Accessibility is vital to the engagement and outcomes for all learners and delivering inclusive education.

There have been huge advances in the use of assistive technology to improve accessibility across the tertiary education sector and Jisc plays a key role in advising colleges and universities on how to level up online accessibility and equality for all students.

This is key to Jisc's vision for the UK to be a world leader in technology for education and research.

As the sector shifts toward an education model with an increased amount of online delivery (as a result of the pandemic), a strategic approach to inclusive digital delivery is even more critical to ensure every student, regardless of their location or needs, can continue to experience high quality learning. This includes offering a curriculum that makes the best use of technology and accessible, user-friendly content that will display across different browsers and devices.

The right policy and conditions set by Government and funders are critical to enabling Jisc members to deliver quality accessible education and effective use of assistive technologies.

A guide to digital inclusion and relevant policies can be found here.

Recent legislative change

2020 was a landmark year for the anniversaries of three of the most important pieces of UK legislation for disabled people, including the 50th anniversary of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act, the 25th anniversary of the Disability Discrimination Act and the 10th anniversary of the Equality Act.¹

Most importantly, for the education sector, was the introduction of a new directive set out by the EU in 2016. The EU Web Accessibility Directive (EUWAD) concerns the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies. It seeks to ensure that they are accessible to all users, including disabled people. In the UK, the directive became enshrined in the Public Sector Bodies Accessibility Regulations (PSBAR.)

¹ Extracted from the Higher Education Commission’s report ‘Arriving at Thriving: Learning from disabled students to ensure access for all’ (October 2020)
PSBAR were introduced on September 23rd 2018. They require public sector websites and mobile applications to achieve specific accessibility standards that apply to all publicly-funded higher and further education institutions, including Jisc and its members.

PSBAR is not just a compliance issue; it is an excellent opportunity for the education sector to ensure the greater engagement of a wider range of learners and potential students by making all digital resources accessible.

**Jisc's policy work on accessibility**

Jisc feeds into the accessibility policy discussions in the UK and works with officials in the Department for Education (DfE), the Government Digital Service (GDS), and is also a member of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive Technology (APPGAT).

Jisc has also been a key contributor to debates and discussions about the better use of assistive technologies and improving accessibility for students, including through our sponsorship of the Higher Education Commission Inquiry into the Disabled Students’ Experience.

In 2019, Jisc played a key role in collaborating with the DfE to develop their EdTech Strategy. Jisc’s former CEO, Paul Feldman was a member of the DfE Edtech strategy leadership group and was a commissioner for the abovementioned Higher Education Commission for Disabled Students experience. Jisc has strong ties within the GDS and seeks to not only to be a conduit for colleges and universities regarding PSBAR requirements to our members, but also a provider of tailored guidance for colleges and universities who are seeking to navigate the compliance.

In addition, over the course of 2020/21. Jisc specialists engaged with the Office for Students (OfS) backed Disabled Students Commission, which had its secretariat based in Advance HE, in online roundtable sessions on accessibility matters, including the move to teaching online and ensuring accessibility.

**Jisc advocacy for accessibility and assistive technology**

Jisc sponsors the Higher Education Commission (HEC) which examines higher education policy, holds evidence-based inquiries, and produces written reports with recommendations for policymakers. It is chaired by Professor Steve Marginson and Lord Norton and is run by policy thinktank, Policy Connect.

Our thought leadership and expertise on accessibility and assistive technology helped shape the HEC’s *Arriving at Thriving* report which looked into the experience of disabled students at universities. The report followed a six month’s collaboration with organisations.

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2A disabled student's experience featured in the Higher Education Commission’s *Arriving at Thriving: Learning from disabled students to ensure access for all* report.
and leaders including the NUS and Lord David Blunkett and made 12 recommendations to ensure better access to education for all disabled students.

Jisc provided extensive evidence to the HEC and the report’s final recommendations to government and the Higher Education sector, to improve the experience of disabled students including:

**Recommendation 1:** A senior leader in every HEP, such as a Pro Vice Chancellor, should take on the responsibility and accountability for driving change to improve the experiences of disabled students attending their institution.

**Recommendation 2:** HEPs should undertake a review of disabled students' access to teaching and learning. This should leverage the existing structure for academic curriculum reviews and must be carried out by a strategic group which has representation from disabled students, the student services department, academic staff, and senior leadership.

