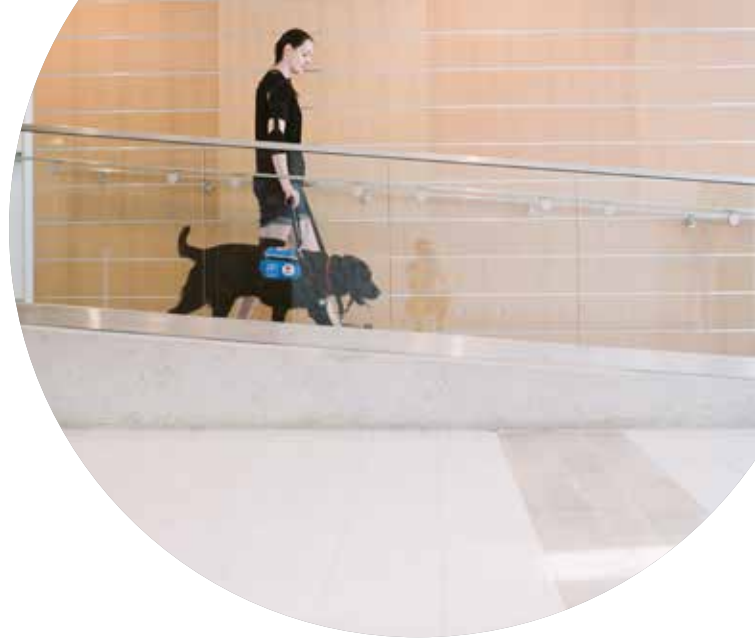
Section E

Education

MYAP 2018-2022 had specific sections related to education that included a commitment that Waterloo will strive to incorporate universal design principles within teaching spaces and related protocols.

E1. Universal Design in Teaching Spaces

Status: started
Progress: on track

The University has catalogued all classroom elements and assets as part of our annual classroom space planning review, led through the Teaching and Learning Spaces Committee. We have been able to highlight various accessible elements within our catalogue, such as power door operators, adaptive seating/desks, podiums, sound amplification systems, etc. This information will be helpful in scheduling classrooms to meet the accessibility needs of students and instructors. We are also reviewing our capacity to include accessibility upgrades within our standard classroom repair maintenance schedule.

BRIDGE PLAN
2023-2025

This bridge plan enables us to take advantage of our opportunity to align our MYAP goals with the institution's strategic plan, and also with the development of new provincial education accessibility legislation. Through the bridge plan, we can look beyond the conventional five-year planning process and incorporate the final recommendations in AODA's proposed Postsecondary Education Standards as we imagine:

What do we, as an institution, aspire to become by our 100th anniversary in 2057?

Over the next three years, the University will focus on establishing key connections into our broad institutional activities to create a foundation to support disability inclusion. The next three years will also provide an opportunity to develop meaningful consultation pathways with the disability community.

Our Commitments

Leadership

Achieving disability inclusion requires commitment and support at senior levels of an organization. Under the principles of inclusive design, accessibility considerations to prevent or address disabling barriers must happen at the forefront of all decision-making. Inclusion is not an addendum, an extra, nor an accommodation – it is part of the core values of how we approach our work.

Waterloo has already begun to shift from its current model of accessibility to one of disability inclusion by forming a Disability Inclusion Steering Committee. The steering committee consists of executive council members who are reviewing accessibility matters related to the drafted recommendations of guidelines that AODA education standards should include at an institutional level.

Over the next three years, the steering committee will undertake an extensive review of these recommendations to establish its Terms of Reference and where it can influence and impact the University's work with an inclusive lens. Coordination with the ongoing work and scope of the current Accessibility Committee will also be reviewed.

Accessibility Infusion

To ensure accessibility is included in everything we do, it must be built into our decision-making processes. Waterloo's disability community is a part of our diverse university campus, engaging with us under the same intentions and expectations.

The past five years have been spent on projects and initiatives to bring the University to a state of compliance, and there is still work to do. The future of Waterloo is one that strives to be fully inclusive, recognizing the intersectionality of our work and the identities of our community. We will spend the next few years ensuring we apply universal design principles in all areas, not only to adhere to requirements but to prioritize them in all pertinent institutional activities, including the key areas of research, education, and service.

Waterloo's Teaching Innovation Incubator, designed to "support experimentation with bold teaching and learning ideas," is well-suited to enable ways that Waterloo can deliver equitable and accessible education. Leveraging the recommendations within the AODA's Postsecondary Education Standards Final Recommendations Report, we will prioritize the educational areas that impact students the most, and develop teaching and learning innovations that see our future students thriving at their maximum potential.

Another key initiative is our Waterloo Student Experience and Engagement (WatSEE) Framework. This framework is designed to provide a "lens for guiding student experience activity and assessment at the University". It considers "learning" to be a transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development. The framework is well suited to include the accessibility lens required by our student population living with disabilities, as articulated in the AODA's PSE Final Recommendation Report on Barrier area 3: Assessment, curriculum, and instruction, Barrier area 6: Social realms, campus life, and Barrier area 8: Financial barriers.

Intersectionality

It is said that disability is the only marginalized group that anyone can join at any time. At some point in our lives, everyone will experience a disability – whether it's physical, visual, auditory, or cognitive – either permanent or temporary. Designing with accessibility in mind is a best practice, and will ensure that everyone is able to participate and engage in a user-friendly way.

Waterloo has established key units, departments, and teams that help steward some of these efforts, such as our Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Anti-Racism (EDI-R) Office; Office of Indigenous Relations; and the Health Promotion team in Campus Wellness. The Disability Inclusion team will work with these teams to ensure the coordination of efforts in planning accessibility initiatives.

Over the coming months, a cross-review of other operational initiatives will be completed to identify synergies, partnerships, resource sharing opportunities, and collaborative practices. Accessibility can help amplify these efforts and in some areas, establish fundamental, sustainable practices to address legislative requirements.

Community

"Nothing about us without us." Disabled people share this motto with the broader community when trying to implement accessibility initiatives. It is of utmost importance that the individuals who we are trying to support are included in the planning and decision-making on how we embark on this journey, and they have made critical contributions in the development of the MYAP. Under the AODA, there is already a requirement for the University to consult with disabled people in the development of our accessibility plan. Under AODA's proposed Postsecondary Education Standards, there are 30 unique areas of education that require consultation with disabled people. Within these areas, there could be multiple instances where consultation is required, such as in the mitigation of technology barriers. In the creation of a long-term strategy, consultation with disabled people is invaluable as we work towards an accessible Waterloo.

Building on Our Past:

Waterloo was able to make progress in all but one of the objectives outlined in our 2018–2022 accessibility plan. We were also able to highlight some additional accomplishments during this time. Examples include the Visitors Centre's initiatives to increase the accessibility of campus tours for disabled guests; Co-op's resource to support employers in providing accessible co-op experiences for disabled students; and Waterloo Engineering Outreach's six-week virtual program (Design For All), that teaches universal design principles to high school participants who designed a device for disabled people.

While we achieved many things, the pandemic and corresponding changes slowed some of our plans as we focused on broader initiatives and responses. However, we are committed to carrying through the objectives we initially set out. These initiatives, tools, and programs will move us forward with our new plan, so we remain accountable to our community in the promises we set out.

Closing

CLOSING

We have a unique opportunity to be proactive in light of the forthcoming legislation and have developed a new institutional strategic plan to ensure accessibility is at the core of the University of Waterloo's mission. We will approach this with intention and thoughtfulness, and emerge with a plan that celebrates and recognizes disability as an integral part of our diverse community. We look forward to your support as we implement these initiatives.