

# Digital Accessibility in Online Education

## Leeds University's MSc Disability Studies, Rights and Inclusion

*CODE Webinar, 10 April 2025*

The first of four webinars organised by the Centre for Online and Distance Education (CODE) in the summer term 2025 covered a topic that proved as popular as it is important: how online courses can be made accessible to as many students with impairments as possible. Before beginning the session, CODE director **Linda Amrane-Cooper** mentioned that over three hundred people had registered as participants, and explained some of Zoom's many accessibility features to the – hopefully, by then, large – audience.

The webinar took the fully online [MSc in Disability Studies, Rights and Inclusion](#) from the University of Leeds as a case study. A panel of academics, learning designers and a current student was chaired by **Margaret Korosec**, Dean of Online and Digital Education at the University of Leeds and a CODE Fellow. There were four panellists:

- **Hannah Morgan**, Associate Professor of Social Policy and Disability Studies, Leeds
- **Tahiya Brewin**, Learning Designer, Leeds
- **Emma Dibb**, Learning Designer, Leeds
- **Claire Ashdown**, student, MSc Disability Studies, Rights and Inclusion, Leeds

A fifth panellist, Miro Griffiths MBE, co-director of the [Centre for Disability Studies](#) at Leeds, was ill on the day and unable to take part.

### Introductions

**Linda** first introduced **Margaret**, who she described as 'a great friend to the Centre for Online and Distance Education... and an exceptional leader in online education'. Margaret explained that she was taking a 'conversational approach' to presenting the webinar, encouraging all participants to add comments and questions to the chat. She then asked each panellist to introduce themselves briefly and explain their involvement in the online Disability Studies MSc.

**Hannah** is the current academic lead on the MSc programme. She was brought into the programme just after it started to move into development, and she is also a module convenor and tutor.

**Tahiya** and **Emma** are both learning designers associated with the project. Tahiya started off as its lead instructional designer, and Emma was brought in part-way through.

And **Claire** is one of the students on the first cohort to take the complete course. She has been studying for about 18 months and is engaged on writing her final dissertation.

## Disability Studies at Leeds

Hannah explained that the programme currently offered at Leeds includes certificate and diploma programmes besides the full MSc in Disability Studies, Rights and Inclusion, providing more flexibility. Although this is a new programme, courses in Disability Studies there go back to the 1990s, and Leeds has even been described as 'the home of disability studies in the UK'.

The first MSc course at Leeds started in the early 90s as both a one-year on-campus programme and a two-year distance learning one. As was usual at that time, the distance learning programme involved large packs of paper sent by post, telephone tutorials and occasional on-campus study weekends. That course lapsed at the end of the decade, when it became clear that the future lay in online provision but the university didn't, at the time, have the capacity to introduce it. The on-campus course continued until the COVID pandemic but with declining numbers. It followed the pandemic-driven 'jump online' before lapsing briefly while the new, fully online programme was developed.

## The MSc Programme

The current course sits within the [School of Sociology and Social Policy](#), with a number of experts in disability studies on its teaching faculty. It has close links with the Centre for Disability Studies and with a wide range of academics in other schools and departments: not just the more 'obvious' ones like education and law but also, for example, engineering and history. As it is fully online it caters for students who live far from Leeds or who may live locally but are unable to travel to or spend much time on campus. It is deliberately aligned with the university's values around inclusion and compassion-based learning.

This course also has a broader focus than its predecessor, with a strong practical component. It is rooted in the experiences of disabled people globally, particularly, perhaps, disabled academics, and with input from professional practice in other disciplines. Crucially, it is based on a [social model of disability](#). It does not teach people to work with disabled people (for example, as physiotherapists or social workers) although many students come from these professions. Rather, it focuses on disability as a human rights issue, the 'lived experience' of disabled people and how to remove discrimination and reduce inequalities.

