This edition includes an update on the refurbishment of the Institute for Transport Studies and the innovative redesign of three lecture theatres on campus, all of which have been sensitively refurbished to improve access for all users.

Thank you also to Simon Morris, Assistant Head of Student Support for Disability Services, who as someone with sight loss, writes about his experience of access across campus.

It opened in 2010, yet the Edge continues to deliver a great service to users with varying needs and holds an Inclusive Fitness Initiative Mark. Discover more in the case study below.

Help us to spread the word by forwarding this newsletter to fellow colleagues, also by printing and distributing copies to staff and students.

Case Study – The Edge, a facility for all
The Edge is the main sports centre and fitness facility at the University of Leeds which caters for staff, students, alumni and the local community.

Since opening in 2010, it has quickly become very popular boasting an extensive membership base and priding itself on its customer experience. This focus on excellence has been recognised nationally by being a finalist at the Ukactive Flame awards and the National Fitness Awards.

During construction, the Inclusive Fitness Initiative (IFI) guidelines were used to ensure the facility was welcoming and accessible, resulting in the Edge being awarded the IFI Mark on opening in 2010. That means the facility is accessible both inside and outside and ensures that the gym equipment meets design standards which have accessibility in mind. The current suppliers of the state-of-the-art equipment are Technogym who are one of the 15 UK suppliers who have IFI accredited equipment as part of their portfolio.

There is easy access from the exterior of the building, through reception to the swimming pool and fitness suite with suitable gates, lifts and ramps. Accessible changing rooms and toilets are also provided and the swimming pool has provision of a hoist so disabled users can enter/exit the pool more easily. Having been in operation for a number of years now, the Edge facility and its staff have a history of catering for users with a range of access needs and are more than happy to discuss individual scenarios with customers prior to their visits.
Navigating campus when you have sight loss

Simon Morris, Assistant Head of Student Support for Disability Services, talks about his experience of navigating campus with sight loss with the help of his guide dog Ice.
Tell us about your disability

I lost my sight at the age of 15 as a result of a genetic condition, Dominant Atrophy. My condition is rare and causes damage to the optic nerve. This has resulted in patchy and blurred vision which can be changeable from day to day. There is no treatment for my condition and doctors are unable to determine if it will get any worse, however it has been relatively stable for the past 5 years. I can see large shapes, people and can generally navigate around, however as everything is blurred I cannot see detail and things tend to blur together unless there is clear contrast or definition. I also struggle to see moving objects and have no depth perception. I can also find it hard to see peripheral things when I am concentrating on a specific object or narrow field of vision.

I am a very independent person and therefore am a guide dog user. My dog is a major part of my life as she is a major part of my independent strategy for getting around.

How do you find getting around campus and what are the issues that you encounter from your perspective?

I have worked at the University for just over a year now and am beginning to find my way around. It is common for many visually impaired people to learn routes around their environment using key landmarks to orientate and navigate by. Landmarks can be everyday objects, sounds or smells. Routine routes are also important for a guide dog, as they too need to understand where they are so that they can concentrate on guiding effectively rather than working out where they are.

My experience of using the campus is that it can be challenging. I am unable to use both the standard and accessible campus maps as they are quite confusing and “busy”. I therefore rely on colleagues to show me where buildings and facilities are so that I can learn the routes. There’s a lack of distinctive landmarks and signage that I find usable both on campus and in buildings. This means that learning a route can take longer. I have also found that sometimes newer parts of the campus to be designed with internal and external aesthetics in mind rather than accessibility – this is certainly not true for the whole campus, but it can be frustrating when there’s a distinct lack of high contrast step edge markings and handrails, or when ramps and accessible routes take you on a longer route than the standard route. Some choices of building materials can make a big impact for me too. Light coloured paving can cause huge amounts of glare causing painful and disabling restrictions to my vision.

I mostly find the majority of routes are clutter free, with bins, and benches placed out of the way, and the “red accessible route” is a great way to find your way to many buildings without having to use flights of complex and poorly marked steps. As I am also responsible for Disability Services I can also report that the Estates team have recently worked hard to engage with both services such as mine and disabled people to ensure that accessibility is built into new projects, and legacy buildings and facilities are made as accessible as possible.

This is really important as the numbers of disabled people who are joining both our student body and staff is increasing and it is so important for the University to ensure that everyone feels welcome and able to have the full University of Leeds experience. I am hoping that this will continue and grow further so that we can ensure that all disabled people have a positive experience.

What changes would you like to see on campus to improve access?

I would love to see more signage around campus directing people to buildings and services, preferably in large print and at eye level. I would also like to see more landmarks around the campus to support those of us with limited sight to orientate themselves, as well as other disabled people who have difficulties with either their orientation or navigational memory. Improved internal signage and a move away from vast areas of non-contrasting space inside and outside buildings would certainly allow people with low vision to navigate independently.

If I could only choose one thing though, I would love to see the main access to the Parkinson building, our University’s logo, made accessible. The steps have no contrasting edges, handrails or signage to accessible entrances. Visitors, staff and students who are unable to use our iconic steps are instead directed through a long and complex route which is difficult for a range of disabled people.
ACCESSIBLE PROJECTS – MAKING A DIFFERENCE

INSTITUTE FOR TRANSPORT STUDIES
Improving access internally and externally within the Institute for Transport Studies has been an important part of the refurbishment programme. The £3.9m investment has improved the building by creating a well-connected learning space through modernised features and upgraded fixtures and fittings.

To ensure the building was fully accessible Turner and Townsend were commissioned to help make the building accessible. Recommendations that they made that we've implemented as part of the refurbishment included; creating generous space centres, creating fluid access for all including wheelchair users, creating convenient and usable means of travelling between floors and features within and outside the building to assist people with visual, hearing and cognitive difficulties find their way easily and safely.

This was achieved through a number of ways such as ensuring the routes through the building were widened to allow for wheelchairs to travel freely within the building. A new lift was installed to provide access from the ground level to the mezzanine level. The reception area is well lit to allow for lip reading and waiting area furniture was carefully selected to consider differing abilities of users, including back and arm rests.

INNOVATIVE NEW LECTURE THEATRES
Last summer the transformation of three key lecture theatres across campus took place. The newly transformed spaces are the Roger Stevens LT 8, Mechanical Engineering LT B and Dental Lecture Theatre, Worsley.

The state-of-the-art refurbishment is a £2.8m programme to redesign our lecture theatres by upgrading teaching space to a new set of standards, which seeks to improve collaborative and technologically enabled experiences for staff and students alike.

Additionally, improving the access for users within the lecture theatres, was an integral part of this improvement programme. The specific access improvements included a new induction loop system installed in the Roger Stevens lecture theatre. In the Mechanical Engineering and Worsley Dental Lecture theatre, improvements focused on a new platform lift in Mechanical Engineering, new induction loop systems, new automatic door opening facilities, improved wheelchair access for users with two wheelchair spaces, located to either side of the Mechanical Engineering lecture theatre and another located at the front of the Worsley lecture theatre.