**National Strategy for Disabled People**

On Wednesday 28th of July 2021, the Government’s Disability unit's much anticipated document was published.

Jisc played a role in Cabinet Office level roundtable meetings that helped to shape the final outcome of the strategy and are continuing to play a role in the shaping the way in which the strategy is implemented.

From a Jisc perspective, the key things to note were as follows:

1) **Technology is a prominent theme**

This is summed up in the expression of a new ambition to “help make the UK the most accessible place in the world to live and work with technology.”

2) **The strategy included plans to create a Centre for Assistive and Accessible Technology**

The paper includes a commitment to “... invest up to £1 million in 2021 to 2022 to develop a new Centre for Assistive and Accessible Technology, reporting on progress by summer 2022”. Elsewhere the strategy says “The Cabinet Office commits to... explore the establishment of a world-leading Centre for Assistive and Accessible Technology”.

3) **The strategy revealed that there will be a trial of ‘Adjustments Passports’**

The paper details that the “DWP is working ... to develop an Access to Work Adjustments Passport, which will be piloted during 2021” Elsewhere the strategy says the Government...
“will… create an Access to Work Adjustments Passport to support disabled people with their transition into employment, including disabled students leaving education”.

4) There will be an introduction of a Disability and Access Ambassador for Universities

The paper includes a commitment: “is launching an enhanced and expanded programme of Disability and Access Ambassadors in summer 2021.” Although, at present, the piece made mention of a university ambassador, Jisc very much hopes to extend this to Further Education and Skills.

Jisc welcomes the strategy and believes that it has a huge potential to bring together various bodies in education and employment to create a more joined up approach to supporting disabled people in their lifelong learning journeys and transitions into employment.

Jisc’s Policy Priorities:

There have been several policy priorities that have emerged from Jisc’s thought leadership work around AT / accessibility over the past few years. Key ideas that Jisc has established as part of these discussions and to improve accessibility in education include:

1. Ensuring accessibility is considered as a fundamental part of the online design and delivery of education.
2. Establishing the professionalisation of the Assistive Technology role
3. Combating issues relating to digital poverty/exclusion and employment

Priority 1: Accessibility is fundamental to online education design and delivery

The emergence of a pandemic in early 2020 necessitated a rapid transition to online learning by colleges and universities. This transition presents an excellent opportunity in terms of the benefits it could bring for disabled students. New structures and models of teaching have been emerging. As a result, institutions have the opportunity to permanently embed these possibilities into their teaching and learning offer going forward, which could benefit disabled students both now and in the future.³

Jisc has been helping organisations to be digitally accessible by default, by providing comprehensive guidance on meeting web accessibility regulations – from legal, technical

³ Extracted from the Higher Education Commission’s report ‘Arriving at Thriving: Learning from disabled students to ensure access for all ’ (October 2020)
and strategic perspectives. The team have been highlighting opportunities to enhance personalised options and approaches for disabled students, particularly through ‘learning and teaching reimagined’ resources, which centre on examples of how education providers have successfully improved the experiences of disabled students in the move to more online and hybrid learning.

LTR recommendation 6: Universities to ensure inclusivity and accessibility are integral considerations in curriculum redesign. Much of the resources come under ‘personalising the student experience’

Rationale

Alongside ensuring that all students have access to the online systems and digital resources that they need, there’s also a strong legal driver around improving accessibility. Jisc collaborated with GDS and the APPGAT to publish an article on how colleges and universities can comply with the PSBAR.

In the piece, APPGAT co-chair, Lord Shinkwin said:

“Digital accessibility in further and higher education is key to the success of our disabled students, with the ongoing COVID-19 crisis highlighting the importance of ensuring all students can access educational resources virtually.

We know that disabled and non-disabled students alike benefit from inclusive practices… it is vital that colleges and universities make this a priority in their preparations for the new academic year.”

Priority 2 : Professionalisation of the Assistive Technology role

Jisc is committed to supporting activities that not only build the capacity of the sector to implement assistive technology but also those that generate further evidence of ‘what works’ in practice. The professionalisation of the AT role is uniquely important as the role of an educational assistive technologist is a multi-disciplinary one. The role itself draws upon the skills and knowledge base found within education/teaching and technology and it adopts health, social care and therapy approaches.

