



Student Strategic Advisory Committee 2024/25

Accessibility of Language

Initial findings and recommendations for practice

October 2025

Introduction

The Student Strategic Advisory Committee (SSAC) plays a key role in advising the QAA Board on the formulation and delivery of the QAA strategy to ensure that it takes into account the views of key stakeholder groups. It offers objective advice and guidance founded in its members' specific expertise, experience and perspective, as students, student representatives and students' union/student representative body staff members in UK higher and tertiary education.

During the 2024/25 term the committee decided to prioritise and promote the importance of accessible language used by institutions particularly around academic rules and regulations. It is commonly reported by students that the language used by their institution is not easily understood. This, in turn, has consequences:

- jargon and complex terms pose a barrier to effective communication to students;
- students might be less likely to follow and understand guidance;
- this might cause students to abstain from seeking support from their institution;
- where guidance is unclear/hard to understand, this could have repercussions on the successful outcome of study (guidance around the use of AI is a current example of this).

The main goal of this priority area is to raise awareness of the accessibility of language and impact on the learning and wider experiences for students and learners across the UK tertiary education sector.

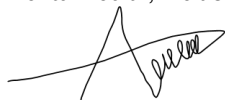
To achieve this, we gathered and collated student and student representative feedback via a Padlet and drew upon our own experiences of navigating the often-complex language used across tertiary education. In this guidance we present our initial findings along with recommendations for providers driven by the student perspective.

All voices presented here are authentic and we have only amended quotes where spelling or grammatical corrections needed to be made or if we have picked out a key element in the quotes.

We hope you find this information useful



Anastasia Kennett a member of SSAC and the lead for this piece of work, she is a PhD student and an Associate Lecturer in the Institute of Education and Inclusion at the University of Worcester. Research interests include student inclusive voice within higher education partnerships, neurodiversity and mental health, inclusive curriculum design, and transformative education.



Alex Stanley has been Vice President of Higher Education at the National Union of Students since July 2024. His main role is to represent students in Higher Education and to advocate and campaign for their best interests. Prior to NUS, he spent a year as the Education Officer at Exeter Students' Guild. He sits on QAA's Board and is Co-Chair of SSAC.



Jimena Alamo was president of the Students' Union at the University of Bath from 2023 until 2025, during which she was recruited as the independent student board member for the QAA and co-chair of SSAC. Now, Jimena is a full-time master's student at University College London, again living the student experience closely and still looking for ways of improving mechanisms through which to empower students.

Commonly used terms

The following terms are used throughout this advice.

- **Student/s** - refers to all individuals studying towards a higher-level award regardless of demographic, mode of delivery, level of study, subject area, or geographic location.
- **Provider** - describes all types of organisations that provide higher level learning, including universities, colleges, institutes of learning, and employers. We also use 'institution' in some instances where 'provider' might not suit the context.
- **Student Representative Body** - a formal body or mechanism that represents and promotes the interests of students. This may be known as a students' union, a students' association, or guild, or by another bespoke name where these specific organisations do not exist.

Key Themes:

Whilst we did not receive a high number of responses to our Padlet, the themes that emerged from the responses echoed those of our committee members and we believe it is worth reporting our initial findings.

The questions asked in the Padlet were:

1. Has inaccessible language at your institution impacted your experience? Please say how.
2. Provide an example of where jargon/acronyms are used & how that impacted your understanding of what was being asked or shared.
3. Would you prefer your institution to be more direct in its communications? Please give a reason for your answer.
4. Have you encountered a process (e.g. student support/ feedback/appeals) impeded by non-accessible language? Please detail below.
5. Do you have any additional comments on this topic?

Key Themes identified from responses:

- Emotional impact
- Impact on time and resources
- Jargon, acronyms and abbreviations
- Learning environment
- International students

Emotional impact

From the responses it is clear that inaccessible language does not only impact the learning experience but also impacts on the sense of belonging a student has and potentially can undermine confidence.

