Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) Report

2024

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

A Welcome Message

The University produced its first AODA Report more than two decades ago, coinciding with the creation of a staff position dedicated to improving the accessibility of our institution. This inaugural report established the need for a cohesive, strategic approach to accessibility, and focused on changing attitudes, policies, and physical spaces on our three campuses to better support community members with evident disabilities.

Our 2024 AODA Report identifies critical shifts in our community's understanding and approach to accessibility. Today, our Faculties, divisions, and campuses are prioritizing Universal Design and lived experience and learning how to support neurodiversity and other non-evident disabilities within our community.

Every day, the University of Toronto is enriched by members of our community with evident and non-evident disabilities. We must continue to build on our progress, address existing barriers, and create a cohesive, strategic approach to accessibility. We can—and will—achieve this goal through strong, tri-campus collaborations that are informed by lived experience of disability.

Let's share responsibility for change to ensure success is accessible to everyone.

Kelly Hannah-Moffat
Vice-President, People Strategy, Equity & Culture

Jodie Glean-Mitchell
Executive Director, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion

Sandy Welsh
Vice-Provost, Students

Statement of Acknowledgment of Traditional Land

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

Image: Ma Moosh Ka Win Valley Trail. Photo by Kristina Doyle.

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Deepening our accessibility practices

In 2024, Faculties, divisions, and campuses increasingly considered how to weave accessibility permanently into the fabric of their local culture and strategic goals.

The AODA office engaged in over 130 consultations with the University community about intentionally incorporating accessibility into planning documents and policies and formalizing how accessibility will be achieved across the spectrum of their local activities. Discussions addressed a range of topics, from possible strategies to assess vendors on their ability to provide accessible products and services to potential ways to ensure inclusive user testing of technological systems and platforms.

At an institutional level, we began laying the groundwork for our new Institutional Multi-Year Accessibility Plan. Required by the Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation of the AODA, the Plan will outline the University's comprehensive strategy to prevent and remove barriers to members of the community with evident and non-evident disabilities under the five AODA standards of Customer Service, Information and Communication, Design of Public Spaces, Transportation, and Employment.

School of Continuing Studies

The School of Continuing Studies celebrated International Day for Persons with Disabilities (IDPD) by launching their 2024-2027 Accessibility Plan on December 3, 2024. This plan, developed by an internal working group under the Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Committee, reflects the School's progress in addressing barriers and aligning with regulatory requirements under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA). The plan's development benefited from extensive collaboration with the AODA Office and the Division of People Strategy, Equity & Culture, affirming the University's commitment to fostering an accessible and inclusive learning environment.

Office of the Vice-President, Operations & Real Estate Partnerships

The University of Toronto's Information Technology Services (ITS) division in the Office of the Vice-President, Operations & Real Estate Partnerships refined the language in its Requests for Proposals and contracts to ensure suppliers' offerings are accessible and inclusive. The ITS Inclusivity Working Group continues to enhance the division's inclusive language guide and facilitates ongoing educational opportunities designed to equip IT professionals with the knowledge needed to create accessible technological solutions.

Office of the Vice-President, Research & Innovation

The Office of the Vice-President, Research & Innovation maintained close coordination with the AODA Office for accessibility expertise during site changes, including the integration of third-party tools such as the embedded equipment database for Institutional Core Facilities. Ensuring compliance with accessibility standards remains a priority, and the division actively engages in educational opportunities provided by the AODA Office to address knowledge gaps and uphold best practices in accessibility within its operations.

Image: Student working on a computer. Photo by Matthew Volpe.

Creating accessible physical spaces and structures

Our tri-campus community learned important lessons as we began applying our new Facility Accessibility Design Standard (FADS) to all new construction and significant renovation projects. It will take time for the true impact of these guidelines, released in June 2023, to be realized. The University's first FADS-guided projects are currently in the planning stages, with earliest completion dates slated for 2025.

Applying the FADS also gives us a deeper appreciation of how much our—and the world's—understanding of barrier-free spaces and structures has evolved over decades. We realize, for instance, that we can welcome more people to our spaces by recognizing that the definition of an accessible washroom is different today than it was 30 years ago. We are newly considering non-evident disabilities like neurodiversity in the design of public spaces and structures. We are re-examining how we communicate the accessibility of a space through institutional signage and map tools. Increasingly, our community is perceiving gaps between where we are and where we need to be.

