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Chapter 5.2: University Digital Spaces Becoming Disability Inclusive Spaces

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Introduction

The digital world we live in, and the COVID-19 pandemic, has seen a proliferation of digital spaces adopted in the higher education sector. However, not all digital spaces are created equally. This chapter aims to:

- Explore the current state and extent to which universities are resourced to make their digital spaces accessible and inclusive.
- Analyse both qualitative data and strategic documents provided by Universitas 21 (U21) Universities, including adherence to accessibility guidelines.
- Identify gaps and provide recommendations for maximising digital accessibility in the higher education sector.

Specialist Staff Supporting Digital Spaces

The approach to resourcing varies across U21 Universities. Multiple institutions have dedicated web or digital accessibility officers employed within their Information Technology team. The presence of these dedicated roles indicates a recognition of the importance of digital accessibility and a commitment to ensuring it is addressed by specialised staff. While these dedicated roles are likely beneficial, it might also indicate that other staff members are not sufficiently trained or aware of digital accessibility issues. This risks over-reliance on a few individuals and potentially limits the overall effectiveness of these resources.

U21 institutions show that they overcome this risk by adopting either collaborative or distributed approaches to resourcing. The collaborative approach described by University of Birmingham and The University of Sydney may help ensure that digital accessibility is integrated across the university. The University of Hong Kong adopts a distributed approach, with tasks disseminated among the Equal Opportunity Unit, IT Services, the Centre of Development and Resources for Students, and various academic schools and departments. Similarly, McMaster University has a comprehensive support system that spans multiple departments. The distributed approach may lead to more effective and coordinated efforts, although it risks fragmented support. University of California, Davis further supports its resourcing efforts by using collaborative procurement to lower costs of training and tools.[1]

[1] It's worth noting the inherent challenges of any reliance on third party-products that are externally controlled and who may not always share or continue to commit to the same accessibility targets.

Overall, these examples suggest that U21 Universities see the value in digital accessibility, and are taking structured approaches to ensure it is implemented and available.

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

"Web accessibility isn't just for people with disabilities, it is an initiative to improve the quality of the internet for every user."[2] This messaging is a key principle of universal design.[3] [4] The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) aim to create "a single shared standard for web content accessibility that meets the needs of individuals, organisations, and governments internationally."[5] This global standard includes testable success criteria with universities often setting target levels for compliance, or having their compliance driven by government policies.[6]

Many U21 Universities indicate they are committed and actively working towards meeting WCAG. Aspirational levels of compliance and support among U21 institutions vary, ranging from developing a strategy to align with WCAG standards, to achieving A, AA, and AAA levels. It would be interesting to understand the differences in approach to compliance testing. To measure compliance, many U21 Universities seem to favour automated testing over practical or direct functional testing. Although the distinction is subtle, it reflects the maturity and accuracy of compliance efforts.

The ideal would be for all institutions to achieve AAA compliance. It is, however, important to recognise that WCAG is just one measure of accessibility and universal design. A lower level of WCAG commitment or adoption, when viewed in isolation, may not accurately reflect a university's overall dedication and commitment to accessibility. It is essential to consider other factors, such as equitable access and digital literacy training, to fully assess overall inclusivity of a digital environment. For example, The University of Queensland has launched a project aimed at achieving universal design. While it is committed to meeting WCAG compliance, The University of Queensland's broader goal is to create products and environments that are accessible and usable by everyone, regardless of individual differences.

Public Accountability

Having open forum assurance on how closely a digital environment aligns with a desired WCAG target is preferable, as it likely represents a high level of maturity, dedication, and empathy towards the target.

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[2] Filipe, F., Pires, I. M., & Gouveia, A. J. (2023). Why Web Accessibility Is Important for Your Institution. *Procedia Computer Science*, *219*, 20–27. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2023.01.259 (p21)

[3] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). (n.d.). Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Retrieved January 26, 2025 from https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd

[4] Nielsen, E., & Pedersen, S. (2022). Enabling Spaces; Rethinking Materiality and the Invitational Character of Institutional Environments. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(9), 5577. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19095577 (p5)

[5] Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI). (n.d.). *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 quick reference.* World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). Retrieved January 26, 2025 from https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG22/quickref/?versions=2.1

[6] The University of Glasgow and The University of Queensland both refer to government policy driving compliance and minimum levels.

The levels of maturity and approaches to assurance and accountability of desired WCAG targets vary in U21 Universities. For example, University of Birmingham and University of California, Davis use accessibility and quality assurance platforms, while McMaster University conducts annual surveys. The University of Hong Kong assures the WCAG targets through accessibility policies for web development by internal departments and external vendors. While The University of Sydney indicated it participates in assurance activities, curiously, none of the responses indicate that any U21 University publish results of assurance activities publicly.

While there is excellent work being done to comply and align with WCAG, assurance is not transparent. This is a missed opportunity in ensuring that digital accessibility is not only being met but also continuously improved.[7] Further, publicising this information can build trust with the disability community.

Recommendations

U21 Universities should look at capacity building across their staff body. Investing in the uplift of general awareness of digital technologies that can assist in higher education[8] across staff will ensure understanding is embedded and a cultural norm. Whether this is best achieved via targeted training sessions, professional development programs or workshops should be assessed by each individual institution.

Given the variations across U21 Universities in history, number of Faculties, Schools or departments, and number of staff and students, different targets and compliance with WCAG may be appropriate. There should be, however, a clear commitment and target to publicise compliance and monitoring metrics. Transparency in these efforts will foster a culture of accountability and continuous improvement.

Where there is an aspiration to WCAG compliance or a higher level of WCAG, strategies and roadmaps must be developed to underpin and support the target. Strategies and roadmaps should be realistic and devoid of tokenism. Milestones, resourcing, and performance metrics should be included. Irrespective of target compliance, there needs to be a culture of universal design applied to digital spaces. A novel measure could involve creating a bug bounty program similar to those commonly used for security issues. Such an initiative would likely require funding to implement, but it could reward users who report replicable and fixable accessibility issues in digital spaces.

U21 Universities have a unique opportunity to partner not only with one another, but with the public members of disability community and software vendors to enact these — and other — changes.

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[7] McMaster, C. & Whitburn, B. (eds.) (2020). *Disability and the University: A Disabled Students' Manifesto* (1st edition). PH04. https://amazon.com/Disability-University-Disabled-Students-Manifesto/dp/1433167808 (P166)

[8] Degtyareva, V. V., Nikitenko, E. V., & Degtyareva, T. N. (2024). Requirements and principles of designing online course for students with disabilities in the modern digital space of the university: theoretical analysis. *Perspectives of Science and Education*, *67*(1), 388–403. https://doi.org/10.32744/pse.2024.1.21 (p1)

Conclusion

University digital spaces becoming disability inclusive spaces is achievable but arguably not yet fully embedded in institutional culture and practices, and certainly not approached consistently across U21 Universities. The findings above provide confidence that university digital spaces are striving towards disability inclusive spaces. The variations in progress of digital spaces becoming disability inclusive space may be natural due to the uniqueness of each institution. However, with a concerted effort towards capacity building, transparency, and strategic planning, universities can create more inclusive digital environments for all users.

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