

Introduction

As an inclusive, global and truly international university, the HWU community encompasses people with a wide range of backgrounds and diverse communications and social needs.

When organising accessible meetings, we will consider people who experience

- Sensory difference such as deaf, blind, deafblind hard of hearing and visually impaired people
- Differences associated with neurodiversity
- Physical differences, including those related to age and chronic conditions
- Mental health difficulties
- Cultural and religious differences

When setting up in person meetings and online meetings and events we should be cognisant of as many of these as possible.

British Sign Language (BSL)

Communicating and working with each other is fundamental to how we function and for successful interactions across the whole of Heriot-Watt University. At Heriot-Watt we want to make sure that meetings are accessible for everyone. We recognise BSL as a language indigenous to Scotland and under the BSL Act (Scotland, 2015) we must make sure that BSL users are empowered to participate fully in all aspects of the Heriot-Watt community and make sure that the contributions of BSL users are fully enabled. This is especially true given the recent changes in how we are all working in more creative and technology-enabled ways, something that the BSL community has been doing successfully for many years.

We all regularly attend meetings; training sessions and engagement activities and it is important that these are as accessible and inclusive as possible and that you consider accessibility when setting up the event you are running. This guidance note will help you to make sure all attending are able to participate.

For meetings to be accessible, arrangements must be made to meet the needs of those participating. Meetings involving BSL signers and hearing non-signers require interpreters. Depending on the length and complexity of the meeting, it is possible that more than one interpreter will be needed. At Heriot-Watt we have an interpreting service that can help with this.

Please contact the Interpreting team for further guidance.

- [BSL interpretation \(HWU Intranet\)](#)

Face to face meetings

Sensory differences such as deaf, blind, deafblind hard of hearing and visually impaired people

Meetings involving deaf staff and/or students who are sign language users should be interpreted. Heriot-Watt has an in-house sign language interpreting team who can be contacted for advice and bookings: bslinterpreter@hw.ac.uk

Good lighting and clear sight lines between the interpreter and deaf attendees is important to consider. Anybody signing should try to avoid back-lighting/glare that will cast shadow on their face.

Staff who are hearing aid users will benefit from using the Loop system installed in the majority of meeting rooms at Heriot-Watt. This should be checked before the meeting to ensure it is working and any speakers need to use a microphone connected to the system.

Please contact the IS Help for further advice on loop systems relevant to your campus.

Again, good lighting is important for people who rely on lip-reading. Anybody speaking should try to avoid back-lighting/glare that will cast shadow on their face.

People who are blind or who have sight impairments may struggle to know who is speaking at any given time, so it is important that people introduce themselves in meetings giving their names and job titles before adding their contribution. Verbal description of what is happening in the room is helpful.

Deafblind people often rely on guide-communicators/deafblind interpreters who will use deafblind manual or hands-on signing to provide access to communication. For more advice, please contact Deafblind Scotland

➤ [Deaf-Blind Scotland website](#)

When working with interpreters or guide communicators, it is important to present any information at a measured pace and to ensure that participants have an opportunity to contribute. Interpreting of any type involves a time-lag, so when asking for participants' views, allow time for the interpreter to request them and the participant to formulate them before moving on too quickly.

In addition, interpreters and communicators need information in advance, in order to prepare their work, so information sent at least 48 hours in advance is very important. This should include a list of participants, a running order/agenda and copies of any presentations/notes from presenters. Any information about the purpose, intended outcomes of the meeting is also helpful.

Neurodiversity

Many of the adaptations that apply for interpreted meetings, also benefit attendees and presenters who are neurodiverse.

Other considerations

- All meetings should be physically accessible, for example have ramps to the meeting room, access to 'disabled' toilets. Good practice is to include standard text for attendees to advise the meeting organiser of any specific considerations and adaptations that might be needed
- Easy access to toilets that provide tampons and pads, can be used by all attendees and should provide water and sugary snacks – an important consideration for attendees who may be diabetic)

- Food should be vegetarian by default with vegan options available
- All food/snacks should be available as nut/gluten/dairy free and labelled appropriately, preferably vegetarian
- In addition, the meeting spaces should have temperature controls to cool or heat the room if required – an important consideration for menopausal women.

Mental health difficulties

We should always be mindful of challenges and difficulties our audience or colleagues might be experiencing and build those considerations into the management of meetings.

Fatigue, mental exhaustion, stress and anxiety are common with high volumes of long online meetings.

What causes this?

- Anxiety can creep in around a lack of control of external factors that might impact our meeting participation, such as: noises in other rooms, doorbells ringing, loss of internet connection and so forth
- Stress from trying to look presentable and engaged continuously. Staring at our own face and the faces of others as we strive to look attentive, while staring at others judging how we feel/look against other participants generates stress. Self-criticism, self-objectification and perhaps self-esteem can all negatively impact our sense of wellbeing
- Repeated constant exposure to online meetings is extremely tiring
- Harder to communicate and get messages across. We have no non-verbal cues to work with, body language, gestures, voice modulations are not present.

