PRESENTER: Welcome to this ADCET podcast, your gateway to the world of inclusive education in the post-secondary sector.

As part of ADCET’s long running commitment to supporting Universal Design for Learning, or UDL, we’re running a special series of podcasts called UDL In Action, the What, Why and How.

In this episode Darlene talks with Dr Scott Hollier, CEO of the Centre for Accessibility Australia, a not-for-profit collaboration that works to promote digital access. The focus of today’s discussion is a 2022 research project titled Higher Education for All which was undertaken in response to current and prospective students who contacted the centre requesting assistance in navigating several university websites. Over to you, Darlene.

DARLENE MCLENNAN: Welcome, everybody. In 2022 the Centre for Accessibility Australia released a report Higher Education for All.

This project was funded by the Western Australian Government Department of Communities and supported current and prospective students in the higher education sector by addressing critical digital accessibility issues across five Western Australian university websites.

The Centre for Accessibility Australia audited the websites of Curtin University, University of Notre Dame, the University of Western Australia, Murdoch University and Edith Cowan University.

I’m really excited today to welcome Dr Scott Hollier, the CEO and co-founder of the Centre for Accessibility Australia to talk to us about the report and how this work can have an impact and help improve the experience of students with disability in the tertiary sector across Australia.

Welcome, Scott, it’s great to have you today. Thank you, you’re happy to be here, that’s wonderful.

For people who haven’t read or are not familiar with the report can you provide an overview of the report and the key objectives?

DR SCOTT HOLLIER: Yes, certainly. What we found is that we had a number of both potential and existing students knocking on our door saying that they’ve had a number of accessibility challenges in accessing their education or trying to get information about a future course. So, that led us to try and find ways that we could effectively support the sector and so with that we looked to get some funding so that we could really explore and dig into this area.

The project essentially was focusing on both current and prospective students and trying to identify what the primary accessibility issues were both from a student perspective and also from the perspective of designers and developers within the universities who were creating their websites.

We’re very fortunate to get support from the Department of Communities, Western Australia, to be able to undertake that research. So, really the research revolved around trying to find out firstly how accessible is the website portal when you try to get information as a prospective student to connecting with disability services and then, secondly, we did a fair bit of research with focus groups and also students contacting us directly to find out how things are going in the studies like using LMS platforms and connecting with services and things like that.

Through the process of the grant we were able to, as you mentioned in the intro, audit the five websites for accessibility, had those great conversations with current and prospective students and then ultimately did some upskilling to support the universities in improving their processes.

DARLENE: What were some of the accessibility challenges that were faced by the students and by the higher education institutions in this regard?

DR SCOTT HOLLIER: The students were already studying, and this is also an interesting time because COVID was in play as well, the students found that often there was a difference between being students online and being students with face to face classes, the students that either preferred to be online or because of COVID needed to be online they felt that there wasn’t as much support online for their accessibility needs.

What often happened when it came to using the LMS platform is that there were a number of accessibility issues had crept in and some of the really key issues that were identified were things like not having a consistent navigation, so from unit to unit, course to course the layouts of the LMS platform would change. That made it very inconsistent in terms of trying to find the right information. That was presumed to be a design feature just to make the course look nicer or maybe to jazz it up a bit, but because students expected a consistent layout, and certainly by default the LMS would have a consistent layout, the fact that that was changed became quite problematic.

There were a few common accessibility issues that crept in, things like missing alt text on images. Colour contrasts was another big one that was identified and, interestingly, a really big issue that was identified was that often lecturers wouldn’t make use of the LMS. They would often instead of putting course materials in the materials area and assessments in the assessments area they’d often just pile everything into one massive PDF document which was often inaccessible.

The reasoning for that from the lecturers was that it’s much easier just to update one PDF document and upload it than go through and update the course, but the downside to that is you had this very unwieldy massive PDF document that made it very difficult for students with disability and a variety of assistive technologies. Those were very much the key issues that’s talked about in the report.

DARLENE: What methodologies did you employ to make the assessment of the universities’ websites and content?

DR SCOTT COLLIER: In terms of methodology the W3C who produces the web content accessibility guidelines they have a methodology called WCAG-EM which stands for evaluation methodology.

