

So welcome to episode 9 of Spotlight on Best Practice. The host for today is Chloe Courtenay and in this series we are discussing best practice and learning and teaching and how they can be applied in your own practice. I'm joined today by Sam MacFarlane, Lynn Burrows and Luke Dunmore from the technology enhanced learning team in learning and teaching enhancement. So welcome Sam, Luke and Lynn.

Hello. Hiya. Hi Cori.

Cori. Hiya. So do you want to start by introducing yourselves and what you do as a team?

introducing yourselves and what you do as a team? Yeah, absolutely.

I'm Sam MacFarlane. I'm a digital academic developer.

I'm also a thematic lead. I took from Lynn a little while ago around accessibility, in particular digital accessibility, with the scope of largely around the learning and teaching and the technologies that we support in our learning platform suite tools.

Okay, and Luke. I'm Lynn Burrows and I am the lead for Blackboard AI, which is a piece of technology we'll talk about later on in the podcast, and I'm also a digital academic developer.

And Luke.

Hi, I'm Luke Dunmore. I'm a TEL systems developer, which basically means I'm sort of the top level systems administrator for Blackboard and everything else that plugs into Blackboard. That's great. Okay, thank you. So let's get the ball rolling by asking why you think accessibility is important, because I understand that the topic today is digital accessibility, and you're going to help our audience to understand what different techniques or skills they can use. I'm happy to start off with this one. So I was reading something last October, and it really hit me because it said a fifth of students reported the disability in the UK, and the students are actually going to declare the disability because some are hidden. So I think it's important also to remember that there are times when we will have temporary disabilities at any point in our own lives.

So I think it's important that digital accessibility encompasses everyone, because accessibility is important for everyone, not just people with specific needs. So I'm going to talk about later our module design workshops. We'll talk about universal design for learning.

So for me, it's around giving everybody an accessible resource. Yeah, I completely agree with that.

There are also other elements of which makes it important. So as for other part of my role is around legislation and standards.

We also have to meet our legal imperatives. So there is, and this is a mouthful, so apologies if I don't get this right.

The public sector bodies websites and mobile applications number two accessibility regulations 2018.

I did it. And essentially what that does is it enforces parts of the Equality Act and the Disability Discrimination Act.

So there is a legal imperative we have to meet in order to make things as

accessible as possible for our students and also for our staff as well.

There is also another element which is coming on board, although we're not part of the European Accessibility Act, which is coming into force at the end of June 2025.

As I said, it doesn't directly affect us because we're out of the EU. But for all EU stakeholders, such as EU students or partners in the EU, we have to meet their requirements as well. There's other jurisdictions which may have their own requirements.

And that's what we would look into as a team to make sure that we are sort of keeping in line with those directives. So do you happen to know if the government is saying we have to stay in line with any? Because I know for the GDPR, for example, we have still adopted many of the EU's directives. Yeah.

So in terms of the public sector bodies accessibility regulations that I mentioned earlier, they are our own. They're the UK ones. And we took those from an EU piece of legislation and they fit in with the Equality Act and Disability Discrimination Act. So that's ours. Where we are affected in terms of the other jurisdictions is where we have international students that come to the UK to study.

So they are entitled to support under the Act. So the European Accessibility Act means that we have to provide a certain amount of accessibility for those students, even though they're studying in the UK.

UK. Also, if we've got partnerships in the EU, or in other jurisdictions that have similar legislation, we would have to make sure that we met those as well. So what would it happen if it was a partner outside of the EU, for argument's sake, Thailand, Pakistan, somewhere?

for argument's sake, Thailand, Pakistan, somewhere? We would have to make sure that we were fitting with the legislation of the country if they affect the students when they're studying abroad. But largely, all of these fit into the same sort of framework as the ones we have in the UK. So more or less, if we're meeting the framework that we have in the UK, we're meeting the ones of others.

