



Accessible Digital Futures Workshop report

Accessible procurement: exploring the challenges and identifying collaborative solutions in Scottish Higher Education

Monday 17th June 2024, 13:30 - 16:30 University of Edinburgh.

Report author: Kellie Mote, Programme lead (accessibility), Jisc.



Glenlead Centre



Jisc

Workshop report

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An **Accessible Digital Futures** event, hosted by the University of Edinburgh. Report author: Kellie Mote, Programme lead (accessibility), Jisc.

Contents

Summary of key findings.....	3
Immediate outcomes.....	4
Workshop participants and facilitators.....	4
The Scottish context	5
Mapping current practice and challenges.....	5
Accessibility in procurement at the University of Edinburgh: sharing experiences	5
Mapping practice, identifying barriers and facilitators	6
Expectations and timing	6
Working with vendors	7
Focus on the future	7
Lightning talks: innovation fatigue; procurement in complex times; and preparing for new procurement regulations at home and away	7
How do we work together to become sector-leading?	7
Centring the user	8
Careful collaboration	8
Living with AI.....	9
Competing compliance.....	9
Next steps.....	9

Summary of key findings

There is a varied approach to addressing accessibility in procurement. This reflects the different sizes of institution and related levels of capacity for in-house testing and training.

Accessibility information from vendors is typically absent or incomplete and where it is supplied, e.g. in the form of a VPAT¹, it is not fit for purpose in an HE context.

Investigating the accessibility of products needs input from specialists, who also have an understanding of how tools will be used and by whom.

Data on student and staff accessibility requirements and the lived experience of disabled people are essential to guide decision making. Best practice examples of how to effectively centre user voice would be welcomed.

The growth of AI to tools both to assist with producing accessible content, and as assistive tools for individuals, has added a layer of complexity to procurement. There were concerns that caution around AI could lead to missed opportunities, and that 'tech solutionism' and vendor promises could engender a false sense of security.

Monitoring changes to widely used products would benefit from a collaborative, user group approach. The sector would welcome support in facilitating the creation of user groups, perhaps from the Scottish Government and/or procurement consortia, with whom they could share findings

The availability of a single testing framework, contextualised to HE, would be helpful. Sharing of accessibility test results could create a baseline of assurance. Where testing results are shared, it is essential to also share how the product was tested and with which assistive technologies.

Some institutions were reticent about the effectiveness or feasibility of creating databases of test results. There was also a feeling that there are already so many frameworks for procurement and these are not always flexible enough to cope with change.

Procurement is a useful component of an accessibility strategy, but there was awareness that it is not solving the real problem, and is merely mitigating risk. There is a lack of motivation for vendors to create accessible products. Not all assistive AI enters the HE ecosystem through procurement and this needs to be acknowledged.

There is cautious optimism that the cumulative effect of legislation both overseas and in the UK could influence the tech industry to produce more accessible products, but there is still a desire for vendors to accept more direct responsibility for creating accessible products.

¹ [Voluntary Product Accessibility Template - Wikipedia](#)

Immediate outcomes

Attendees strongly agreed that they would like to have regular meetings, similar to the workshop, where they could continue conversations and build collaborative relationships.

People who were unable to attend have requested a small and informal meeting in Glasgow, which is being arranged.

To assist with the added complexity of AI in accessibility and assistive technology, the AI team at Jisc has produced guidance² based on question sets workshopped with attendees. This guidance will be refined over time in response to sector feedback.

The Accessible Digital Futures project will examine the implications of new laws and the potential for frameworks in the sector to respond to these. John Kelly at Jisc has produced introductory guidance on the European Accessibility Act.³

The next phase of the ADF project will also prioritise the exploration of pathways to engage directly with vendors around the sector's needs for accessible products.

Workshop participants and facilitators

The aim of the workshop was to facilitate and explore solution-focused insights from people working in and with Scottish HE.

Attendees from across Scotland participated, including representatives of the Universities of Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow Caledonian, and Heriot Watt. We were also delighted to welcome representatives from Higher Education IT Directors Scotland (HEIDS) and Advanced Procurement for Universities and Colleges (APUC).

Job roles of those participating reflected the broad spectrum of employees involved in, or impacted by, procurement processes and the need for accessible technology and resources. Representatives included: heads of information services; web developers; senior procurement officers; learning technologists; heads of digital learning; and heads of disability services.

