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Students with disabilities prioritised in UCT online learning plan

The University of Cape Town (UCT) has prioritised the needs of all students, placing particular focus on students with disabilities, to ensure the new, temporary learning methodology is tailored to their individual needs.

As a starting point in the online learning process, the university set out to establish whether students with disabilities have access to technology and the necessary software programmes to ensure “equitable access” to online learning.

During remote online learning, asynchronous learning for students with specific learning disabilities means students can self-manage their learning processes. Hard-of-hearing students using South African Sign Language interpreters will use WhatsApp video for interactions and, if data allows, Zoom conferencing to access sign interpretation. Visually-impaired students have access to the Job Access With Speech (JAWS) programme on their computers for ease of learning.

The university’s Disability Service has spent the past few weeks establishing how each individual disability requires a shift in learning technique and troubleshooting and discussing any challenges that could arise.

According to Dr Sianne Alves, director of UCT’s Office of Inclusivity & Change, “COVID-19 is an entirely new situation without precedent. Tailoring this approach [remote teaching and learning] means being flexible and obtaining the views and opinions of students”.

Students with mental health conditions are receiving ongoing support in the form of extra time applications and verified accommodation letters, and carers and psychologists continue to liaise with students who require mental health support during this time.

Denise Oldham, coordinator at Direct Services (part of the UCT Disability Service), said: “Scenario planning has already taken place for each disability. Right now, the priority is to ensure students who have indicated technological requirements, as well as those with mental health conditions who require course accommodations, are assisted speedily.”

Oldham explained that students who rely on notetakers and scribes for face-to-face interactions have also been a key focus, as have students who don't make use of laptops and cellphones. She said in the latter instance that the Disability Service has adopted a blended approach with the use of images, which students will capture, upload and send to lecturers for review.

Alves said the OIC is aware that physical and environmental stressors, such as gender-based violence and unfavourable living conditions, can make learning from home difficult. But the university is committed to ensuring that students are "completely supported" and will continue to provide the necessary physical resources and emotional and learning support students require.

ENDS

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