AllAble

Thomas Pocklington Trust

Executive Summary:

Technology and accessibility in further education (FE)

Blind and partially sighted student access to information and assistive technology (AT) in further education.

Report delivered by All Able Ltd on behalf of Thomas Pocklington Trust

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Blind and partially sighted students in college

Many young people choose to leave school and move into college, to help them take that next step into adulthood. This is an exciting time for any student as they hone their education, into the area of work they would like to enter and take those next steps to independence.

This is the same path chosen by many blind and partially sighted young people. However, we know that their journey can often encounter many barriers that aren't experienced by their peers. Through surveying colleges, speaking to learning support teams and blind and partially sighted students, we have identified that there is a lack of compliance with accessibility regulations across the sector and a prevailing culture where accessibility is not built in to support equal opportunities for disabled students.

Vision impairment is a low incidence disability, 0.2% of children and young people up to the age of 25 in the UK are estimated to have a vision impairment. Understandably a mainstream college may not be an expert in knowing exactly what support is needed, however their websites and learning platforms are required to be accessible. Systems should be in place to enable them to identify and meet the needs of blind or partially sighted students.

No two blind or partially sighted students are the same, each will use their sight differently and will access information in a different way. However, there are several approaches that can be taken to ensure that colleges and further education providers are accessible.

Improving organisational digital accessibility can reduce the amount of one-to-one support, enabling blind and partially sighted students to learn more independently and help prepare them for transition into higher education (HE).

An accessible-by-design approach to learning, teaching and assessment resources can improve the quality of the learning experience for all.

Getting the basics right: accessibility of websites

All public sector providers are legally required to have an accessibility statement on their website. The statement should set out how accessible their websites are, what are they doing to make it accessible and provide a route for any complaints or issues to be raised.

Having an accessible website for students is vital as it allows prospective and current students to access information about the college and indicates an awareness that the college realises the importance of accessibility.

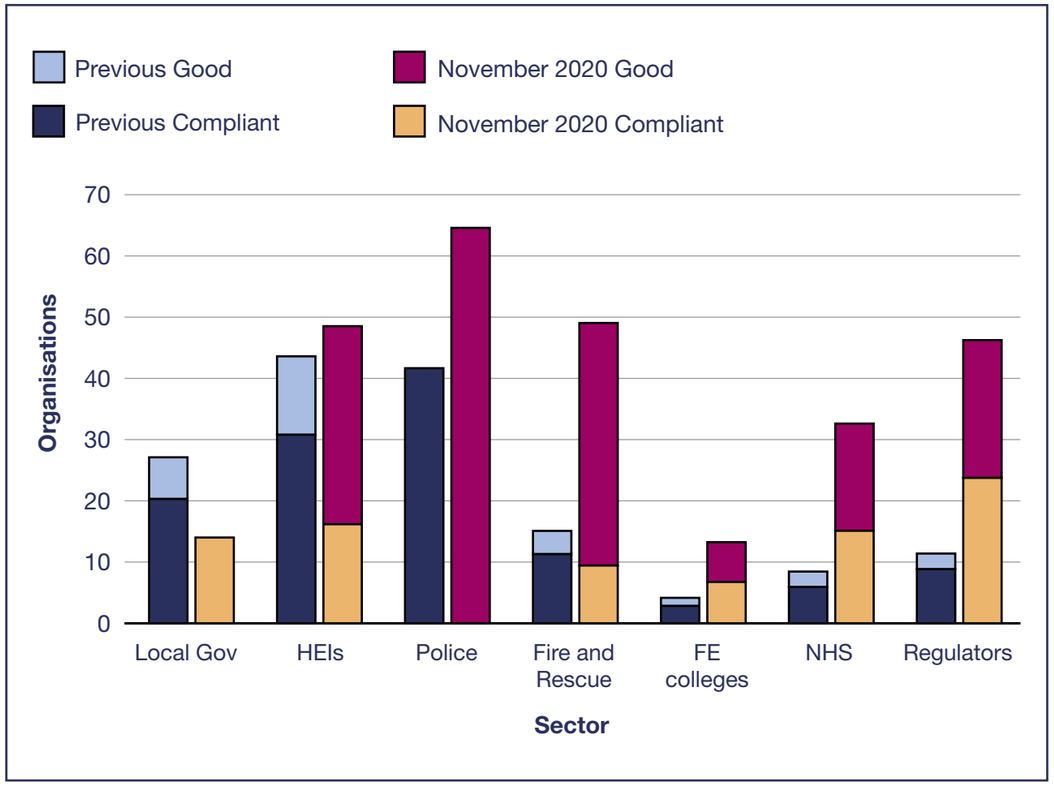
We audited the websites of 427 FE colleges in the UK and graded as: compliant, good, partial, poor, or no statement (against the **All Able Ltd accessibility statement grading methodology**), to assess the extent they are meeting the 2018 regulations. We also did this for Higher Education (HE) providers, local government organisations and others within the public sector which has allowed us to benchmark their progress.