So if you're designing for accessibility for all, then effectively you shouldn't have a problem meeting those requirements. Okay, thanks, Sam. Luke, did you have anything you'd like to add? Yeah, I guess just from a personal level, really. I think Lynn and Sam have covered things really nicely from sort of the top level and the business level that we have to meet as a university. But I guess ultimately, we want everyone to be able to access all of their learning resources, their assessments.

If I'm just narrowing in on my job, we want people to be able to access our suite of tools without facing any barriers. And we know that not everyone declares their disabilities with the university, whatever they might be.

And I think that's quite common across the sector.

And people will try and make things work as best they can for themselves with extra add-ons to browsers or onto their laptops that we may never know about.

never know about. And so if we, as a team, but also people creating their learning resources, their lecture notes and things can make things as accessible as possible, that's better for everyone, not just the percentage of people who come into the university and say, yes, I have this additional need or make contact with the disability team. Yeah, because quite often adaptations that we make are actually really useful for everybody, so don't they?

so don't they? I use dark mode on all of my Microsoft Office applications because I find it so much easier to read white text on a dark background.

That probably is related to something I've never picked into with myself, but it certainly wouldn't be something I would have done at the University of Business, but there'll be hundreds of people out there who do the same thing. And that's really important to take into account.

And actually, that's something that to go into Blackboard.

Blackboard doesn't have a dark mode feature. I have requested it from the vendor and it has got enough support within the sector and other clients of their service that they are planning to implement it. Oh, that's really good.

And I'm thinking as well, like the recordings, they started off with one particular purpose of the thing, which was to support people who couldn't be in the class, but on Collaborate or in Blackboard.

But actually, it's really good if you want to just review. It's really good if you didn't pick everything up in the lecture.

I think the transcripts are like, say, for example, like we're doing today, recording a podcast, it's very good to actually look at a piece of audio or video and actually work out what was said when you can go to the correct point and actually not have to look through the entire thing.

entire thing. So, you know, it's things that have been created for others that I think I use more probably than I'm even aware of. Yeah, and I'd agree. I mean, there are times like, you know, talking personally sitting on the bus where it's easy to have the subtitles up on the video than try and listen because you've got noise around you or if you're in a noisy cafe working, whatever. So I think you absolutely understand there is that element. I was always useless at note taking in lectures when I was studying, so being able to have had recordings of the lectures that I could go back to and like, say, either search through the transcript or put on times one and a half times two speed to scrub back through to the bits that I struggled to really catch would have been game changing for me. Yeah, but we didn't have that at the time. So those are some really good points. So you've already started touching on this, but what is your team doing to specifically support accessibility?

support accessibility? Well, as I mentioned it, I think I'll jump in here.

So I mentioned the module design workshops that we've put in place and I mentioned UDL, University Design for Learning. We've included these in our workshops because it's really important that we design with accessibility in mind because it's easier to design from the beginning than it is to try and retrospectively make something accessible.

And I just wanted to read this quote from the UDL to change the design of the environment rather than to situate the problem as a perceived deficit within the learner.

When environments are intentionally designed to reduce barriers, every learner can engage in rigorous, meaningful learning. And I think that just, you know, that's what we've talked about earlier.

So from the perspective of this team, as I said, we're looking at Blackboard and how we can make that more accessible. And one of the things that we do have within

Blackboard is our Ally technology.

So this is automatically available on every Blackboard site and it enables students to access the resources that you've put on a Blackboard in a different format to what you've put them on there. So for example, if you uploaded a Word document, the students can download that Word document in a variety of formats. So I'm just going to read from the list so I don't miss any out.

You've got a tagged PDF format, which is structured for improved use with assistive technology.

You've got HTML, which is better for viewing on browser and mobile devices.

And just as an aside, we are aware that students are increasingly accessing Blackboard on mobile devices on their phone, for example. So that becomes increasingly important.

EPUB for reading as an ebook. So, you know, for example, new iPad and other ebook readers.

Electronic Braille for electronic braille displays.