Ways to combat this

- Consider switching off your camera or minimising the meeting window for a few minutes during meetings; switching them back on, if you need to speak
- Limit the meeting time to 50minutes instead of 1hour or limit the number of meetings in one day
- When considering meeting times, be mindful of colleagues working patterns and respect the traditional lunch hour where possible
- Avoid multitasking in meetings – this simply adds to your stress levels and compounds your fatigue
- Allow participants to control their own visibility in the meeting – do not insist on a camera 'on' culture all the time
- If asking for questions/answers or feedback, do not target individuals by name. You are not in an appropriate medium to gauge how someone might feel or react by being put on the spot
- Finally, treat all meeting participants with courtesy, consideration and respect.

Cultural and religious differences

Timings of meetings should consider the obligation of the Muslim call to prayer. In particular the prayers of Dhuhr (after midday) and afternoon Asr (afternoon) take place during the working day. In addition, the Maghrib prayer (after sunset) may occur during the working day in Scotland during the winter.

If uncertain, please seek advice from your campus HR team who will be able to advise on any local cultural or religious considerations.

Online meetings

For online meetings and events, consideration should also be given to the applicable advice for face to face. It is the University's position that practical provision will be made for BSL attending meetings including online or hybrid meetings. This will entail making use of a range of technical options depending on the requirement.

- Do not run parallel meetings with Teams and Zoom, only use one platform at a time to avoid confusion
- Consider the digital capability of all your attendees – which platform are they likely to be more familiar with?
- It is important to make sure there is plenty of time set aside in scheduling the meeting. This is to make sure the set-up is appropriate and the right interpreting services can be put in place
- Inclusivity is vital. It may be necessary to run more than one event to ensure that all can take part
- If you are running an event multiple times contact the interpreting services about designating one of the meetings as having interpreters present. You can then take time to ensure the session is scheduled to take place, that interpreting services are involved and that this is appropriately communicated to all participants
- Remember the interpreting service will be able to advise about meeting protocols when working with interpreters online
- Regular breaks should be built in, every 45 mins. Also consider avoiding back-to-back meetings – does the meeting need to start exactly on the hour or half-hour? Could the meeting be 45 minutes instead of an hour? Why not schedule for 5 or 10-past the hour and finishing at 5 or 10-to the hour
- Meetings and events should have an 'event schedule' shared in advance with all (including professional services like AV and Interpreting) participants so everyone knows what to expect
- Information, traditionally imparted through text, as well as being plain English, could be visually represented as well in diagrams
- Expectations/agendas/pre-reads for the meeting should be provided in plain English in advance of the meeting event so all participants can prepare before attending. In

addition, this information should be available in large print (min font size 16), BSL and text to voice

The University makes two platforms available; Microsoft Teams and Zoom. All staff and students are licenced for Teams whereas an additional licence needs to be allocated to use Zoom. Information Services maintains a pool of licences and can purchase additional ones if there is genuine need and Teams cannot meet that need.

Using Teams

Microsoft have added a specific sign language view within the latest version of Teams. Sign Language View is a meeting experience in Microsoft Teams on Windows, Mac, and web that helps signers – people who are deaf or hard of hearing, sign language interpreters, and others who use sign language – keep one another prioritised in a consistent on-screen location throughout every meeting.

- [Use Sign Language View in Microsoft Teams - Microsoft Support](#)

Beyond this, Microsoft Teams has three key functionalities that help with accessible meetings more generally:

- Pinning; allows any participant in the meeting to keep the people they want on the screen.
- [Adjust your view in a Teams meeting \(microsoft.com\)](#)
- Spotighting; like pinning, this feature can put the focus on a specific person but for all participants. Only meeting presenters can spotlight a participant. Presenters can currently spotlight up to seven video feeds in a Teams meeting, including your own if you are a presenter.
- [Spotlight someone's video in a Teams meeting \(microsoft.com\)](#)
- Live captions and transcripts; Teams can generate live captions and a recorded transcript of the meeting including speaker attribution. Captions are available in 34 languages but only one can be selected for the meeting – this is not a live translation solution.
- [Use live captions in a Teams meeting \(microsoft.com\)](#)

Microsoft also publish guidance on general accessibility of Microsoft Teams.

- [Accessibility tips for inclusive Microsoft Teams meetings and live events](#)

Using Zoom

Although Teams is routinely used across the University as the default platform, Zoom is also available for use at Heriot-Watt due to its historic use as a platform with sign language interpretation.

Due to the cost of licences, Information Services manages a small number that can be allocated on request via IS Help for specific cases where Microsoft Teams is not viable.