Quotes:

"Students were less likely to seek help when they felt alienated by the way the institution communicated"

"There is often an assumption of knowledge about university processes and departments that makes communications more difficult to access and can make one feel like an outsider"

"Institutional language, especially at British universities, reflects the vagueness of managerial-speak ... The language used in institutional communication is often opaque and therefore anxiety-provoking"

Inaccessible language
"fails to reflect intersectional needs"

I "felt undermined" when inaccessible language was used

Inaccessible language
"impacted my performance and made me feel a little alienated"

Inaccessible language
"disillusioned me and made me feel less confident"

Questions for Providers to consider:

1. Have we asked our students about how accessible our language is? What did we do with the responses?
2. When developing or revising policies or processes, how often do we ask students and colleagues specific questions about the accessibility of them?
3. How often are policies and processes reviewed – who is notified and when?
4. Are we aware of the potential impact of inaccessible language? What are the risks?
5. Are we confident that the language we use enables effective engagement across the student learning and wider experiences? How do we know?
6. Do we perceive a risk to students or their representatives engaging in quality processes because of inaccessible language?

Impact on time and resources

An impact highlighted in the responses is that relating to time lost in “translating documents” or in staff time re-clarifying information previously given.

Quotes:



Questions for providers:

1. How do we know how much time is spent clarifying information for students?
2. How many “student friendly” versions of information are available? Does this mean ‘non-friendly’ versions are out there? If so, why?
3. How many staff will use a “student friendly” version of something? If a lot, why have different versions?
4. In terms of procedures, is the entire procedure student friendly or just at a surface or top level?

Jargon, specific terms, acronyms and abbreviations

This is an area of clear frustration and something that is not new to the sector. However, it is clear this presents a barrier to student engagement both in representation and academic experience.

Quotes:

Acronyms “shut out the student voice”

(Acronyms) “is a huge one, especially as they have so many varied meanings across subject areas, institutions and fields. Glossaries are great, but take an age to build and keep relevant”

Acronyms “impacted my ability to understand what people were talking about ... I wasn't always confident to interrupt [or] ask for clarification”

“I wasn't always confident to interrupt and ask for clarifications in a meeting and sometimes 3 or 4 [key terms and acronyms] would be rattled off in one sentence”

“We shouldn't assume they [students] know about them [acronyms] from the start”

Questions for Providers:

1. What other options are there beyond a glossary to explain key terms and acronyms? If a glossary is all we have, how is it kept up to date and whose responsibility is it to do this?
2. How can we enable representatives to engage fully in meetings that are heavy with jargon, specific terms, acronyms and abbreviations?
3. How often do we monitor how much jargon is used in/on/by:
 - Departments and programmes
 - Assessment and grading
 - The virtual learning environment
 - Our website and social media
 - Our Student Representative Body information and website?
4. Where are key terms explained and promoted to the student body and especially representatives? These may include terms such as:

Enrolment	Concerns	Academic Regulations
Retention	Complaints	Quality Assurance
Attainment	Appeals	Quality Enhancement
Validation	Academic Integrity	Formative assessment
Summative assessment	Student Engagement	Course Approval
External examiner	Self-directed learning	Exam board

International Students

It was clear from the responses that international students are particularly impacted by inaccessible language, with commentary highlighting that it impacts not only the academic experience but also can lead to misunderstanding about key elements of student engagement such as student representation.

Quotes:

“Appeals not accessible for international students (due to) jargon about processes. E.g. what support they’re actually getting is different to what they thought they were getting”

“Content currently misleads e.g. writing letters and publishing materials that make international students think they aren’t able to become sabb[atical]s unless they self-fund but if you know the institution, you know they actually do have the license”

“For international people it is important to maintain consistent terminology throughout a document or system. Variations in terminology can create unnecessary confusion when first time reading them, even if they refer to the same process. Or add the glossary for the alternatives”

Questions for Providers:

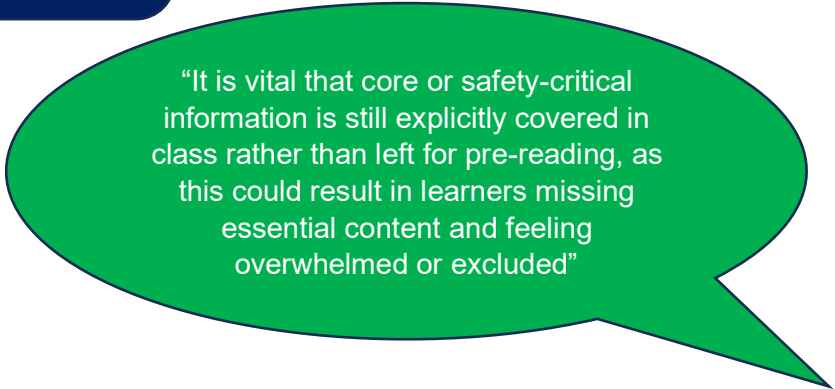
1. When asking students if information is accessible, are we confident the answer represents the diversity of the student body?
2. Is there a sabbatical officer or student representative dedicated to international students? If so, do we work with them regarding how to best communicate with international students?
3. Are we making use of societies and other extra-curricular channels to communicate with students?
4. How do we know that international students understand information given to them throughout their learning journey?