Audio and what's called Beeline Reader. Now this is an enhanced version, which is easier for reading on screens. So it aids comprehension and grammar skills.

So those are the different formats that Ally offers automatically and then staff don't have to do anything to enable it. It is just on the Blackboard. And I think what I'd really like to do in this podcast is just really encourage staff to promote the use of Ally to their students because I don't know how many students are aware of this and it could really be helpful if they know that it's there.

So from a staff perspective, Ally does provide an indication of the accessibility of the resources that you place onto Blackboard. So as an instructor, you have a little dashboard indicator. And when you click on this, you get an accessibility score for your content and it will provide you with guidance on how you can actually improve the accessibility of that resource in Blackboard. But we would also say what we offer is support in staff in using Ally. So there are workshops that can be signed up for. You can contact your digital academic developer and we'd be more than happy to give any advice and assist you with using that.

So those that make the start of the things that we do, I'll hand over to Sam. Yeah, just to pick up on one of the things before I talk about the things I wanted to. In terms of where staff can help us to aid students really is when they're doing an induction for students at the start of the year. They're going through their Blackboards and commenting about it.

If they turn on student preview mode to show it as a student would see it. If they showcase what that A symbol is, then that will go a long way to actually making sure that all students see what alternatives are available that Ally's providing.

And it's a great service. It means that we don't have to provide so much. It saves us a lot of time providing those alternatives.

So I think that's something that wish for any listener to this to be able to do in their practice and to continue to do that throughout the year just to make sure the students do that.

And then for those that don't declare that they've got any impairments or anything, that will be really useful for them. Absolutely.

So other things that we might do is sort of, you know, we provide accessibility advice via the PG cap. So we do sessions on that to members of staff.

So making sure they're aware of what they need to do by law and what they need to, you know, the best ways and the things to get started with effectively.

We've been working with senior academic developers to make key documentation such as the university's module handbook and standard presentations accessible.

You know, it's those sort of lower level elements that actually build up accessibility across the whole. I mean, up until about three years ago, the university module handbook wasn't accessible.

university module handbook wasn't accessible. And it was I think it was Claire Lofman in the senior academic development team that actually said, well, this is this is ridiculous. Why are we doing this?

we doing this? So essentially, that has made a big impact across the entire university. We also provide, so say, for example, recommendations for how we might provide support for members of staff and their students.

So pointing out accessibility features. I don't know, Luke, if you're planning to talk about the accessibility features or tools.

But it's things like browser add ons, extensions, etc, like that, and other accessibility features within the university. So you can do quite easily. So there are some bits and pieces that you would need more time for.

But I will hand over to Luke before I talk a bit more about that, because I don't know if you might want to talk a bit more about that. Those sort of accessibility features, I mean, it would be a good place to start with those are particularly based around the laptop and what else the university offer, because there's so many that you can download if you've got any sort of university loans, their own device, there's there's a whole world of tools out there, and they're not all going to be great. Some of them, some of them will be so it will be good people to talk to about that from from within our own remit.

Lynn's mentioned ally, which is great, and we try and promote it as much as we can is available in every single blackboard module.

I, I really like the beeline reader.

I really struggle with large paragraphs of text. I just find I just zone out too quickly. So the beeline reader helps because it adds color to different color gradients.

So that's just me. I think otherwise, in terms of what I see that we're doing as a team to support academic accessibility is so we work with our vendors a lot. We've got a core set of services that plug into to make sure that they are keeping themselves to task in terms of their accessibility standards.

Some like pebble pad are really good. They're really on it.

Others slightly less so and we in the community around them try and gently nudge them into making their tools as accessible as possible.

We also attend focus groups with vendors as well.

We're very active in that regard so that we're getting the voice across just that we're hearing from our university as well. So we're representing that. I don't use the word basic, but at a basic level, I guess we're a critical friend to our staff as well in terms of how they might design their learning materials and you know it's that whole thing. The simpler, the simpler, the better. Yeah. That's why you go to design days and things, isn't it? So that you could be having a safe right from the beginning of planning a curriculum.

