

# Chapter 10

## Establishing an Assistive Technology–Enabled Culture at the University of York: Reflections on a Values–Based Strategy

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This institutional case study outlines the journey that the University of York (United Kingdom) has been taking towards establishing an assistive technology-enabled culture across the university. A change management strategy is not the first thing that comes to mind when asked to think about how best to advance equality and inclusion in an organisation. However, the authors argue that digital inclusion is not about making quick technical fixes to systems, nor is it about focusing on improvements for disabled students only. Instead, it is about the slow and steady progress in creating and embedding an inclusive culture within an organisation that benefits all categories of students. They challenge the assumption that setting standards will bring about a level playing field. Instead, the authors report on how using a people-centred change management strategy has helped the University of York to promote equity and inclusion, and the impact that this has had in making sustainable changes to digital working practices, informed by policy, training, and guidance provision.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter will discuss the change management strategy that was employed at the University of York (United Kingdom) in the face of new accessibility regulations intended to improve equity and inclusion for students. It is a case study of the wide range of human-centred actions that were undertaken to stimulate a community focused on creating an inclusive environment in a sustainable and generative way. The promotion of accessibility standards at the University since 2007 had resulted in an accessibility score on the virtual learning environment (VLE) of only 57% at the start of 2018, so a new approach had to be taken to stimulate systemic change, with a rise in the accessibility score as one measure of success. Other measures would include the number of action statements generated by staff, showing their commitment to improving accessibility standards and improving equity, and positive student feedback. A change management framework helped to highlight areas of work that were arguably not obvious when thinking about ways to improve things for disabled students. From small-scale user research to large-scale mandatory training, an ecosystem of communities, learning resources, training events, tools, systems and teams had to be sourced, nurtured or developed. This created an environment in which discussions about equity and inclusion could flourish and actions to promote inclusive practice could thrive.

## **BACKGROUND**

The University of York is a medium-sized, research-based university located in the north of England. With circa 22,000 students and 4,600 staff, it has a longstanding commitment to digital inclusion and accessibility. Undergraduate and Postgraduate courses cover Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences and Science disciplines. The University established an e-Accessibility Forum in 2007 to help it to meet its statutory obligations under the Equality Act of 2010. The Forum sought cooperation between staff and students to improve services to disabled students and to improve the accessibility of resources. Students with a declared disability grew year on year in higher education (Bolton & Hubble, 2021) and in the academic year 21/22, 3,674 students or 16.7% declared a disability to the University. With 1 in 6 students telling the University that they have neurodiverse conditions, mental health issues, long term health conditions or physical impairments, it is vital that the learning environment is made as accessible and inclusive as possible to help students succeed.

In 2018, new standards were set in the UK to further improve equity and inclusion through the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018 (Gov.uk, 2018). Also known as “digital accessibility”, this is about making websites and resources as usable by as many people as possible (Gov.uk, 2018). It is the ethos behind the digital accessibility regulations that are based on the World Wide Web Consortium’s (W3C) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA standard. The University had to encourage staff to engage with the new standards.

Due to the scope of the project, an implementation plan was needed that would promote both the breadth and depth of staff and student engagement with digital accessibility good practices. Digital accessibility could have been approached in a top-down way (Kezar, 2011) by announcing baseline standards and deadlines for departments to reach a minimum level of compliance. However, the baseline standards had been available and promoted to staff over a number of years, without leading to any great change in working practices across the institution. An audit of the resources uploaded to the University’s central virtual learning environment in 2018 revealed a significant deficit in the use of document structure,

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