MAKING LABS ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL: A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE PROMOTING INCLUSIVE PRACTICE IN LABORATORY TEACHING

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Teaching in STEM disciplines during the pandemic has seen the development of communities of practice for sharing ideas for accessible and inclusive online teaching, and the support of students who need to develop laboratory skills as part of their course requirements. Now students are being encouraged to come back to the campus for face-to-face interactions, and we continue to implement online components that have the potential to enhance the inclusive learning and teaching experience.

For students studying in the STEM disciplines, the return to campus also means a return to laboratory practicals and hands-on workshops. Laboratory classes can pose many challenges to students with disabilities, however long before the pandemic, we recognised that designing an inclusive and accessible learning environment is essential if we want to encourage more students into the STEM disciplines (Hackl & Ermolina, 2019), and consequently a more diverse STEM workforce. Besides changes to the hands-on-components of laboratories to make them more accessible, changing student identities and demographics are necessitating the development and adoption of teaching pedagogies that promote inclusive group work (White et al., 2021), as well as professional development for teaching staff that raises awareness and empathy (Johnson, 2019).

We initiated a Community of Practice, the Laboratory Accessibility Working Group (LAWG), to promote interdisciplinary knowledge sharing amongst staff from laboratory teaching and professional backgrounds. We aim to promote inclusivity in hands-on laboratories and workshops that complement the inclusive practices developed for online spaces. We discuss our progress so far in forming the CoP, with a view to increasing participation both in the CoP and of more students in STEM laboratory education.

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