Part of the methodology that we used for this project was the W3C’s own methodology and what that says is that when you are assessing and auditing any content it’s really important that you follow the methodology process which essentially means that you need to form a baseline for your assessment, a baseline of the type of tools you are using. We used a combination of assistive technologies like screen readers, evaluation tools which is an automated process, and digital checks. Then we took a sample page selection of the public facing content and then went through and assessed those.

On the prospective student side of the project, we had a really good look at the public facing content, the first port of call if you like for prospective students, and did those assessments, so WCAG-EM was really important in that process.

Then in terms of our survey instrument we looked more at a qualitative approach when we actually talked to students directly and so we had some focus groups which we ran through the project and also students who did knock on our door prior and throughout the funding gave us some great insights as well.

It was really good to get that combination of formally assessing based on the web content accessibility guidelines with WCAG-EM on the public facing content and then having those student perspectives on the LMS platforms and some of those internal processes as well.

DARLENE: Thank you, Scott, for answering that question so well and also for raising the web content accessibility guidelines.

For those who aren’t familiar with WCAG, can you just provide us a little bit more information around WCAG and the compliance that is expected of higher education and other tertiary providers?

DR SCOTT HOLLIER: Certainly. WCAG, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, is an international standard that supports the creation of accessible content and, although it is called the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, it does broadly also apply to apps and documents, so it’s a great international resource and standard in terms of what we need to do to make content accessible.

There are essentially 13 guidelines and then within that there is what we call success criteria which is testable parts of WCAG. The great thing about the standard is it is a consistent international standard and also recognized by the Australian Human Rights Commission that says that if you don’t make websites compliant to the standard then you do run the risk of being in breach of Section 24 of the Disability Discrimination Act, so there is a lot of recognition of the importance of WCAG.

Certainly in the work that I do and my disability led team we do a lot of auditing of content against that standard. What’s been really interesting in this project is that there have been known site consistent issues that have popped up and the standard really does provide effective guidance in what we do and I did find what those issues are.

DARLENE: You spoke previously about some of the trends or those patterns you saw around learning management systems within the higher education, were there also trends or patterns that emerged in this evaluation of websites in any kind of common areas that you see the improvements needed to happen or need to happen?

DR SCOTT HOLLIER: There were and, look, a positive to take out of this is that for the most part the websites for prospective students were reasonably accessible to the point where most students with disability were able to navigate the site effectively, and while there were accessibility issues present, often they were relatively minor in terms of their severity and occurrence and so therefore universities were well placed to address those issues.

There was only one university that did have a lot of work to do that they acknowledged going into the project and were very supportive of the project because they already knew that their website wasn’t great and they were looking to this project to really help provide guidance on how to fix it.

Aside from that one outlier most universities in Western Australia were pretty consistent and were reasonably accessible, so that was a good result to see although the percentage scores don’t entirely reflect the severity because once you have one accessibility issue then the whole criteria is considered a fail, but broadly speaking it wasn’t too bad.

Where the issues were is that it wasn’t clear for students how they actually contact to acknowledge that they had a disability and to get that very specific disability related information, so there was lots of good information on the website and reasonably accessible in terms of what the university was, what the courses were, how to make general contact, but until students enrolled they weren’t really given the opportunity to connect with the disability related services.

So, this was a really interesting thing to come out of the research that a lot of prospective students with disability wanted to quite quickly and comfortably get in touch with those disability services and it wasn’t really clear. The website was really well set up for any student to get in touch but if you wanted to get that more specific information it wasn’t really clear on how to do that and sometimes form accessibility also played a part in filling out the contact form.

While there are some encouraging things to take away from that front facing information, what we found is that when students enrolled that the further into the system the more accessibility issues crept in and also not having that ability to easily just find out well, what disability services are there within the university that people are interested in as that is an important criteria for people to make decisions if you’re a prospective student. That was a real stand-out for me I think in the research that was done.

DARLENE: It’s amazing isn’t it. I think sometimes we just have an assumption like I think because we think it’s on the web but we forget that actually behind the wall of, you know, the current student that isn’t there, so that’s a great recommendation going forward to all universities and providers to actually have the information available to prospective students as well as current students.

In the work that you’ve done was there any best practice or success stories that you wanted to highlight that worked at excelling in the digital content around accessibility?