Accessibility, as summed up in the disability rights slogan 'nothing about us without us' is key to all these issues. The course is set up to 'practice what [we] preach' with a very high proportion of disabled staff and students with a wide variety of support needs. Staff were delighted when the digital education services at Leeds really embraced the challenge of meeting these needs. It has, of course, not been perfect but with accessibility taken as standard, disabled people no longer feel like 'the complainant in the room'.

Hannah went on to list some of the standards that have been adopted on the course:

- All documents are available in Word and PDF, and all videos and podcasts have captions and transcripts
- All materials produced in-house meet the accessibility requirements of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 2.1 ([WCAG 2.1](#) AAA) and similar international guidelines.
- Multiple modes of submission are standard for all assessments, so students may choose, for example, whether to submit a written report or an audio presentation.

Finally, Hannah highlighted the way in which the team had been able to break out of the ‘bubble’ of disability studies and thanked the service providers they had worked with: particularly digital education services and the library.

Margaret thanked Hannah for her comprehensive introduction to ‘a gem of a programme’ and asked her, with learning designers Emma and Tahiya, to explain how the course design had come about in more detail. Hannah explained that she had come on board in the very early days of its development, just after the COVID crisis, and that at the time she had little more experience of online learning than most academics who had followed the ‘jump online’. Overall, students and staff had felt that they were going online because they had to, not because they wanted to, but disability studies was different: many potential students could see the enormous benefits that a course designed to be fully online could offer them.

In retrospect, she felt that the initial course design had been module-focused rather than programme-focused, and she would have liked to have more time to think at the programme level. Staff members with different levels of experience had been involved in each module, and to some extent they had ‘made things up as they went along’ so that the later modules benefited from experience picked up when developing the earlier ones. One example of this was with podcasts, which were picked up after the first module had been developed. These were found to work really well, but that first module still includes none of them. Also, it’s harder to get social sciences courses to work well online than those of some other disciplines, as these subjects are based on reading. It is quite difficult to work out how to offer students the large body of text that they are expected to read in accessible formats that work well online.

## The Learning Designers’ Perspective

Margaret then asked the learning designers, Emma and Tahiya, to talk about their work on the course and what they had learned from it about designing for accessibility.

**Emma** began, explaining that she had been brought in to work on the course from Module Four, when Hannah was both the module lead and the programme lead. She attributes the programme’s success to the team effort involved. She and her colleagues worked closely with project managers, graphic designers and learning technologists as well as the academic module leads. As some of the academics hadn’t worked on an all-online programme before, one of her roles was to provide reassurance.

**Tahiya** then explained that the work began with her and her colleagues sitting down with the academic leads to design each module. They would map out the activities and ensure that, as far as possible, they were both engaging – preferably interactive – and accessible for students with a range of impairments. The aim was always to keep students at the centre of their practice.

Margaret asked if they could expand on the design process and, in particular, how it incorporated user testing, and also how it works in practice in the VLE they use, Blackboard Ultra.

Tahiya responded by sharing a short presentation. They had always aimed, as a department, to achieve the WCAG AA standard, but in this course they explicitly verified it by user testing. They created prototype content in Blackboard and gave it to external testers with a range of accessibility needs. Software allowed the team to monitor where on the site the testers were spending their time and what they struggled with, and this guided improvements. The first set of tests took place before

any modules were launched, but they are continuing to respond to student feedback in an iterative manner.

Following this feedback they 'flattened' the module structure, reducing the total number of web pages. Using a single page with multiple headings rather than multiple pages reduced some of the student effort in scrolling through the material. They did discover that this didn't work very well in Blackboard and wasn't particularly helpful for screen readers.

Margaret picked up on a question from the chat to ask Emma and Tahiya how long the development and testing process took. Tahiya said that the initial development of the first module had taken about 8-12 months, and now the whole process, including QA checks, will take about nine months for each module.

