Example of practice: accessibility statements for inclusive education

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Abstract

This paper provides an example of practice that outlines the benefits and challenges of creating School or Department level accessibility statements related to digital and online content, and the principles that can be followed when creating them. Like all methods of improving accessibility, there is no one-size-fits-all statement, but through demonstrating one possibility, this example will assist colleagues and other teaching professionals to create an accessibility statement that caters to their needs.

The discussion is informed by the results of a staff and student evaluation of accessibility statements issued by the School of Chemical Engineering and the School of Metallurgy and Materials at the University of Birmingham. These Schools issued accessibility statements to show their commitment to accessibility, create open dialogue around students' varying requirements, and explain the accessibility features/limitations of their teaching and learning resources.

Activity and context

Accessibility statements are an increasingly common way for organisations to show their commitment to accessibility, create dialogue about user requirements, and provide information about accessibility features of their resources and activities. These statements have been defined as "a contract with your Web site's visitors that provides an important aid in site navigation and demonstrates your commitment to universal design" (Providenti, 2005). Furthermore, according to the W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (2021), accessibility statements are useful to "show your users that you care about accessibility and about them, provide them with information about the accessibility of your content, demonstrate commitment to accessibility, and to social responsibility".

In higher education, where large amounts of resources are housed online (e.g., in Virtual Learning Environments [VLEs], recorded video content, and shared files), creating an accessibility statement which focuses on, but is not limited to, digital accessibility is a useful way to respond to these challenges, while setting standards and expectations of both staff and students.

In this project, the aim was to set our accessibility standards within the wider context of Universal Design (Mace *et al*., 1996) and more specifically Universal Design in Education (Burgstahler & Cory, 2010; Burgstahler, 2009), and as described by Fiell (2019): "The concept of universality in design has been subject to different interpretations over the years, but it is fundamentally about creating a solution that can be used by as many people as possible" (p. 40). The subtle but all-important difference between the terms 'accessibility', 'inclusivity' and 'universality' is addressed in May (2018), who indicates that, while Universal Design might evoke an "elusive sense of perfection", the combination of these three terms serves to highlight the "ultimate goal". So, while accessibility and inclusivity embody the "practice of going up the mountain", "Universal design, by contrast, implies that reaching the summit is the true goal". This is the perspective being taken here.

In the UK context, Accessibility Regulations of September 2018 (Central digital and data office, 2018) state that a website must be "perceivable, operable, understandable and robust", and must include an accessibility statement. This does not mean that accessibility statements at module, programme or School level are mandated, but there are many benefits to providing localised versions. At the University of Birmingham, two Schools – Chemical Engineering and Metallurgy and Materials – implemented School-level accessibility statements for the 2022-23 academic year. These comprise two documents: a student-facing statement outlining the principles of accessibility that the School is committed to, and a staff-facing statement which focuses on resources and guidance to assist them in adhering to the accessibility requirements, thus also helping to increase buy-in and long-term support for the initiative. The impact and operability of these statements were evaluated through student and staff surveys.

In practice, accessibility statements are an overview of online and classroom resources and how content is organised online. They function to highlight what the School or Department is doing and will do to provide accessible resources and, where there are areas that may fall short in terms of accessibility, the steps being taken to address them. The statements include contact information and specific information about pedagogy and aim to create transparency and open dialogue with students by explicitly acknowledging different accessibility needs while also allowing for discipline specificity. In the long run, accessibility statements also provide an opportunity to move the perspective towards Universal Design for learning as a goal (Burgstahler and Cory, 2010; Cumming and Rose, 2022).

Conversely, there are significant challenges to consider. The foremost challenge is that any strides toward improving accessibility—beyond merely drafting an accessibility statement—necessitate a dedicated investment of time and effort. A prime example is the verification of captions for lectures and all other recorded materials. To ensure the accuracy of captions and transcripts, they must be manually reviewed, which is a time-consuming process. Nonetheless, research consistently shows that a large proportion of people who do not describe themselves as having a hearing disability prefer to use captions when watching videos (Ofcom, 2006; Youngs, 2021).