Learning environment

Responses indicated that information presented in an inconsistent or confused format may hamper understanding of the academic expectations. Commentary also highlighted the benefits of covering key information explicitly during teaching sessions rather than assuming students have undertaken or understood the pre-reading.



“Standardising the layout and structure of online learning platforms across modules would further enhance clarity and consistency”



“It is vital that core or safety-critical information is still explicitly covered in class rather than left for pre-reading, as this could result in learners missing essential content and feeling overwhelmed or excluded”

Questions for Providers:

1. Are our online learning environments accessible and clear to our students? How do we know?
2. How often do we review the accessibility of our learning environments?
3. How easy is it to respond and action feedback regarding the learning environments we use? Where does our feedback come from about these services?
4. What is the core information we need to tell students about academic learning? When do we offer this information? When is it reiterated?
5. How often do we review the core information offered to students? How do we engage students in revising this information?

IT literacy and support information

This topic came up as an overarching theme and commentary refers to the risks to accessibility through assumed knowledge of IT. Answers also highlighted information that contains lengthy text with too many points mentioned within a paragraph and challenges around academic writing and referencing.

“providing students and staff with the ability to opt out of non-essential email communications ... would help reduce inbox overload and ensure important messages are not lost”

“Not clearly separating different paragraphs or discussing a multitude of things in a single paragraph”

“Academic writing and referencing can be a challenge when adjusting to HE. Academic writing workshops, and clear and easy to access reference guides can assist in that process”

“When working in education we easily forget not everyone is IT literate. These students suggested an IT literacy workshops would help”

Questions for Providers:

1. Do we expect a level of IT literacy for students who enrol at our institution? If so, what do we expect them to know on arrival?
2. If a level of IT literacy is expected, how and when is this communicated and what support is offered?
3. How do we liaise with our design and marketing teams to utilise their expertise in communicating clearly and accessibly with different audiences?
4. How do we monitor and evaluate the volume and methods of communication that goes to our students to ensure that we are not overwhelming them?
5. How do we work with our student representative body in the design, development monitoring and evaluation of our communication to students across their learning journey?
6. What support is offered in terms of academic referencing and writing? How do we monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of this support?
7. Do we signpost who to contact if a student requires support to understand what we are talking about.

Next steps:

Recommendations for improving accessibility of language

Suggestions from the Padlet responses include:

"Key updates and guidance should be consolidated in a single, accessible location to avoid confusion or missed content"

"A more direct and unified approach to communication would support accessibility, consistency, and learner confidence"

"Direct and clearly structured communication is essential, especially when it relates to vital, must-know information"

"Just be direct and honest - Use direct language at all times. Don't use too many 'sugarcoating' words. Language used should be 'on point' and honest"

"Uni to be more upfront and honest in comms, would build trust with students, lots of SU [Student Union] time wasted explaining what should be, clear processes/language"

Top tips for accessible language around academic learning are:

1. Use accessible language

Avoid:

- Jargons,
- Acronyms
- Abbreviations

2. Utilise direct and clear communication

- Divide information into smaller easy to digest chunks
- Position vital information at the top of your comms
- Standardised layouts and structure
- Reduce inbox overload through opt out systems
- Utilise accessible formats for communicating key information about the rules and regulations about academic learning and responsibilities
- Look to other providers or other sectors for good practice.

3. Be honest in how you communicate to build trust

- Include timescales for a response/decision
- Publish data indicating success rates if available (such as for appeals/complaints upheld)
- Be clear about why there might be eligibility criteria attached to certain processes and procedures
- Be clear about things that cannot change and tell us why.

4. Do not assume students know

- IT Systems
- Processes within UK Education
- Where to go for information
- If it was only covered in induction and is important, please repeat!

5. Offer alternative ways to enable students to absorb information

- Investment in creating 'How to' guides for key processes utilising different modes of delivery
- Deliver in person/online workshops
- In classroom reminders of key information throughout the learning journey.