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Supporting accessible learning resource design with Designing for Diverse Learners

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Abstract

This brief communication introduces the regulatory and ethical requirements of accessible learning design, and the Designing for Diverse Learners project. This communication is a call to action, asking for educators to share, support and help develop the Designing for Diverse Learners guidance.

Keywords: accessibility; disability; inclusion; diversity; learning design; digital.

The context for inclusion

Accessible learning design has never been more important. One in five people in the UK are disabled (Department for Work and Pensions, 2022) and the number of students in higher education with a known disability is rapidly increasing, with 15% of full-time undergraduate entrants and 18% of part-time entrants now reporting a disability (Office for Students, 2022a). The most commonly reported disabilities among students are 'specific learning difficulties' (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022), including conditions such as dyslexia, visual and auditory processing disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Many of the barriers to inclusion are external to the individual and can reside in resources (Campbell, 2009).

Across the sector, course completion rates are lower for disabled students than non-disabled students, with disabled students also less likely to be awarded a first- or upper second-class degree (Office for Students, 2022b). Meeting this need is therefore an ethical and moral requirement, just as much as it is a legal one.

The legal context is, nevertheless, important. The 2010 Equality Act states that a Higher Education Institution (HEI) must not discriminate against students in 'the way it provides an education' (Equality Act 2010, s.91) and that where information is provided it must be in an 'accessible format' (Equality Act 2010, s.20). Furthermore, a new 2018 statutory instrument requires online resources provided by HEIs, including teaching materials uploaded to VLEs, to conform to the international Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1) for production of content that is accessible to everyone, including those with vision, hearing, mobility and thinking and understanding difficulties (W3C, 2018; HM Government, 2022). While this sets a high standard for content, it can be challenging for educators to meet these requirements.

With the ever-growing utilisation of online spaces for teaching and learning, and the increasing student appetite for flexible provision, there is further need for accessible learning materials that promote equal opportunities for all. The Covid-19 pandemic further highlighted issues of access and quality (Jisc, 2021) especially with the propagation of poor-quality teaching materials, such as voiceover presentations and flat pdfs or those without tagging, that lacked adequate consideration of additional educational needs for an increasing number of learners. Disabled Students UK (2022) did note that the increase in the provision of lecture recordings was a significant benefit, however, less than a quarter of students consulted felt they had received the disability support they required, such as lecture slides that are accessible through screen readers. Furthermore, the Disabled Students Commission and Borkin (2022) noted that adjustments such as the provision of captions was inconsistent and have recommended the introduction of sector-wide standards for accessibility. Many of these issues are well represented in the special compendium of *JLDinHE* (Syska, 2021).

As shown in this section, there are many pressures that require accessible learning design. For these reasons, the Designing for Diverse Learners guidance was produced, developed and maintained.

Origins and development: Designing for Diverse Learners

When a team led by Pun (2016) at the Home Office launched a series of six posters to help meet the accessibility needs of users, there was significant potential for their use in education. While this work identified guidelines for accessibility, it was separated into six specific conditions: autistic spectrum; deaf and hard of hearing; dyslexia; low vision; screen-reader users; and physical or motor difficulties. This was later expanded to include a seventh poster for supporting anxiety (UK Home Office, 2019). Whilst going a long way to support the development of accessible content, we argue that this multitude of posters were only helpful when focusing on the needs of one specific person and did not help when aiming to design inclusively to meet the needs of (almost) any user. It would, therefore, be overwhelming for educators to strive for inclusive design while cross-referencing multiple sets of guidance. For this reason, Fallin and Watling (2018) set out to create *Designing for Diverse Learners*, an amalgam of the six Home Office posters specifically for educators.

Since this first version, the *Designing for Diverse Learners* poster has now gone through several iterations, each improving the quality of the guidance and its accessibility. The third version of the poster was launched on the National Teaching Repository (Fallin and Watling, 2021) where it has become one of the most downloaded and internationally shared resources. Thanks to the Creative Commons license, other institutions such as UCL (2019), Newcastle University (2019), and Edinburgh Napier (2021) have now adapted these guidelines as part of their own education practice, and Aberystwyth (2020) have provided the Welsh translation. For the Association of Learning Development in Higher Education Annual Conference 2022, the fourth version of this guidance was launched by an expanded design team (Fallin and Tomlinson, 2022a). This version moved the guidance to a native web format to further accessibility, while retaining a print version for usability. The new website includes new pages to justify each statement of the guidance and additional alternative formats such as PowerPoint (see: www.designingfordiverselearners.info). *Designing for Diverse Learners* remains true to the original guidance format, but removes duplication and focuses on principles of universal design for maximum inclusion (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The original Home Office guidance compared with the latest Designing for Diverse Learners poster v4 (Pun, 2016; Tomlinson, Fallin and Watling, 2022).



Designing for Diverse Learners: next steps

The Designing for Diverse Learners Project is now supported by a conglomerate of academics and professional service staff from UK higher education institutions. We all have a passion for accessible teaching materials, student support, and widening participation. Our group strives to develop easy to read and accessible best practice guidelines that would benefit not only those students with additional learning needs, but all learners. Our work aims to be evidence-based, founded on Pun’s original work (2016), influenced by W3C’s 2018 WCAG Guidance and tested with the community (Fallin, 2018; Fallin and Tomlinson, 2022b). This work is constantly evolving as accessibility and inclusion requirements develop. Our next steps are outlined below, and we’re actively looking for people to get involved to take this forward:

- Promote the use of the Designing for Diverse Learners guidance in educational settings.
- Develop a student version of this guidance to promote good practice in assessment and peer-peer communication.
- Facilitate research into the use of the guidance and real-world impact.
- Develop further adaptations and translations of the core guidance.

If you are interested in getting involved, please contact the lead author of this article.

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