Because otherwise, I don't know about you, I get used to using the same templates over and over again or the same documents that I know this one worked for me a couple of years ago so I'll just keep using that and actually that document might be wildly inaccessible but I'm just used to using it and it rolls on and on and on every year and I copy it forward and I copy it forward but actually I probably could do with starting completely afresh on that document and just taking the core content over.

The other one that we've done a few times now, last few years, is around Global Accessibility Awareness Day.

So it's usually I think 15th of March, middle of March. May. May rather, 15th of May, thank you.

Too many M's and A's. But yeah, middle of May and we've used that day and the week leading up to it to promote Ally and other resources. We've worked with the IT trainers, for example. We've worked on workshops around various tools around accessible parts of practice for Blackboard just to try and tie into what's a worldwide way of recognising accessibility standards and the need to drive that. And so we've tried to tie into that just to raise a bit of visibility because otherwise I don't think there's anything else that goes up anywhere else around the university so we try and hide that as much as possible.

So you've covered a lot of the idea of the kind of things that they could turn to you for.

So in terms of accessibility advice, we're always there.

So say, for example, someone wants to plan their sort of sessions over the period, we will tell them what generic advice we require and then say, for example, a bit more into each session. So it could be advice around what Ally is telling them, you know, or what do I need to do first, that sort of thing. I mean, accessibility is a goal to aim for. You should start off, you know, let me rephrase that. It's not a goal, it's something which we should all have but there are smaller elements that you can work on first such as alt tags for images, et cetera, you know, making sure that the documents are in a certain format so that they meet, say, for example, the British Dyslexia Association, they've got a way of providing those sort of things.

In terms of the other things which the team can do, we do more in the background, which is when we buy a new piece of software, we will look at the accessibility of the tool. Now, if members of staff are going out there and they're going to buy a new piece of software, we can be a third party to actually comment on how accessible that is. Do they have an accessibility statement or, you know, in American format it's a VPAT statement because there is lots of things we need to do to make sure that accessibility is in the product. As Luke has already said, we do sort of championing for accessibility with our suppliers.

We will make changes every few years, everyone will remember them, move to Blackboard Ultra a few years ago.

We moved from original, which was largely, it was accessible in some ways but not

really a lot.

So essentially we will move the university into a, or help them to move to a more accessible practice. And then we do other things such as training sessions, et cetera, which people can sign up to. So I think there's probably everything, unless you can think of anything else, Lynne, that we wanted. No, I think that covers it really well into, you know, we're here to help, I think is the main message that we're going to get across to staff. I think sometimes people can think, oh, you're busy or I don't want to, but I mean, I'm in the same department. I mean, LTE as well, but, you know, obviously, because you're the digital academic developer with education and the PG Cat fans under that always meet with you, Sam, at the beginning of the year to try and make the Blackboard as good as possible and with obviously inclusive practice in mind and wanting to make things accessible. So I just think people should feel that that's what they can do. Absolutely.