Emma returned to the testing process, pointing out that the Programme adheres to [Universal Design for Learning](#) guidelines ensuring that all content is accessible for all students. For example, they ensured that they designed features that would help neurodiverse students as well as for visually impaired students who use screen readers. In the design of the build, they took a holistic approach considering the time a learner would need to navigate to the content rather than just the content itself. There is now a complete alternative SharePoint resource for screen-reader users, and at least four visually impaired students have made use of it since the course started. They are still working with the Royal National Institute of Blind People ([RNIB](#)) transcription unit to transcribe every piece of core or recommended reading.

She also emphasised that the academic content is not diluted while making the programme accessible. This is done by making it clear which readings are core for success in the assessment, and which are readings are optional. Students are often given a choice of readings and case studies to choose from to suit their interests or professional context. Emma explained that for accessibility, the automatic markup tool in the VLE cannot always be relied on and she cited a few examples of problems with this, including a whole paragraph marked up as a heading and difficulties with quotes and ALT tags.

## The Student Perspective

Margaret introduced the student panellist, Claire, asking her to explain why she had chosen to study this programme and how she was finding it.

**Claire** explained that, working as a project manager in [Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Leicester](#), she sees her work as a 'kind of low-key activism' and this MSc course as a way of expanding that further. However, she fell into it almost by chance after seeing an advert on Facebook. She is a member of the first cohort and is aware of problems that are being ironed out, but in general she has found the staff on the programme 'brilliant' at responding to student queries and problems.

She picked up one question in the chat that asked about how staff foster a community among students. She remembered how, at an introductory meeting before the course even started, one staff member had suggested that they might set up a WhatsApp group to keep in touch with each other, and this has proved a great success. And she has noticed one significant difference between this degree and her undergraduate studies: students are much more supportive of each other, almost certainly because over half have some kind of impairment. It is an international cohort, and she has

co-students in China, the US, Canada and Belgium; this does cause problems with the timing of live sessions, but WhatsApp has been helpful there. Discussion boards on the VLE have also been useful, but generally only for academic subjects.

She has now reached the end of the course and is working on her final dissertation. Students in this position have been offered online peer support sessions, which they are finding very helpful as they are largely working independently. Breakout rooms haven't worked, however, because with a fairly small cohort to start with, each breakout group was too small. She was very pleased that staff listened to the students when they asked if these could be dropped. And she has picked up one key point, which she is now promoting at Leicester: the idea of allowing students to submit assessments in different formats. She, has personally, found it far easier and less stressful to submit most of her assessments as presentations, and she would like students in Leicester to have the same opportunities to choose how to submit theirs.

She summed up her experience with two points that she has taken away from her studies: the need for first-class communication, and the need for consistency in resources so students know exactly where they can find what material. All universities should be able to take these principles on board, even if they lack the resources to develop specialist courses like the one at Leeds. And in general terms, she emphasised that she will keep pushing for more of the innovations at Leeds to be implemented in Leicester... because, she said, they were 'brilliant'.

## Discussion

Margaret thanked Claire and all other panellists for their excellent contributions, emphasising the value of the student perspective. With limited time left, she re-emphasised Claire's points about choice and consistency, which, she said, were valued by adult learners in particular. She then mentioned a couple of points and questions from the lively chat. One delegate had asked about the scale of the programme; with cohorts starting each year in September and March, they now have about 60 students registered overall with about 40 new registrants per year.

Linda then drew the session to a close as it was out of time, thanking all panellists again for a lively and thought-provoking session. She also drew delegates' attention to further conversation and links from the chat. There had been more discussion of assessment choice, including the feasibility of scaling for larger student numbers, and of a recent [ruling](#) by the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission underlining the duty of HE establishments to make reasonable adjustments for any disabilities they are aware of, regardless of formal notification. Margaret posted links to Leeds' short OpenLearn course on the social model of disability (on the [MSc programme home page](#)) and to the International Society for Technology in Education ([ISTE](#)). And on a lighter note, there was much appreciation for Claire's 'very chill' cat, Milo.