Jisc has made progress recently in terms of ensuring the professionalisation of the role. We have provided support to Dundee University to develop an MSc in Educational Assistive Technology (EduAT). This work was initiated as it was identified that it would be useful to focus on a ‘train the trainer’ approach to ensure that Jisc member organisations can have an AT specialist on staff who can train the rest of the staff team internally. This approach can ensure the long-term sustainability of AT skills across the sector. The first cohort of EduAT started their studies in January 2021.

Rationale
The challenge of engaging academic staff in accessibility work can be directly related to the lack of training available. As explained in a written submission to the HEC below, a lack of training means that sometimes academic staff can lack the knowledge and confidence to know why and how to implement reasonable adjustments and to make their teaching accessible.

“Barriers identified by survey and by senior academics include time, knowledge, training and confidence of teaching staff. They identify adjustments to assessment tools as their main area of concern, as well as a lack confidence and knowledge about how to implement recommended adjustments, legal requirements and inclusive practice approaches.”

Jisc Digital Experience Insights 2020

Jisc’s Digital Experience Staff Surveys 2020 yielded some interesting results relating to accessibility in HE and FE.

The FE report detailed that 16% of teaching staff used at least one of four assistive technologies. It also detailed that 63% of staff who used at least one of them said their organisation had offered support to do so. Finally, only 40% of all teaching staff said their organisation had offered support (irrespective of whether they used any of four named technologies.)

The HE report detailed that 14% of teaching staff used at least one of four assistive technologies. It also detailed that 33% of staff who used at least one of them said their organisation had offered support to do so. Finally, only 20% of all teaching staff said their organisation had offered support (irrespective of whether they used any of the named technologies)

The figures above show very few staff who said they used assistive technologies were offered support. It is vital that all staff have a knowledge and awareness of assistive technologies so they can promote the benefits to students.

Ofs’ Independent Review into Online Teaching and Learning Gravity assist: a new era for higher education? (Published February 2021)

The report said:

*The speed at which the shift to remote emergency teaching and learning took place has also meant that the needs of some student groups have not been considered as fully as they could have been. In response to our call for evidence, the Disabled Students’ Commission, an independent and strategic group that advises higher education providers on improving support for disabled students, reported that:*

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4 A disabled student's experience featured in the Higher Education Commission’s 'Arriving at Thriving: Learning from disabled students to ensure access for all' report.
- Students with visual or hearing impairments faced severe challenges engaging with learning.
- Students who relied on assistive technology struggled with compatibility issues.
- There was a distinct lack of learning materials in accessible digital formats.

Although the initial switch to emergency remote teaching and learning has created a new set of challenges, such as those highlighted by the Disabled Students’ Commission (see chapter 6, ‘Embed inclusion’), there is real potential for digital delivery to revolutionise the learning experience for disabled students.

The potential to offer learning material in a variety of digital formats means learners can choose the format that suits their needs best, such as an audio file for text based content, or those that integrate best with assistive technologies. Placing a greater weight on pre-class preparation and the flexibility to revisit content at their own pace will also benefit students who find traditional in-person learning environments more challenging to engage with.

One of this report’s findings concluded that digital assessment can be more accessible.

**CASE STUDY EXAMPLE:**

One provider told us that, while usually it receives hundreds of notifications about adjustments required over the assessment period, particularly for disabled students, it received only a handful for digital assessments. From a practical perspective, we also heard that digital viva voce exams enabled providers to draw on a wider number of external examiners, including some from other countries.

**Jisc’s accessibility expertise**

Jisc’s subject specialists team includes experts in assistive tech; digital strategy; equality of engagement; organisational strategy; and law. who help members across the UK. The team runs drop-in clinics and facilitates lively debate via an online community group. Jisc’s accessibility community groups have a combined membership of 1200 members from across further and higher education. Subject specialists provide access to training to help colleges and universities and also produce numerous guides and online articles to help students with a variety of needs.

**Future projects**

Jisc partnered with the Open University on a knowledge exchange project looking at the potential for using Artificial Intelligence powered virtual assistants to make it easier for students to disclose a disability or a need for support, removing some of the administrative barriers that can be faced. The team is working with a small number of universities to assess the value of this approach and findings will be shared in late 2021.
The accessibility community is moving into a mature phase, shaped by a member-led Community Leadership Team. Jisc resources and activities will aim to integrate the assistive tech and accessibility communities more closely.

ENDS