Worryingly, we found that 8 out of 10 colleges in the UK do not provide legally required accessibility information.

We are concerned that

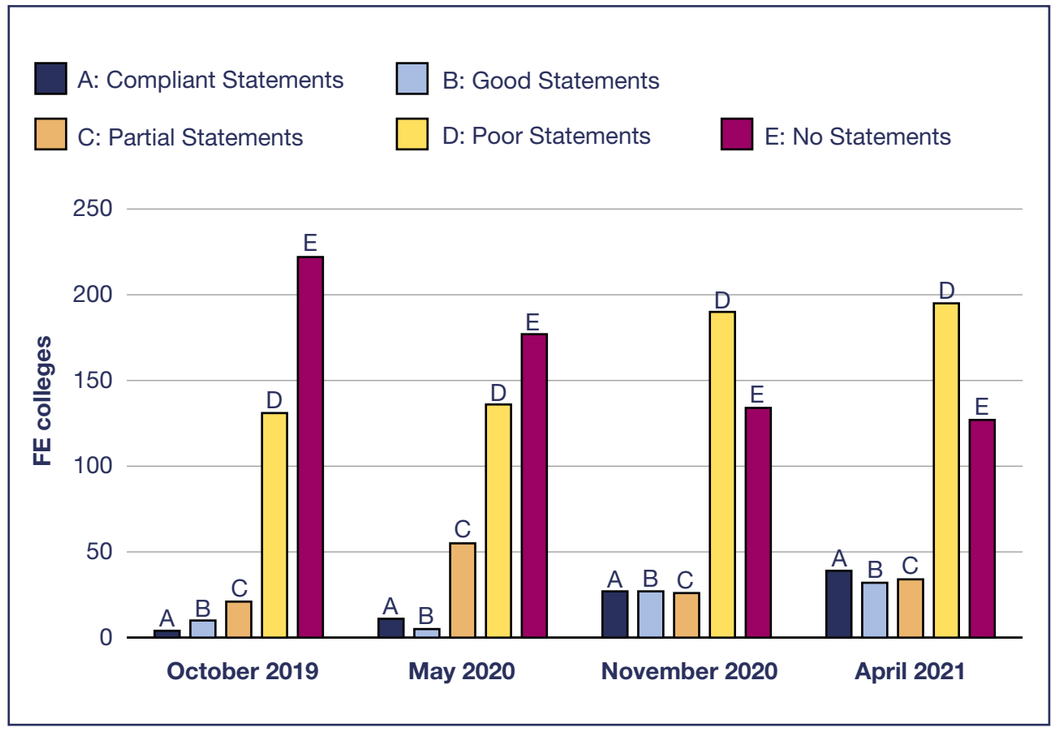
- **Only 13% of colleges are fully compliant compared to half of local government (53%) and universities (49%)**
- **Between October 2019 and April 2021, there has been very little growth in compliant statements, an increase from 4 to 39 (1% to 9%) out of 427 organisations**
- **Out of the 107 statements which claim a level of compliance, only 11 say they are fully compliant. A further 91 say they are partially compliant and 5 not compliant**
- **Nine out of ten (90%) of colleges that attempt monitoring the accessibility of their websites, list at least one accessibility barrier with their services.**

Compliance and good attempt changes May 2020 - November 2020



Graph 1: Percentage levels of compliant and good attempt accessibility statements by FE colleges compared to other groups (including universities, local government, etc.)

FE Statements Growth October 2019 - April 2021



Graph 2: Growth of accessibility statement compliance across the FE sector October 2019 – April 2020

These results represent a disadvantage to disabled students in FE. Front facing information is not accessible and presents barriers. The poor information provided by most statements leave students not able to access information that their peers can.

We are concerned that this is symptomatic of a sector that is unable to react and potentially indicates a lack of awareness at leadership level of their legal responsibilities.

Put simply, colleges are not delivering the accessible information they are required to by law.

Making informed decisions about which college to choose

There is a lack of pathways within colleges to know how and what support is available for blind and partially sighted students.