Technical difficulties also occur, particularly when dealing with complex images or mathematical formulas and graphs. Moreover, the implementation of accessibility statements faces its own set of challenges. One of the most common is garnering sufficient commitment from staff to address the afore-mentioned issues and to acquire the necessary skills and experience to manage them effectively. Additionally, managing communication and setting appropriate expectations for students are tasks that are not easy to navigate.

Methodology

This study aimed at investigating issues related to the creation and publication of the statements through the analysis of staff and student surveys in relation to them.
Staff surveys were conducted online, with slightly different methodologies, among teaching staff in the Schools of Chemical Engineering and Metallurgy and Materials during the academic year 2022-23. In Chemical Engineering, only module leaders (a total of 34

members of academic staff) were invited to complete the survey (through the survey tool provided by JISC): 13 responses were received for semester 1 and 19 for semester two, for a total of 64 (out of around 100) modules concerned. In Metallurgy and Materials, the survey was opened to all staff members and received 10 responses overall, out of 40 academic members of staff. Data were collected through MS Forms.

The two surveys were almost identical, with quantitative questions accompanied by optional free text windows and a final free text question for any additional comment. The Chemical Engineering survey additionally asked for the module(s) led by the respondents to be indicated and whether the respondents had completed the Accessible Educator course. The students in both Schools were all invited to complete the same survey, distributed through MS Forms, but were asked to indicate which School they belonged to. They were asked whether they had seen the accessibility statements and how they felt about them, with an option to provide further comments in free text. 26 students responded for Metallurgy and Materials (out of around 600, i.e. around 4%) and 28 (out of around 1000, including PGT and PGR, i.e. around 3%) for Chemical Engineering. Although the response rates were low, the data provided important first steps in this process and useful insights into how the accessibility statements are perceived and might be used.

Results and discussion

Staff survey

Figure 1 below shows the results of the staff surveys organised by semester 1 and 2 for Chemical Engineering (CE Semester 1, CE Semester 2) and comprehensively for Metallurgy and Materials (MM).

The first set of data concerns the percentage of lectures being captured with the lecture capture system employed by the University (Panopto). The second whether Canvas pages are checked for accessibility with the internal accessibility tools and the third whether this was done for Microsoft documents. The fourth is concerned with the correction of captions in recorded material. Finally, the fifth set of data reports whether images and charts within the courses published on Canvas are accessible.