Yeah. Come to us. To use a phrase, we're never too busy for accessibility. No, absolutely. I mean, that's quite a strapline, really, that perhaps we can do, but we can't be because everyone has the right to be able to view all of their course materials in the way that they need to see it. And it's up to us to really to make that as easy as possible for the academic or professional service members of staff to do. So that is really what we try and do is actually turn things around and say, well, how we've got to meet this standard. How do we do it in the most time efficient way possible? Some things we can't make time efficient, but there's a lot we can and that's what we try and strive for. OK, so finally, then would you say there are any quick wins for staff if they want to get started on accessibility? You've always mentioned loads of resources, but where's a good starting point? Well, we've got loads of resources on our staff knowledge base, particularly around accessibility with loads on Ally as well. And we'll try and promote as much of that through the there's a link in the board modules that goes out. That's hidden from students, but it's just a staff sort of how to get started, how to set things up, key contacts. So that's a really useful place to get started. We've also got on there on our knowledge base loads of things that we've done for Global Accessibility Awareness Day, particularly from this year. We really tried to make a concerted effort to put some tips together. It's a tip a day for the for the full week. But also, as Sam said, it's I guess the quick, the quickest win is building very simple accessibility routes in from the very start of building a document. So I think we're all part of a generation where I think I think of something like PowerPoint. PowerPoint became this big thing and it could do lots of wizzy, complicated, colorful things. And it took a while for the majority of people to realize that actually doing that might look great to some, but it's not it's not the best thing for accessibility. So probably the quickest way is to go back to basics. Start simply use the tools that are built into the likes of PowerPoint or Word. There are inbuilt accessibility checkers, use the heading styles, use bulleted lists for bulleted lists. Don't underline things that don't need to be underlined because the majority of a digital or tech savvy audience will think those are hyperlinks. Go back to the basics. And that ties to what Sam said about being a critical friend. And I think it's that we're aware that these things are time sensitive as well. So it's often the simpler the better is the quickest way and keep it simple. Just to be clear, tell knowledge base is on the blackboard home page, isn't it? Correct. Yeah. So people can find it. Yeah. I think in terms of quick wins for me is the things that I got used to using these things by trying them out. So go into Ally, look at what the alternative formats are so that you are aware of some of these things. So try the Beeline Reader. It's great. Try the text to audio bit. I use that quite a lot. Try Dark Mode. I know loads of members of staff use Dark Mode. In actual fact, they come back up to me and say, you know, is Blackboard got Dark Mode yet? Or has Turnitin got Dark Mode yet? We're working on it. We're working on it. And we've got a champion in the team that's doing it. But it's things like that, utilizing those sort of things, becoming aware, just in case you get the old question from a student, something you can answer quite quickly and

you're aware. And you'll probably be aware that these things help you as much as it will them. So I think that's probably my bit of advice about quick wins. The other bit is, say, for example, always making sure that your images have alternative text on them to describe what that is. And you can speak to your digital academic developer about how much information you need to put in that. I just wanted to add something Sam said there, which is a really good point. It's that staff can use Ally the same way that students can to get accessible for all multiple versions, formats of these documents. It's not just available to students in that regard. The bit of Ally that staff have access to that students don't is the sort of reporting and remediation side where they can then see what challenges might be in place on certain documents. But they can absolutely use it themselves as well to pull off MP3 versions of documents and things like that. It's really powerful in that regard. The only thing I was just going to add to what I said before is when it comes to trialing out some things, when it comes to extensions and browsers, just a plea from my data security head on, is make sure that you use something which is legitimate, genuine and has very good reviews. If you're worried whether something is reputable or not, have a chat with IT because they can tell you because some of these extensions can ask for a bit too much data. And essentially, if it's a lot of the accessible elements are free, so therefore what data is it handing off to something else? So just keep that in mind. And if colleagues in IT can help with in terms of the browser features, but I just wanted to make sure that that was put in there. I don't care everything that's been said. And my main advice is make a start somewhere. Just have a look at Ally. And it may seem daunting to begin with. And as Luke said, if you design with digital accessibility in mind rather than trying to retrospectively fit something, it does make it easier. So as we said, use the accessibility checker in Microsoft and look at your Blackboard module accessibility report for Ally and see if there are any quick wins, things like adding alternative text for the Blackboard resources. But I think my main, as you say, my main advice, my quick win is just do make a start. It may seem daunting to begin with, but once you incorporate it into your practice every day, it does become part of what you do rather than an extra add on. And obviously, I think, as I said earlier, if we can promote Ally to students, that would be great as well. But that's me. So thank you for a very interesting podcast. If you have any last things you want to add. Great. So thank you. So thank you for listening to the Spotlight on Best Practices podcast on digital accessibility. We hope you have enjoyed this episode and please look out for further learning and teaching podcasts.