To help us understand how prospective students are directed to student support information and college contact information, we contacted a selection of colleges (who had agreed to receive feedback on this exercise) through their generic contact routes (e.g., email or web form). A student persona was used for consistency of a prospective blind student who;

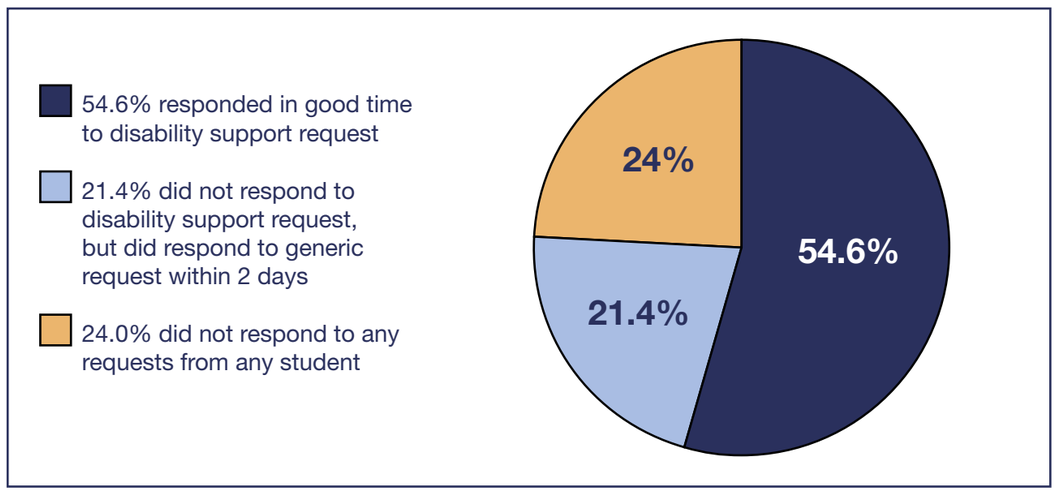
i) **wanted to be put in touch with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)/Assisted Learning Support (ALS) disabled student support and**
ii) **to know about the accessibility of platforms used by the college i.e., the college's digital platforms.**

The responses indicated a worrying mixture, in the quality and usefulness of guidance and information provided to prospective blind and partially sighted students. Tellingly, almost half (45%) of colleges contacted did not respond.

When a response was received the student persona, was often directed to the appropriate learning support team. However, the quality of the responses was poor. Many failed to provide useful information;

- **34% could not even say which virtual learning environments were being used**
- **Only 3% gave legally required information on compliance or directed to useful compatibility information for disabled students.**

College Respondents



Graph 3: College respondents to persona requests

We contacted all colleges that did respond again, this time we used a persona that made no mention of vision impairment.

We found;

- **21% that did not respond to the disability support email, responded within two days to the query that did not mention disability**
- **A quarter of colleges (24%) did not respond to student queries at all.**

The lack of engagement with a prospective student indicates that colleges are not geared up to responding to queries from blind and partially sighted students. We are deeply concerned that if a student mentions their vision impairment, that it is likely to cause a delay or no response.

When speaking to colleges that had not responded we found that;

- **There is a clear disconnect between front line communications and SEND/ ALS support teams**
- **Colleges barely have any information on the accessibility of public facing systems and practically no information on internal systems that can be easily shared with those requesting information**
- **Because of the lack of accessibility awareness for internal systems, there is a continued reliance on one-to-one support and remediation, as opposed to an accessibility-by-design approach.**

Accessible-by-design

The SEND/ALS teams are crucial in ensuring that blind or partially sighted students can access their course. However, through detailed conversations with SEND/ALS staff and our survey of 11 colleges, we identified that their skill sets and resource are not being used effectively. Key findings show;

- **Lack of staff awareness on disability and adjustments**
- **Over reliance on one-to-one support**
- **Lack of organisational inclusion, accessibility, and anticipatory adjustments**
- **Failure to effectively support the delivery and effective use of AT provision.**

Worryingly, some colleges disclosed that they were hesitant to engage, as they are concerned of inadvertently incriminating themselves for lack of compliance or placing themselves at risk of Equality Act challenges.

We found that there is a lack of inclusive practice creating a barrier to accessibility. This was seen in inaccessible software, systems, processes, and a prevailing culture in colleges, where student support departments are viewed as the only teams in colleges that have a responsibility to anticipate the requirements of people with disabilities.

> "It just seems every time they tell you there's something fantastic you can do for visually impaired students there's always something bigger that's going to prevent it from being used. It's like we've got a train that does everything but we're going to put a barrier in the way of the tracks, so it doesn't matter how fast that train goes, it's not going to get anywhere because something is going to stop it, like the exams, like the software."
>
> **(ALS team member)**

Voices from the sector

The interviews we undertook with staff and students in colleges evidenced the human impact of failings. There were numerous examples of blind and partially sighted students being directly disadvantaged on account of their disability. This had a significant impact on their sense of belonging and their hope of future prospects;