A group of facilitators ensured everyone's contributions were captured, while allowing the group to draw upon a range of relevant expertise throughout the workshop:

- Anderona Cole, External Relations and Public Affairs Officer, Jisc
- Hannah Lawrence, Licensing manager, Jisc
- Helen Nicholson, AI specialist, Jisc
- John Kelly, Subject specialist (legal and regulatory), Jisc
- Kellie Mote, Programme lead (accessibility), Jisc
- Laura Hutton, Subject specialist (accessibility), Jisc
- Vaughan Connely, Director, The Glenlead Centre

² [AI Procurement Due Diligence - Artificial intelligence \(jiscinvolve.org\)](https://www.jiscinvolve.org)

³ [European Accessibility Act \(EAA\): what does it mean for UK further and higher education? - Accessibility, assistive technology and inclusive practice \(jiscinvolve.org\)](https://www.jiscinvolve.org)

The Scottish context

The project team wanted to ensure HE voices from across the UK were heard, including those for whom travel e.g. to London would represent a potentially prohibitive cost. While key legislation like the Equality Act 2010⁴ and the Public Sector Bodies (Website and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations (No.2) 2018⁵ are non-devolved, education and related funding streams are devolved. Although a small population, Scotland has a large world-renowned, and diverse HE sector, with strong links to innovation and industry. The Scottish Government is exploring a distinct approach to tech procurement, including a register⁶ of AI technologies procured by the public sector and a stated commitment to the deployment of AI that is “ethical, inclusive and trustworthy.”⁷

While Scottish HE is a distinct community, given the variety of organisational models - including ancient universities, online and hybrid provision, research-led innovation, post-92 universities, and distributed campus delivery – we anticipate the findings from the workshop will be transferable to the other UK nations.

Mapping current practice and challenges

Accessibility in procurement at the University of Edinburgh

Viki Galt, Head of Disability Information, the University of Edinburgh provided a detailed explanation of how the team works with procurement colleagues and others across the university.

When the team is made aware of a pending procurement, they meet with relevant colleagues to explore the purpose of the product, the context in which it will be used and to ask some basis questions about it's functionality. The team checks whether the standard question set is relevant to the procurement, or if bespoke sections are required.

Edinburgh University has created its own criteria which is different from a VPAT. There are easier general questions and depending on the product, they will remove questions. Questions are simplified, as questions based on Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are too complex for most suppliers.

Viki and team noted that a product demonstration is not particularly useful because it doesn't show accessibility issues; they request a test system that they can test with assistive technology.

Unique questions to Edinburgh are based on compatibility with specific high incidence assistive technology: JAWS, Zoomtext, Texthelp Read and Write, and Dragon.

Viki noted that there can be huge differences between the scores based on responses to the written questions and subsequent testing results. A downside to this is that this is extremely time consuming to test. Most testing is manual using assistive technology, with emphases on the high incidence AT mentioned above.

⁴ [Equality Act 2010 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15)

⁵ [The Public Sector Bodies \(Websites and Mobile Applications\) \(No. 2\) Accessibility Regulations 2018 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukreg/2018/11)

⁶ [What is the Scottish AI Register? | Transparency Report](#)

⁷ [Scottish AI Alliance - Scottish AI Alliance](#)

Responsiveness to requests to fix problems depends on the supplier. Viki notes that often smaller companies are more open to listening. Larger, global, suppliers are less likely to be influenced. The team offers to share their test reports with suppliers; emphasising the quick wins, and highest impact fixes.

Mapping practice, identifying barriers and facilitators

Attendees broke into groups to discuss their current situations, using the following questions as prompts. Each group was facilitated by a Jisc or Glenlead team member and outputs were captured as a group.

1. **How is accessibility in procurement handled in your organisations?** Where are things going well? Are there gaps? What are the biggest challenges?
2. **Is procurement considered when developing or implementing accessibility strategies?** Is there evidence of alignment or opportunities for mutual understanding?
3. Who **owns** the responsibility for assessing whether a product is acceptable in terms of accessibility?
4. **How useful are existing frameworks?** (these can be mandatory or voluntary) What are the limitations of frameworks?
5. **What needs, specific to the higher education sector, have to be considered in any guidance in this area?**

Expectations and timing

The sector needs solutions that are forward thinking and proactive. At the moment, processes feel reactive, with accessibility testing usually happening after a purchase has been made.

For many participants there was a feeling that it shouldn't be left to procurement to set the standards or thresholds for the level of accessibility that was acceptable. Likewise, testing of products was seen as a specialist role.

There was recognition that virtually no products are fully compliant with the required standard of WCAG 2.2 AA and so a pass/fail approach based on compliance was not workable. A realistic compromise could be the requirement for a vendors to publish a public facing timeline for improvement that they are working towards.

There are already a great number of criteria that procurement teams need to address and it can be a lengthy process. "Sometimes going through procurement is a challenge in itself so people avoid it."

There is diversity in how self-sufficient institutions are in being able to test and having in-house expertise. "You need people to do testing and not all institutions have this time." There was also a recognised need for cross-organisational training on testing and regulations.

Working with vendors

A key challenge was that – due to how rare it was for products to be fully accessible – there was no competition and therefore no motivation for suppliers to improve. This was even more evident in the case of large commercial organisations with few or no competitors.

“Some suppliers are more challenging to work with than others when it comes to providing information and working with institutions.” Start-ups were generally more open to feedback and seeing this as an opportunity to become more accessible.

It was felt that expectations of procurement teams were high and that the load needed to be pushed back onto industry. “Frameworks are good when they work but they vary in effectiveness. Vendors should be proactive and work for procurement teams. How do we keep up with all the changes? Can vendors take this on?”