Accessible Ramps and Entrances

Two Accessibility Improvement Program projects began construction in late 2024 to enhance access to key buildings on St. George campus. At the Wallberg Building, a new exterior ramp will provide an accessible entrance from St. George Street, with additional interior ramps and updated stairs and entrance doors to meet U of T Facility Accessibility Design Standard requirements. Similarly, the Centre for Industrial Relations & Human Resources will include an accessible entrance and universal washroom with updated stairs and paths designed to exceed Ontario Building Code requirements. Features such as snow melt systems, touchless controls, and glare-free lighting will ensure barrier-free access.

Accessible Washrooms

Efforts to improve restroom accessibility span multiple facilities on St. George campus. The Galbraith Building now includes a women's multi-stall washroom and an all-gender accessible washroom, addressing longstanding needs in a building where only men's washrooms existed for over 60 years. Additionally, revisions were made to a washroom in the C. David Naylor Building to bring it in line with current accessibility standards and design plans are underway for a new accessible restroom in the 500 University Avenue lobby, significantly improving accessibility for all users.

Signage and Door Openers

Upgrades to accessibility signage and door openers have enhanced navigation and mobility across campus facilities. In addition to sweeping signage replacements throughout the St. George campus and improved promotion and communication to point users to accessible entrances, improvements include new automatic door openers for the first accessible Physical Therapy instruction lab at 500 University Avenue. At 105 St. George Street, signage in accessible washrooms has been upgraded, and new stickers indicate mobility-friendly tables in the cafeteria, further promoting inclusive use of shared spaces.

Image: An accessible door opener in the entrance of the FitzGerald Building, U of T St. George. Photo by PSEC Communications.

Providing accessible services and tools to our community

This year, our community continued our collective journey to better understand neurodiversity. We learned from a wealth of sources—including an IDPD event hosted by the AODA Office showcasing research on the neuroinclusivity of Canadian post-secondary education—that services and tools are not truly accessible unless they consider the needs of users with evident and non-evident disabilities. With this more nuanced understanding of accessibility, we advanced efforts to innovate in core academic areas of teaching and research and to find new approaches to providing supports and services for students, librarians, faculty, and staff.

The AODA Office reported a significant increase in requests for advice about service animals. These requests reflected a variety of priorities within our community, ranging from individuals wishing to bring their service animals to University spaces to event organizers, administrators, and instructors wanting to prepare appropriately for the presence of service animals. These requests underscored the value of having accessible guidelines for everyone to follow, such as the U of T Service Animals Guideline, established in 2019. At the same time, they confirmed the need for dedicated resources to address questions about how to apply guidelines to all spaces and activities supported by the University.

Faculty of Information

The Faculty of Information prioritized accessibility in its 2024 website redesign, aligning with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA framework—and going beyond current requirements of the AODA—to create a more inclusive online experience. Key improvements include enhanced screen reader compatibility, seamless keyboard navigation for interactive elements, and accessibility suggestions integrated into the WordPress block editor to promote better colour contrast and descriptive image labels. Structured menus and forms with hierarchical designs and labelled fields further improve usability for individuals with visual or motor impairments. Plans are also underway to introduce automatic "Made with AI" tagging to enhance transparency for all users, including those with disabilities.

New College

The New College Writing Centre (NCWC) collaborated with their Registrar's Office to expand accessibility support for students facing barriers to success. With students' consent, Registrarial staff can request additional writing appointments to address their access needs, ensuring privacy by relying on professional judgment rather than disclosing personal details. Instructors are also encouraged to connect with the NCWC director to discuss assignments and syllabi in alignment with Universal Design for Learning principles, fostering accessible learning opportunities for all students.

Student Life

The Career Exploration & Education and Accessibility Services introduced the Career Pathways Series for Neurodivergent Students, a hybrid learning program tailored to support participants in navigating the transition from academia to the workplace. This six-workshop series focuses on self-assessment, career exploration, networking strategies, and navigating disclosure and accommodation in the workplace. Designed to empower neurodivergent students and recent graduates, the program helps participants build a community of support and advance their career goals in a supportive, accessible environment.

University of Toronto Mississauga

The University of Toronto Mississauga Accessibility Services launched an informational video to increase awareness of available supports and encourage early registration for academic accommodations. The video outlines service offerings, registration eligibility, and the process for accessing accommodations. To increase reach, instructors and faculty integrated the video into lectures, Quercus course pages, and course syllabi, ensuring students received timely information.

Image: A service animal in Convocation Hall, U of T St. George. Photo by Polina Teif.

