

DIGITAL INCLUSION MANIFESTO

At [Digital Universities Week 2023](#) organised by [Times Higher Education](#) (THE) in Leeds, a number of universities including University of Leeds, University of Liverpool, University of Bristol, and University of Staffordshire, together with the [Digital Poverty Alliance](#) (DPA) and [British Computer Society](#) (BCS) and championed by THE, started a call to action to create a sector-wide digital inclusion strategy to address digital poverty. A small working group comprising colleagues from these institutions/organisations, led by Professors [Raheel Nawaz](#) and [Simeon Yates](#) and coordinated by [Freddie Quek](#) and [Charlotte Coles](#), has drafted this Digital Inclusion Manifesto and the accompanying Toolkit.

Our aim is to establish a global Higher Education Digital Inclusion Network comprising higher education institutions, organisations and stakeholders linked with digital education, with a view to enable and support digital inclusion activities in higher education across the world. To this end, THE has created a [register of interest](#) for institutions, organisations, and individuals to be part of this global network.

DIGITAL INCLUSION

At a minimum level, Digital Inclusion in the context of higher education institutions can be framed as universal access for (at least) all internal stakeholders to the following:

1. Affordable high speed internet service
2. Accessible connected devices
3. IT/Digital training
4. Quality technical support
5. Online content that encourages independent use of digital platforms

THE CALL TO ACTION

At a time when digital transformation is redefining the boundaries of knowledge and learning, it is imperative to create an inclusive digital environment in higher education for students, staff and wider communities. This manifesto is a call to action for higher education institutions to foster the principles of accessibility, equality, diversity, inclusion, and empowerment to ensure that all stakeholders have sufficient access digital technologies, resources, training, and support. Furthermore, it recognises that higher education institutions have a role to play to improve digital inclusion for not only staff and students, but also communities, businesses, and voluntary sector organisations. It also calls on educators, policymakers, students, technologists and community and civic partners to unite in the creation of an equitable and inclusive digital learning ecosystem.

CORE PRINCIPLES

We have identified the three core principles that should underpin institutional strategies for digital inclusion:

1. Accessibility

- a. **Universal Design** – application of universal design principles to ensure all learning, teaching, and communication materials, are accessible for all, regardless of physical or cognitive abilities
- b. **Assistive Technologies** – incorporation of a variety of assistive technologies to support diverse learner needs
- c. **Affordability** – availability of affordable digital platforms and resources for all stakeholders
- d. **Skills Barriers** – recognition and mitigation of the fact that some people are excluded from higher education due to limited existing digital skills
- e. **Partnerships** – working with community, civic and business partners to extend the inclusive digital environment beyond the walls of the institution

2. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

- a. **Equal Opportunities** - ensuring that every learner has equal opportunities to participate, contribute, and succeed in digital environments
- b. **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy** – adaption of curricula and teaching methods to reflect and respect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of students
- c. **Affirmative Action** – implementation of measures to identify and address inequalities and barriers faced by marginalised communities
- d. **Safe and Inclusive Environment** – promotion of a learning environment where everyone feels valued, respected, and included, free from discrimination, prejudice, and harassment
- e. **Global Perspectives** – integration of global perspectives and multicultural approaches to foster understanding, empathy, and collaboration among students from different backgrounds

3. Empowerment

- a. **Person-Centric Approach:** Developing and maintaining digital platforms and curricula that are person-centric, and address individual learning needs, preferences, and goals
- b. **Lifelong Learning and CPD:** Encouraging and facilitating continuous learning, skill development, and knowledge acquisition beyond formal education settings for staff, students and wider communities
- c. **Digital Literacy:** Equipping staff, students and wider communities with the essential skills and knowledge needed to navigate, utilize, and contribute to the digital world responsibly and effectively

This manifesto is a call to action for all stakeholders to commit to fostering a digital learning environment in higher education that is accessible, inclusive, equitable, empowering, and conducive to the holistic development of every learner. By embracing the principles and strategic actions outlined below, we can collectively build a more inclusive and equitable digital future for all.

STRATEGY TO ACHIEVE DIGITAL INCLUSION

Indicative ways in which we might implement the above digital inclusion pillars and core principles include:

1. Policies and strategies
 - a. Explicitly incorporate digital inclusion in staff recruitment and development processes
 - b. Identify role-related inclusive digital capabilities and link them to job descriptions and performance reviews
 - c. Be specific about the importance of assistive technology and productivity tools
 - d. Encourage, share, and reward good practice in inclusive use of technology
 - e. Encourage initiatives that extend digital inclusion beyond the walls of the university
2. Education and training
 - a. Provide inclusive teaching practice guidelines, standards and training to support all staff
 - b. Provide templates and varied staff development opportunities that enable everyone to create accessible documents and rich media as a base line
 - c. Curriculum - Include usability criteria in all module design and specification processes so that course curricula and assessments are designed to be inclusive
 - d. Inclusive navigation: consistent layout, clear organisation, meaningful heading structure, colour, and word count tips
 - e. Helping students orientate themselves at the beginning of the course, e.g., welcome video, module summaries, learning aims and icebreaker activities
 - f. Communication: opportunities for feedback and discussion, help forums for students to interact and evaluate digital resources
 - g. Open digital skills development opportunities to communities and business partners
3. Service provision
 - a. Provide technological infrastructure and software to enable staff to deliver accessible content
 - b. Adapt IT policies to support extensive use of accessible rich media
 - c. Ensure networks and technical support for widespread access to assistive technology and productivity tools
 - d. Embed digital inclusion in procurement and commissioning processes
 - e. Don't digitally exclude- consult the widest range of learners, both within and external to the university at the outset
 - f. Build in usability checks at the start of procurement process for digital solutions and platforms
 - g. Reference relevant usability and Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) criteria
 - h. Allocate responsibility for digital inclusion in web and design management
4. Cooperation and collaboration
 - a. Include staff and students in research, development, implementation and evaluation of digital solutions and platforms
 - b. Encourage collaboration between local education, community, civic and business sectors to extend the reach and impact of digital inclusion initiatives within regions
5. Research and development
 - a. Be up to date with latest technological advances and facilitate access to these where relevant
Evaluate practice and manifesto implementation

DIGITAL INCLUSION TOOLKIT

The following can be used for quick self-assessment, reference for developing institutional strategies and policies, and monitoring progress against the three core principles:

ACCESSIBILITY

Currently my organisation	Responsible Teams	Yes	No	Maybe	N/A
Conducts regular accessibility audits and testing of the university website involving people with lived experience of digital exclusion as appropriate					
Ensures that the website complies with international accessibility standards, such as WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines).					
Maintains a list of recommended accessible software and technology tools.					
Provides access to digital hardware and services to allow those struggling with digital poverty to access their materials					
Provides an accessible alternative for multimedia content, such as transcripts for videos and audio descriptions.					
Ensures there is high quality training and support available to staff and students for all educational software and applications used within the organisation					
Provides training, guidelines and resources for staff on creating accessible course materials.					
Ensures that the LMS is accessible to students with disabilities, including those using screen readers.					
Promotes the use of open educational resources (OER) and accessible e-books to reduce barriers related to textbook costs.					
Staff are conscious of the challenges faced by students and wider communities experiencing digital poverty and considers this when designing modules/courses and other digital initiatives					
Students with disabilities have timely access to accessible versions of required course materials.					
Students have access to course content in preparation for their instructor led session					
Staff use accessible formats for course materials and other external engagement activity, including digital documents, presentations, and multimedia content.					
Staff design online assessments and tests with accessibility features in mind, allowing students with disabilities to participate fully.					
Staff provide alternative assessment methods for students who require accommodations.					

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

Currently my organisation	Responsible Teams	Yes	No	Maybe	N/A
Develops and communicates clear digital accessibility policies and guidelines for the university community.					
Raises awareness of digital poverty and considers this in design of services and courses					
Raises awareness about the importance of digital accessibility within the organisational community.					
Provides information about available accommodations and resources for students with disabilities.					
Included accessibility requirements in procurement processes and vendor contracts for digital products and services.					
Established a dedicated support team to assist students, faculty, and staff with accessibility-related questions and issues.					
Encourage faculty to adopt inclusive teaching and engagement practices that consider diverse learning needs.					
Support research and development of innovative accessibility solutions and technologies.					
Share best practice case studies to demonstrate to staff					
Collect and use feedback from students, staff and the wider community on their experiences with digital accessibility as part of their monitoring and evaluation of the university's digital accessibility efforts.					
Publish accessibility reports and progress updates for transparency and accountability.					

EMPOWERMENT

Currently my organisation	Responsible Teams	Yes	No	Maybe	N/A
Collaborates with other institutions and organisations to share knowledge and resources related to digital inclusion.					
Partners with disability support organizations, advocacy groups and community sector partners who work directly with people who are digitally excluded to enhance inclusion efforts.					
Enables staff to understand the characteristics and individual needs of students on their courses					
Has a dedicated team whose remit includes training and support in digital platforms and digital pedagogy that are person-centric.					
Encourages staff to create accessible and inclusive course content using Universal Design for Learning					
Ensures that staff have access to digital capability diagnostic tools to audit their own skills					
Enable staff to access training on digital inclusion in various formats to suit their needs and schedules					
Embeds opportunities for students to develop digital skills and digital literacy before and during their courses					
Extends the opportunity to learn basic digital skills to communities, voluntary sector and business partners through innovative partnerships.					
Ensures that staff are trained in content capture software					
Monitors and evaluates the training it provides and the impact on staff, student and community digital skills and literacy					