

## 6 ways to support more inclusive online learning environments

We currently live in a knowledge society which “promotes inclusion, education for all, [and] universal access to knowledge” ([Blessing & Rao, 2023](#)).

With this information in mind, it is important that teachers adopt a few key inclusive online learning principles to support the provision of a more accessible learning environment for their students.

Here are 6 ways to support more inclusive online learning environments:

### 1. Ask and advise students about how to support for their online learning

While teachers might not always know about their students’ online learning needs before starting their online course, there are 3 simple ways to start supporting a more inclusive online learning environment:

- Ask students what you can do to support their online learning – you can even provide an anonymous way for this to happen by asking online learners for feedback in weeks 2-3 via an online survey
- Advise students where they can access support with their online learning – both synchronously in the first online session, and asynchronously through information on the learning management system and through Study Program support information
- Create a community of online learners who understand the benefit of working collaboratively and collectively by incorporating online relationship building activities where you get to know your students, as well as, students getting to know one another

*For more information:*

Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET). 2023. Working with students, *Inclusive Teaching*, <https://www.adcet.edu.au/inclusive-teaching/working-with-students>

### 2. Adopt proven online inclusive learning design processes

Teachers can also apply Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to their online learning design. These principles aim to reduce barriers to education and increase a sense of belonging for students through use of inclusive design principles.

UDL principles encourage teachers to adopt practices which provide options for online students in terms of how they can consume their online learning content, or by offering multiple ways for students to present their work. One example is having audio-based versions of written content, as well as, having written versions of audio-based content.

*For more information:*

Disability Awareness. 2023. Principles of Universal Design, *Universal design for learning in tertiary education*, <https://disabilityawareness.com.au/courses/universal-design-for-learning-in-tertiary-education>

### 3. Reduce online student’s cognitive load

Another way for teachers to improve their online students’ learning experiences is to consider ‘Cognitive Load Theory’. This theory is based on human brain science (aka Neuroscience) and it provides guidance to teachers about how to present information which

allows students to more effectively process information. One example is presenting information with the least amount of distraction or irrelevant detail by removing unnecessary images or information.

*For more information:*

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. 2017. Cognitive load theory: Research that teachers really need to understand, NSW Department of Education, <https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/about-us/educational-data/cese/2017-cognitive-load-theory-summary.pdf>

#### **4. Follow international web accessibility guidelines**

Teachers should also be made aware of using systems and digital resources which follow Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). These guidelines aim to ensure that web-based resources meet the needs of people living with a disability, which in turn improves the online learning experience for all students.

For online learning content to be WCAG compliant, teachers should follow the four POUR design principles: Perceivable, Operable, Understandable and Robust. These principles state that information and online user interfaces must be easy to read, and they should be able to be operated by more than just humans, but also by assistive technologies. These principles also states that information and online user interfaces should be presented in a way that is easy for people to understand.

*For more information:*

Centre for Accessibility Australia. No date. *What is the WCAG Standard?*, <https://www.accessibility.org.au/guides/what-is-the-wcag-standard>

#### **5. Undertake ongoing online inclusive learning professional development**

Technology and systems can also only go so far in supporting different online student needs, as teachers need to be trained and gain opportunities to use different accessible technologies to improve their online learning environments so they are more inclusive for all students.

One example is undertaking accessibility training into how to use accessibility checkers in learning management systems and in other resource development technologies such as Word. This will ensure that your online learning materials and resources meet the minimum accessibility requirements.

*For more information:*

Boutelier, S. & Ludwig, N. 2021. *Leveraging Technology to Support Students' Needs*, Edutopia <https://www.edutopia.org/article/leveraging-technology-support-students-needs>

#### **6. Build an inclusive online learning environment one 'byte' at a time**

As a teacher, you should always be aiming to ensure that all online students' learning needs are catered for, however, this can be a lot of work when retrofitting existing online learning materials and resources (Tobin, 2022).

Prof Tom Tobin (2022) talks about using a 0 + 1 approach. This is where a teacher aims to improve their online learning materials and resources on an ongoing basis, starting with particular a pain point within the online learning environment. For example, start by applying

more inclusive online design principles when multiple students are unable to complete a learning activity or they ask lots of questions about how to do a learning activity.

Hence, it is important for a teacher to be aiming to ensure that they take into account students' online learning needs. However, teachers should also remember that this endeavour is more of a marathon, and not a sprint, so taking one step at time will help to improve online students' learning experiences.

*For more information:*

Tobin, T. 2022. UDL plus-one, *DisabilityAwareness elearning*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDt1r3FcCQU>

Sweet, L. 2020. *Catering for diversity of students' learning abilities in today's learning environment*, Education Today, <https://www.educationtoday.com.au/news-detail/-Catering-for-diversity-of-students-5057>

This post was written and produced by [Allison Miller](#), Director and Lead Consultant at [Digital Capability](#).

To learn more ways about how to support students online, join Allison on [22 March for Key Principles for Student Success and Engagement in an Online Environment](#) as part of [Velg Training](#) and [Skills Education's Focus Week: Student Support](#), or view the recording.