- You can access a Zoom meeting link through Teams, as long as you have already downloaded the free Zoom desktop app

- An HWU Zoom license holder can host a meeting of up to 300 people.
- We can make arrangements for Zoom licence holders to be the 'host' of a meeting through allocation of a 'roving' licence or use of an Interpreting Service License for a meeting/session
- Meeting organisers will need to retain 'control' of their meeting. While someone else may be hosting the meeting because they are the licence holder in Zoom you are able to give someone other than Zoom license holder 'administrator' responsibilities. This way of working makes sure that the meeting organiser retains control of the meeting
- Zoom uses passwords and waiting room protocols to make sure the meeting is secure.

Zoom has several useful features that make it more suitable for BSL facilitated sessions, some of the more notable highlighted below.

- Full control over your video layout in virtual meetings. You control your layout completely independent of anyone else in the meeting.
 - [Adjusting your video layout during a virtual meeting](#)
- You can enable automated captions to easily meet accessibility requirements.
 - [Enabling automated captions](#)
- Zoom also publish comprehensive guidance on focused accessibility of Zoom meetings.
 - [Accessibility Frequently Asked Questions](#)
 - [Tips for hosting more accessible meetings](#)

General guidance on online meeting accessibility

In addition to the above, the following steps will improve your meeting's accessibility:

What are the structural barriers?	How to address the barriers
Meeting/session organisers are unable to arrange interpreters	• The University has in place platforms and support to allow signers and non-signers to participate • Take steps to make sure everyone can participate from the outset • Plan ahead; request interpreting at an event early and quickly • If you are unsure of how to use our platforms, Information Services can help

	Consider fully the format of the meeting – will it work for all participants and if not, what changes can be made?
Large numbers of participants	- A Zoom meeting can host 300 participants - Microsoft Teams meetings can host 1000 participants - We advocate considering fully the content of the session – remember if a PowerPoint presentation is being used share it in advance - Most platforms offer captioning however captioning is not a substitute for signing.
Unable to arrange an interpreter	- Contact Interpreting Services when you are looking to schedule an event – they should be a key part of your event/session planning - Try to give decent lead-in time (usually c10-15mins) to events/sessions
Short lead in time for interpreter request	- Interpreting Services may be able to help - Inclusion and participation is an important part of being a member of the University community. It may be necessary to reschedule the session
I've never used Zoom or Teams before and don't know how to use the functionality	- Take some time to familiarise yourself with the platform and read some of the advice set out earlier in this document - Information Services can provide comprehensive advice and training on Microsoft Teams - Interpreting Services will be able to give you some advice on using Zoom ahead of the meeting
How can I avoid using PowerPoint and other presentation tools such as screen sharing that are not accessible to everyone?	- Try to limit the amount of unplanned screen sharing - Circulate papers and slides in advance - Make sure that decisions are not made when those participating are not able to access all the information

General accessibility recommendations for educators

It is important that we do not lose sight of general accessibility guidance for teaching content. The following general guidance has been distilled from the wider and more detailed advice available across a number of resources.

For all documents:

- Use a sans serif font such as Arial
- Ensure a minimum font size of 12
- Avoid use of italics, underlining and continuous capitals (use bold instead)
- Ensure no information conveyed in colour or sound only e.g. avoid marking priority items in red font

- Use left aligned, not centred or right aligned
- Ensure abbreviations are given in full the first time they are used
- Make sure you include the alternative format tagline at the beginning or end of the document as long as it can be easily found. As it is the responsibility of the person who produces a document to provide alternative formats upon request, each document must include this statement:

'if you require this document in an alternative format, such as large print or a coloured background, please contact [insert: name and contact details]'

The contact details provided should be the name of the individual responsible for the creation and maintenance of that document. Two methods of contacting that individual should be given, such as phone and email or postal address and email.

This tagline should go on all documents, including minutes, agendas, student leaflets and so on, as a matter of routine. It should be in bold Arial font 14. As long as it can be clearly spotted, this tagline can be placed at the beginning or end of the document.

- Number the pages in the document
- Ensure good colour contrast e.g. black or dark blue font on pastel background (an off white/pastel background can be more helpful than plain white). Accessible PowerPoint templates can be found here
 - <https://www.hw.ac.uk/uk/services/media-services/brand-guidelines.htm>
- Use as much plain English as possible
 - <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/how-to-write-in-plain-english.html>

For online documents specifically:

- Ensure no flashing text or images
- If moving or scrolling content, ensure the user can stop this through an easily visible button or key-press such as the space bar
- Ensure all non-text items such as images have “alt text” descriptions
- Ensure no time limits to completing or accessing a page
- Use Styles and Headings in Word to format documents
- Avoid the use of PDF – use HTML instead if you can
- Ensure users are alerted if clicking on a link will open a new pop up or browser window
- Ensure links are correctly formatted e.g. “Heriot-Watt University Homepage” not “click here”

Paper Documents

- Avoid glossy paper – use matt finish

For more information see the Disability Service Guide to Creating Accessible Materials:

- [Accessible Teaching and Assessment Information \(HWU Intranet\)](#)