Increasing our community's understanding of Universal Design

Universal Design—designing practices, environments, and products for everyone's use—is deepening its roots in our community's planning processes. Over the last several years, it has featured prominently in discussions about pedagogy and research; service delivery; planning and operations; and construction. With its emphasis on creating solutions that are simple, intuitive, and flexible, Universal Design is changing the ways we learn and work across our campuses.

In 2024, more than 800 community members engaged in additional trainings hosted by the AODA Office, which introduced a new training, Accessible People Leadership, to provide managers and supervisors with strategies to create and maintain accessible and inclusive working environments. These and other tri-campus learning opportunities, consultations, and resources emphasized the need to address attitudinal barriers around disability before embarking on a Universal Design approach within a Faculty, campus, or division. They reinforced that understanding what is "simple and intuitive" to use requires consulting and collaborating with individuals who have lived experience of disability. They additionally highlighted that an awareness of intersectionality—the multiple identities that any individual may hold—must be intentionally embedded into a Universal Design approach. They recognized, too, that Universal Design is not a panacea, and that accommodation may still be necessary for some users. Such insights will refine how we apply Universal Design principles in the year ahead.

John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design and the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation

The John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design and the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation (CTSI) have integrated accessibility and the principles of Universal Design into their respective pedagogies. At Daniels's graduate studios for Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Urban Design, students are trained to incorporate AODA requirements and accessibility considerations as fundamental components of their design processes. This approach ensures that graduates are equipped to create inclusive spaces that prioritize accessibility and foster a sense of belonging. Meanwhile, CTSI has integrated Universal Design for Learning principles with backward course design and reflective practice. Monitor-Side Chat Series provided educators with strategies to enhance accessibility and inclusion in course development. These initiatives collectively strengthen institutional awareness and application of Universal Design across disciplines.

Division of University Advancement

The Division of University Advancement enriched its community's understanding of Universal Design for Learning by hosting the session "Optimizing Accessibility in Advancement" as part of the Advancement College program. Developed in collaboration with Advancement Talent Management, Advancement's Office of Equity, Diversity & Inclusion, and the AODA Office, the session provided Advancement employees with a comprehensive overview of institutional AODA policies, accommodation processes, and strategies for creating barrier-free environments. The initiative reflects a commitment to fostering inclusivity in stakeholder engagement and operational practices.

University of Toronto Scarborough

The University of Toronto Scarborough's Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Office, in collaboration with AccessAbility Services and the Department of Physical & Environmental Sciences, developed specialized training for teaching assistants. These workshops introduced strategies for embedding equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility principles into teaching practices, with a focus on Universal Design. Through group discussions and activities, participants explored themes such as power dynamics and intersectionality while gaining tools to create inclusive learning environments that remove barriers and support student success.

Image: Aerial view of the Daniels Building, U of T St. George. Photo by David Lee.

Centring lived experience of disability

Experiences of disability are diverse and varied. For this reason, building a more accessible University requires consultation and collaboration with a diverse range of community members who identify as having evident or non-evident disabilities. It is equally crucial to create opportunities where community members with disabilities can connect, share common ground, and learn from each other. In 2024, we made significant progress in both areas.

The University renewed its existing process of developing the Institutional Multi-Year Accessibility Plan required of public institutions under the AODA. Rather than lead the Plan's consultation and development process, the AODA Office embraced a new direction by embedding lived experience into our Institutional Plan from its very inception. It launched an inaugural Multi-Year Plan Consultation Committee—whose tri-campus membership of students and employees includes lived experience of disability—to support formal consultations across our community and advise the AODA Office on recommendations. Consultations will focus on the themes of Institutional culture of accessibility; Barrier-free services to our community; Accessible Physical Spaces, Systems & Structures; and Information & Communications.

Marking another milestone, the University launched an open call for interested members in an inaugural affinity group for employees who identify as having an evident or non-evident disability. This first-of-its kind community group will rely on membership feedback to identify its priorities and activities in the coming year.

Temerty Faculty of Medicine

The Facilities Management team at the Temerty Faculty of Medicine incorporated feedback from individuals with lived experience of disability to inform project planning and design. For example, an elevator lobby accessibility project in the Medical Sciences Building was initiated in response to input from students directly affected by barriers to mobility. Now, all elevator lobbies of that building are accessible. This approach reflects an ongoing commitment to increasing consultation with impacted groups, ensuring new designs and future projects prioritize the needs and experiences of the community.

