Accessibility: More than just compliance

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If you're lucky enough to be able to simply open a webpage and engage with the content hosted there, the likelihood is that you rarely think about what it would be like if you couldn't do that. What if you were visually impaired but the page was indecipherable to your screen reader? What if you were colour blind and struggled to pick out buttons or interactive elements on a page? What if a physical disability meant you use your keyboard to navigate webpages, but it refused to select the area of the page that you need to access?

Accessibility is one of the fundamental principles of publishing and disseminating content in a world where the majority of our interactions take place through digital means. At its heart, accessible design is about ensuring all content and digital functionality are available to everyone regardless of physical or cognitive impairment or device used. However, accessibility is not just an ambition: in many jurisdictions, it is now a legal requirement with legislation stating that materials cannot be adopted by institutions like universities without meeting a certain accessibility level. This has made accessibility a significant focus area for academic publishers and libraries alike.

At **Oxford University Press** (OUP), we realized that we were facing some challenges around accessibility a few years ago. The issue was really brought home to us when we engaged with librarian colleagues at the **Open University** who invited us to see some of the issues for ourselves. As **Claire Grace**, Head of Content & Licensing at the Open University, explains, 'Some products are essential for certain qualifications or accreditations and if they are not accessible it makes it difficult for a large number of our users to be successful in their studies. We have to try to find workarounds but in some cases this is impossible, so we have to support students individually or risk causing dissatisfaction or even legal complaints'. And this adds pressure to already over-stretched library teams: 'The biggest challenge in terms of volume of work for library staff is converting documents to accessible formats', says Claire. 'It can take us up to 8 weeks to convert them. Testing and converting is resource intensive and many HE institutions cannot afford to do this at scale. If publishers make them accessible from the outset we do not have to worry about this.'

What we witnessed in our meetings with the Open University was very revealing: faculty members who couldn't use content published by Oxford, even on our then new platform, Oxford Academic, because it wouldn't work properly with a screen reader and wouldn't fully

allow for keyboard-only navigation. We left that meeting with the stark realisation that what we were offering was just not good enough. From that point, OUP has made accessibility a core strategic priority.

So what does addressing accessibility needs entail? Our first task was to examine every aspect of our existing digital platforms where users need to navigate or engage with content, and to understand what development would be required to deliver a universally accessible experience. We were guided by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 (WCAG 2.1) and the requirements of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act (US). But, as well as seeking to achieve compliance with the guidelines, our overarching aim has always been to consider accessibility, usability and inclusion as three strands of the same goal – to deliver digital platforms that work for all users.

Our next step was to engage with our development partners. These conversations were incredibly fruitful and we found that we were pushing at an open door. Our partners quickly became fully engaged with our mission and accessibility became a key driver in our digital development. Working together we could jointly seek out the broader benefits of accessible design driven by an ambition for inclusion and sophisticated usability for all users, rather than simply compliance with legislation.

Then it came down to the real work. Over 18 months, we made a huge number of changes to areas such as page and menu navigation, tables and images, form functionality, modals behaviour, colour contrast so that all elements can be accessed by a screen reader and navigated via keyboard. For example, we realised that both the 'advanced search' and 'communications preferences' functionality couldn't be used properly through keyboard-only navigation meaning that users were unable to perform the most powerful searches or let us know how to contact them. We also realized that key content such as images and tables were missing alt text, meaning they couldn't be described by a screen reader. Once you begin to interrogate your platforms with accessibility in mind, you uncover a huge amount of progress that can be made.

An important aspect of this was transparency about the work we were doing. As Claire told us, 'Publishers can help libraries by displaying legally compliant, relevant and detailed accessibility assessment information for our users to access. This helps us to see where and what the accessibility issues are and when they are going to be fixed. We can often help publishers prioritise work needed to fix accessibility issues by surfacing the main issues that students and other library users have when using the content'. A regularly updated accessibility statement shows not only a commitment to accessibility as a goal but provides practical information for users and librarians.

But progress doesn't stop here. Ensuring content and platforms offer the highest level of accessibility is an ongoing (and never-ending) process and an ever more important one. As Claire explains, 'Accessibility is not a one-off activity. It has to be embedded as a strategic and operational priority in an organisation so that everything is designed to accessible principles, staff are trained in accessibility awareness, and funds are put in place to support the delivery of this strategy'.

Making accessibility a strategic priority doesn't just benefit a subset of users, but *all* users. The continued transition to digital solutions in academic publishing has been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and our response cannot simply be to make sure content is available

online—it must be accessible to everyone who needs to use it. Customer feedback and continuing to understand the first-hand experience of those using academic content every day is crucial to this. As new user requirements emerge or new features and functionality are developed, publishers have a responsibility to consider all possible accessibility scenarios to ensure no group is left behind.

These views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.