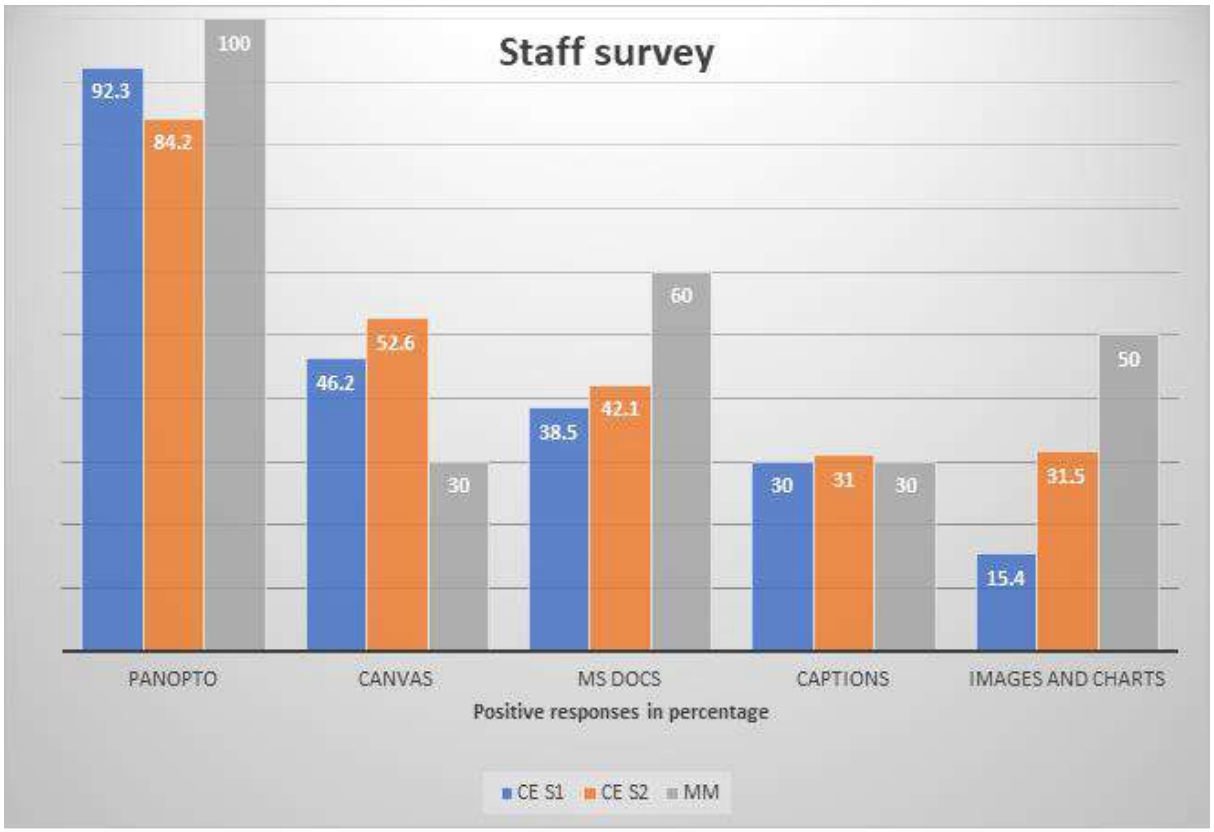

Figure 1: summary of selected results from the staff survey

The most positive outcome in terms of accessibility is certainly the recording of classroom delivered lectures, which is declared by the respondents to be close to or at 100%. This is also due to the legacy of the COVID-19 online teaching period, where most lecturers had produced prerecorded lectures or were recording the live online lectures. As one participant explains, "lecture recordings (developed over the past years) have been made available". Other participants pointed out that some teaching and learning events do not lend themselves to being recorded, such as seminars and small group work and that occasionally technical issues impede the recording, such as the recording not being available from visualisers or Panopto "failed to record".

The data regarding the checking of accessibility on Canvas pages shows that this feature is significantly less used than the lecture recording. The percentage of positive answers is particularly low for the School of Metallurgy and Materials (30%), but this could also be due to the fact that the respondents in this Department are not the module leaders: as one

respondent put it very clearly, “To be honest, I don’t know; hence put no. The module lead may well check all Canvas pages on the modules that I am involved with.”

On the other hand, accessibility checks for self-standing documents is higher for Metallurgy and Materials respondents than for Chemical Engineering, although there is a positive trend showing between semester 1 and semester 2. Quite a few respondents mention that they do not know how to do accessibility checks or have recently found out.

The checking of captions of recorded materials – an important part of making said recordings accessible – is the aspect that presents the lowest numbers of positive responses. This is not surprising as this activity is both difficult and extremely time consuming. Several respondents highlight this, by saying, for example, “It is TERRIBLE [sic] time consuming [emphasis in the original]”, and “This would take an extreme amount of time to do so”. As one of the respondents commented, “If this is required, we should be provided with professional support to do it”. A few respondents mention that they provide lecture notes in support of the recorded materials.

In terms of technology, no concerns were raised regarding the software, but several participants mentioned that the hardware in the lecture rooms would occasionally not work properly, especially the microphones. This of course is linked to the overall quality of the recordings, but also specifically to the captions, which are poorly captured by the automatic systems when the quality of the audio is less than excellent.

In terms of general attitudes towards accessibility, a few participants also mentioned that such interventions would be conducted further to student requests but are not pursued in the absence of such requests. For example, one participant mentioned that “I am generally more reactive in this space, if a student ask will look into it” and another, along the same lines, “if I had a student with a RAP [Reasonable Adjustment Plan,] I could do this”. This is certainly a positive attitude, but it does not go quite far enough as to make the teaching and learning experience accessible to as many students as possible before they encounter an obstacle.

Several participants have expressed interest in training on these topics and have indicated that their attitudes and practices could change if training were offered and available on the topic of accessibility in general and specifically on how to assess and improve it. In terms of accessibility training, in any case, 13 members of staff in Chemical Engineering have said that they had completed the online Accessible Educator course in Semester 1, with 19 others in Semester 2, which is a very positive trend in itself.