> "Honestly, it kind of makes me question my future...like if they're not adapting any of the stuff [learning materials] ...why even bother to put in the effort? It makes me lose confidence in learning and whether I'm going to be able to actually get a job or go to uni or pursue what I want to do…I sometimes feel like I just kind of get ignored."
>
> **(Student with a vision impairment)**

The following themes were identified;

- **Lack of organisational inclusion, accessibility, and anticipatory adjustments**
- **Over reliance on SEND/ALS teams**
- **Failure to effectively support the delivery and effective use of AT provision**
- **Lack of staff disability awareness.**

> "And that's the thing, a lot of people that make decisions don't know what they're making decisions about because they've never experienced [disability], so they don't know what it's like...If it was their child in the room with a visual impairment you can guarantee their attitude would be different. And that's not the way it should be."
>
> **(Student with a vision impairment)**

Recommendations

> “I feel I am a good learner and want to learn. Unfortunately, the big impact is, I can’t really do it on my own.”
>
> **(Student with a vision impairment)**

Every blind and partially sighted student should have access to a quality college education. To enable this, there are clear actions that Government, college leadership and college staff must take to improve support available for blind and partially sighted students.

1. **Urgent action required to improve legal compliance with accessibility regulations across the FE sector for digital systems and learning resources.**

   The UK Government must target existing guidance at college leadership level, so that they are clear of their digital accessibility legal requirements and the broader benefits of investment in this area towards an inclusive education for all. If this is not addressed, colleges are leaving themselves open to significant legal risk and failing to provide the bare minimum for students.

2. **College leadership should deliver an accessible-by-design approach in FE colleges.**

   College leadership, with the support of the UK Government, should urgently put resource into improving compliance with the regulatory framework and remove barriers so that mainstream assistive technologies have maximum impact for all students (particularly students with disabilities and additional access needs).

3. **FE colleges must effectively resource and support SEND/ALS teams to encourage organisational adoption of more inclusive mainstream accessibility practices.**

   This includes being able to use procurement to ‘ensure third party suppliers to deliver accessible software, systems, and services to support colleges in meeting accessibility obligations.

4. **FE colleges must ensure access to AT and effective training for partially sighted students in FE.**

   It cannot be assumed that all blind and partially sighted students in FE are fully confident in the use of assistive technologies. They should be supported throughout their time in FE to develop skills and confidence in the use of assistive technologies and alternative format techniques, as well as being encouraged to self-advocate to represent their needs to college staff to ensure that they are met.

5. **FE colleges should embed accessibility training for all students in FE colleges as a core employability skill.**

   This provides the additional benefit that non-disabled students on the same modules as partially sighted students will better understand their requirements to further support inclusion in group work and presentations.

Practical recommendations

An accessible-by-design approach should be at the heart of how any college supports disabled students. To enable this colleges must;

1. **Implement a digital accessibility policy**, making it clear that delivering an accessible by design approach is the responsibility of all staff, not just SEND/ALS teams.
2. **Map the extent of the college digital estate and student interactions with college systems and resources.** Identify the accessibility issues for each website / system / platform / learning resource system and prioritise remediation to those areas that will have the greatest impact first.
3. **Ensure policy and processes are in place and followed by digital content teams.** Creators of web pages and learning resources must deliver content which meets basic accessibility standards.
4. **Invest in training to support staff** in learning basic accessibility principles and adjustments to improve and create accessible content. For example, supporting learning resource creators in understanding how to make fully accessible documents, provide high quality text descriptions for complex images and diagrams.
5. **All colleges must not procure new digital systems that do not meet accessibility standards.**
6. **Engage with all students to foster the creation of a more inclusive community.**

About the research

This paper outlines the findings of research conducted by All Able Ltd on behalf of Thomas Pocklington Trust. The research investigated accessible information practices, compliance with accessibility regulations and how blind and partially sighted students access information and assistive technology (AT) in mainstream further education (FE).

All Able's research incorporates data from a documentary analysis of FE college websites, a survey of Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)/Assisted Learning Support (ALS) teams across the sector, and interviews with students and staff in FE colleges across the UK.

All FE colleges are legally obliged to develop accessible websites, learning, teaching, and assessment materials. However, this research's findings indicate that there is a lack of awareness, engagement, and compliance with these regulations across the FE sector.

The research team

All Able Ltd

All Able is a consulting company committed to using our expertise to help public sector organisations remove barriers and deliver accessible and inclusive services that work for everyone. We believe that everyone should have equal opportunity to utilise public services, get an education, and engage with their communities to live an enjoyable and independent life.

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Thomas Pocklington Trust (TPT)

Thomas Pocklington Trust is a national charity dedicated to enabling and empowering blind and partially sighted people of all ages to live the life they want to lead. We are committed to increasing awareness and understanding of their needs and aspirations, to working with partners and to developing and implementing services which meet these needs to increase independence and improve lives.

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