Focus on the future

Lightning talks: innovation fatigue; procurement in complex times; and preparing for new procurement regulations at home and away

As a pre-break ‘provocation’ to prompt discussion over coffee, Vaughan Connolly, Director, The Glenlead Centre provided a lightning presentation on the topic of innovation fatigue. Participants reflected on whether we need to think about doing less, and more slowly, but with better results when implementing new technology.

Helen Nicolson, a Jisc AI specialist, Jisc then provided an exclusive preview of a question set in development at Jisc, to help procurement teams respond to rapidly changing tech. The lightning talks section was rounded off by John Kelly, subject specialist for regulation and compliance at Jisc, providing a horizon-scanning overview of developments in legislation in the UK and overseas that are impacting the distribution of digital products.

How do we work together to become sector-leading?

Again, participants broke into groups for rigorous discussion, using the following questions as prompts. They were invited to select the questions that they felt were most important.

1. **Participatory approaches:** what can we do to centre users from the start?
2. **Implications of AI to support accessibility:** Is there an opportunity here to refresh our practice?
3. **Frameworks:** Is a single framework to support embedding accessibility suitable for sector needs? What complexities need to be considered?
4. **Internal relationships:** What would improve collaboration, mutual understanding and strategic alignment in your organisation?
5. **Practical considerations for a collaborative approach:** If we want to work together to share information, product evaluations, or use ‘power in numbers’ to influence suppliers – what are the practical considerations to make it happen?

Centring the user

User input was identified as crucial, but how to achieve this was unclear. Participants would like to see user input to standard setting for projects around evaluating or rolling out new products.

A key challenge was “how do we get users to volunteer for evaluation panels even when they are paid?”

Again, the theme of timing and whether this input was coming too late in the product cycle was addressed. “Centring the needs of the users’ has to be embedded into the product not just an add-on later.”

Another approach was to make data on user needs across the organisation available to procurement teams. It was seen as important to identify the user profiles of learners and staff who would be using a product.

Ultimately it was felt that promoting knowledge of accessibility needs actions more widely, surfacing users’ experiences into digital strategies.

Careful collaboration

When discussing whether it would cut down workload for institutions to share their test results, there was some reluctance, with those who have more capacity to test feeling that there might not be sufficient reciprocity of efforts.

There was also caution that the test results would become out of date quickly, “A test is only a snapshot in time.” And there was some concern around sharing sensitive information about which technology an institution is looking at.

“Frameworks can cover some of the requirements, but further testing is always needed.”

“Guidance needs to adapt and flex to the contexts of different HEIs because they vary, including staffing levels.”

Institutions with lower capacity for doing their own testing valued the idea of an accreditation or validation system for vendors’ accessibility statements. Ideas included a “league table” of accessible products, or a sector information database. Although there was uncertainty who would retain ownership of this work.

A popular suggestion was “working as a collective to test and share experiences with specific products – and influence suppliers as a consortia.”

There were mixed feelings about co-creating frameworks for testing and procurement. “There so many frameworks already and these are not always flexible enough to cope with change.”

We need testing frameworks and repository to share findings. These need to be contextualised. Not just sharing testing results but actual resources to help others learn.

A consortium could be helpful to track uses of and changes to a product in real time. These could potentially be organised around a vendor or product.

Living with AI

Procuring assistive and accessible technology that is AI driven presents additional challenges, given that it evolves so quickly and there can be a lack of transparency around how it was trained, what is happening to data etc.

“AI vendors are not education specific. Our needs are not seen as relevant, and accessibility is not in mind. We need this addressed earlier, for example with informatics students taking modules in accessibility.”

“There is a mismatch between pro-innovation regulation and accessibility regulations. Likewise, there is often a mismatch between universities’ use of AI and what students are allowed to do.”

There was a concern that changes to AI was introduced without telling customers.

Competing compliance

It was acknowledged that there are tensions between policies and practice around AI usage for accessibility. “Security versus data protection versus compliance - do suppliers even know what the AI is doing? Many suppliers are using third-party AI solutions which are opaque in their processing.”

Automated AI accessibility testing and remediation may provide a full sense of security, similar to the issues we currently face with automated testing generally. Alternatively, there has been a failure to capitalise on AI capabilities for example captioning due to excessive risk version. “AI may assist with remediating accessibility issues, but at what cost?”

“The horse has already bolted” institutions already have AI in their digital ecosystem that has not gone through these procurement gateways.

Finally there was a desire for vendors to take responsibility for the seriousness of inaccessible products, especially those crucial to the student experience, and that these could lead to accusations that there had been a failure to make reasonable adjustments, as required by the Equality Act. Was there a case to argue that vendors should be held accountable?

Next steps

As outlined in the introductory section, there were a number of immediate actions resulting from the workshop. There was a strong consensus that getting together in person to untangle the issues, in a supportive environment, was extremely valuable. Participants were keen to build a community around this work and were reassured that they had a trusted and engaged partner in APUC.