Student survey

In Chemical Engineering, students have been offered an opportunity to comment on the statements in their preparation phase through the Student Voice events, but no comment was provided through this route.

Subsequent to the accessibility statements being published, they were shared with the students through email and announcements on Canvas and a survey was opened for all students in both Schools regarding their knowledge and attitudes towards the statements. The student reactions to the accessibility statements (AS), as captured by the survey, were largely positive. 46% of respondents had seen the statement and 61% felt positive about their School having an accessibility statement. Moreover, students were positive about the quality of the documents, suggesting that they were "well-reasoned and thought out" and that "everything stating on the statement is clear and ok for me". In terms of the general approach to the issue, a student mentioned that "It shows that the school has considered accessibility, hopefully moving towards equal opportunity for all students", which is one of the intents of the statements as a "contract" (Providenti, 2005).

However, several students also comment that the accessibility statements do not concern them. One student explains it well: "I haven't been in a situation where I felt I lacked access to resources to overcome educational challenges". This perception mirrors the view from staff that accessibility issues are best dealt with in a responsive manner, based on needs emerging, either from students with a RAP or students making a specific request. As highlighted above, we take the view that Universal Design for Education (Burgstahler, 2009) is a broader and more effective perspective, considering environments and tools "to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or

specialized design" (May, 2018). While it seems logical for staff members to take a reactive approach to accessibility requirements, due to the need to economise time and effort in the short run, in the long run a more proactive approach would both minimise the negative impact of accessibility difficulties for students who need support or adjustments – and would have to ask and wait for said adjustments to be made - and also improve the quality of the learning experience for all students, in line with the principles of Universal Design for Learning. This relates also to the existence of hidden and/or undisclosed or temporary disabilities, which are not well served by ex post interventions (see for instance Grimes *et al.*, 2017).

Finally, students highlighted the need for more visibility/advertisement of the statements as some could not find them even after they were directed to these statements in the relevant communications and within the survey introductory text. Students also commented on the technical difficulties they encountered in the recordings, such as poor audio and incomplete/imperfect captions, and on the increased workload for lecturers related to accessibility and showed concern on whether measures were being taken "to mitigate this or compensate for it".

Conclusions and recommendations

Creating School-level statements allows a department to demonstrate how accessibility is embedded in their teaching philosophy. Over time, this willingness to be demonstrably open and to proactively address differences among students can hopefully boost student recruitment, and may well help often homogenous, traditional institutions further diversify their student population.

For successful implementation, accessibility statements require buy-in from all stakeholders, lecturers and students in particular. However, we have found that misunderstandings still exist and they tend to weaken efforts to enhance accessibility in teaching and learning. For instance, some staff believe that accessibility only concerns individuals with specific learning needs or that student concerns should only be acted upon when they request support or particular adjustments. As highlighted above, this is in contrast with the principle of Universal Design for Learning and would tend to hinder progress rather than facilitate it,

especially because accessibility issues would need to emerge before action is taken, while a better approach is to lower barriers in anticipation of possible issues.

In connection with this, we also found that extensive and targeted communication is useful and effective to share knowledge and to gain support for the implementation of accessibility statements from members of staff and students alike. We noticed a difference, for example, in staff engagement with the survey between the two Schools: this could be due to the more personalized and direct approach used in Chemical Engineering, where the project was discussed explicitly in staff meetings and individual emails were sent to concerned members of staff. In contrast, communication of this initiative to staff in Metallurgy and Materials was done mostly remotely through email. In terms of student participation, more direct communication might be more effective in engaging students in the process.

Next steps for the Schools involved will focus on raising the awareness of the accessibility statements across the School communities, providing further training and guidance for staff and using the data gathered in this exercise to campaign budget holders for better equipment and the necessary time and resources to accomplish more ambitious goals, in the areas highlighted above (captioning and overall quality of the audio/video recordings, accessibility of web pages and documents, delivery of teaching and learning content) as well as increasing awareness in the University community.

Note: All staff and student surveys were voluntary and anonymous, and participants were informed that the results would be disseminated in order to improve practice.

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