Faculty of Kinesiology & Physical Education

The Sensory Motor Instructional Leadership Experience program at the Faculty of Kinesiology & Physical Education brings together Bachelor of Kinesiology students, adults with developmental disabilities, and expert instructors to foster physical literacy and wellness. This seven-week program, developed in partnership with APTUS Treatment Centre, provides individualized physical activity plans and combines group and one-on-one activities aimed at improving fitness, mobility, and daily living skills. Participants engage in fun, targeted exercises at the U of T Athletic Centre, building movement confidence and reducing fall risks. The program emphasizes reciprocal learning, allowing students to develop skills in assessment and program implementation while centring the lived experience of participants to drive impactful outcomes.

Accessibility Services

Accessibility Services and Career Exploration & Education hosted "Elevate and Navigate: Black Disabled Experiences in the Workplace," a panel discussion featuring Black professionals with disabilities. Panelists shared personal experiences, challenges, and strategies for fostering inclusion in professional spaces. The event, offered in-person and online, provided opportunities for engagement through a moderated discussion, live Q&A, and a post-event networking session. By amplifying the voices of Black professionals with lived experience of disability, this initiative strengthened awareness and understanding of the intersections of race, disability, and workplace accessibility.

Office of the Vice-President, Operations & Real Estate Partnerships

The University Planning, Design & Construction team collaborated with Facilities & Services to prioritize projects funded by the Accessibility Improvement Fund, with a focus on centring lived experience in accessibility planning. This principle-driven approach ensures that every building on the St. George campus has at least one accessible entrance and washroom, with priority given to high-traffic areas currently lacking these features. Consultation with individuals with lived experience informs renovations and new builds, balancing usability, safety, and heritage considerations to create dignified and accessible spaces. Recent projects include accessibility ramps at the Wallberg Building, 121 St. George, 123 St. George, and 65 St. George, as well as the upcoming renovation of "The Pit" in the Sanford Fleming Building to improve access to student gathering and event spaces.

Image: Student using a mobility device, U of T Mississauga. Photo by Matthew Volpe.

2025 and Beyond

Launching an AODA Commitments website this year was immensely gratifying for the AODA Office and its many partners across the tri-campus. Though its sheer volume made it daunting to gather, the evidence supporting our community's progress in meeting AODA requirements clearly affirmed how far we have come since the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* passed in 2005.

The AODA Commitments website serves as a living progress report as well as a practical resource to develop our community's learning and deepen our capacity to create a truly accessible University. At the same time, the site offers an opportunity for us all to consider how we connect our many, yet disparate, efforts to strengthen the accessibility efforts in our Faculties, divisions, and campuses. A cohesive understanding of our goals and a greater willingness to collaborate across the disciplines and service areas we represent will help us foster a state where accessibility is consistently embedded, institution-wide, across our activities, policies, and practices.

I am hopeful that the collaborative work involved in creating our new Institutional Multi-Year Accessibility Plan will bring us closer to a unified understanding and application of accessibility principles. I eagerly anticipate the recommendations for future action that will come out of our community consultations later this year, and will work hard to ensure that the AODA Office continues to provide the kind of centralized support that our community requires—whether that be consulting and providing guidance about how to address a barrier to accessibility at a local level, supporting University leadership, or offering institutional resources needed for community-based groups like the Employees with Disabilities Community Network to thrive.

I will close with a heartfelt thank you to everyone in the community who actively supports accessibility and inclusion in your roles as students, faculty, librarians, and staff at the University of Toronto. With your continued collaboration, we can achieve and sustain an institutional culture of accessibility.

Ben Poynton
AODA Officer

About the AODA Office

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) Office, part of the Institutional Equity Office within the Division of People Strategy, Equity & Culture and reporting dually to the Vice-Provost, Students and Executive Director, EDI, is responsible for ensuring that the University meets its obligations under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*, the University of Toronto *Statement of Commitment Regarding Persons with Disabilities*, and the Ontario *Human Rights Code*. This includes overseeing the development of the University's Multi-Year Accessibility Plan, required under the AODA.

We also support the University community in finding ways of going over and above compliance to truly embed accessibility and Universal Design into our systems, processes, and approaches. Through this work we hope to create spaces that are are inclusive and barrier-free.

The Office provides strategic consultations, education, and guidance to all members of the University community on how to create these spaces. Additionally, it acquires feedback on the accessibility of University services and works collaboratively to resolve accessibility concerns.

If you would like a consultation regarding the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* standard obligations or embedding Universal Design principles, or have feedback regarding services provided by the University of Toronto relating to accessibility, please contact us.

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Image: Student seen through a window, U of T Mississauga. Photo by Nick Iwanyshyn.

Image: An accessible crosswalk at Highland Hall, U of T Scarborough. Photo by Matthew Dochstader.

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