DR SCOTT HOLLIER: The thing about these projects is that because we often get funded by an external source and we basically just kind of pop up and say, “Oh, we’re doing this research.”, there is often that little bit of wariness I think from the institutions at the start and they’re wondering, you know, what’s the motivation, will this result in bad press and bad PR.

Look, it’s an understandable concern when you are doing this formalized type of research, but what’s exciting, and this is similar to some other projects we’ve done like in the Telco sector, is that while there is that little bit of wariness at the start once we explain or are able to really clearly articulate that ultimately this research is here to help, we want to not just report on what the situation is but we want to run workshops, we want to upskill you to improve accessibility.

Now at the end of the day wherever the audits may land we want this to turn into a possible good news story where we actually see results, you know, we don’t want to just say okay, there are these issues and that’s the end of it. We want tangible, practical outcomes to really support the universities and as the project has progressed we’ve seen more and more positive response and so certainly in the workshops that we ran, we ran two workshops, one was geared more around ICT staff, one more around marketing and content production and also supporting lecturers being able to publish content. As those workshops progressed, and we had some impact measurement processes in the project as well, we can really clearly see that improvements happen.

Certainly the feedback we’ve had from students anecdotally is that there have been changes, certainly around the consistency of LMS, the more use of the LMS platform to publish information and for prospective students we’ve also heard that these processes are a lot easier now. So, we are hearing that the project has had successes and I really want to acknowledge the many staff that we worked with across all the universities, just their willingness to embrace the results, to attend the workshops, to make those positive changes and ultimately achieve great outcomes for the students.

It’s been a great project to be involved in. The staff response, the response of IT staff and designers at universities I say while there was that little bit of wariness at the start I think once they realised that, you know, we’re here to help and also universities don’t have to pay for this. That’s certainly a positive I think that the help is there and there’s no cost and we can get great outcomes, yes, finish in a really good place.

DARLENE: That’s great to hear that there’s such a positive response to the project and the outcomes.

I attended the Print Disability Conference, a Round Table event for Print Disability in Sydney this year. It still was quite disheartening hearing some of the current student stories on their experience within their universities or TAFE in accessibility and I think sometimes working in this space you just kind of often think it’s a given that everything is accessible, so just that question of how do you envisage the impact in improved accessibility in the tertiary sector on students with disability in their overall learning experience?

DR SCOTT HOLLIER: I think the reality is that there are certainly still issues and while it’s been exciting to see that there has been notable and measurable change in the Western Australian university sector, the issues that we saw were pretty consistent across all five education institutions.I think we can make a logical leap that when we look at TAFE and other universities, you know, the higher education sector more broadly or even just the tertiary education sector across the nation, that there are certainly a number of accessibility issues and there are those fairly consistent issues we just talked about about missing alt text, about the consistency, about making it easy for prospective students to find information about what disability services are available.

These were fairly consistent issues across the five education institutions we looked at and from other works that we do it certainly seems that these issues are consistent across the country. There is certainly work to be done and certainly recognize that not every issue was fixed through this project but I think the more we can get accessibility on the table the more that we can get information highlighted in this area the better it gets.

Certainly I’d encourage anyone who works in the tertiary education sector to grab a copy of our research. The report is on our website in our projects area at accessibility.org.au and I really encourage people to have a read of that report and reach out. Ultimately the purpose of our organisation is to try and help across a variety of sectors including higher ed. and the tertiary education sector more broadly so anything we can do to continue this journey we’d be delighted to do.

DARLENE: There were a number of key recommendations. Is there any that you kind of want to highlight, not that we don’t want to discourage people from reading the report but is there one or two recommendations that you think universities or tertiary providers could do right now or to start with?

DR SCOTT HOLLIER: There are definitely quick wins out there and I think one of the biggest ones we just mentioned earlier is please don’t stick all your information in one PDF and upload it, it’s in the LMS. That PDF inaccessibility is a major issue for a lot of people with disability and a lot of assistive technologies.

The more we get information out of those logged file formats and into the LMS which is designed to be quite good and certainly a lot of modern LMS platforms, including things Moodle and Canvas can be very accessible, so absolutely encourage anyone who’s using a modern LMS to get the information out of the documents, out of the slides, and get it into the LMS itself as much as possible. Just that one thing will make quite a profound difference, support the consistency of information. If you do have your LMS set up make it consistent from unit to unit, from course to course, ensure that the user experience of students is consistent.

In terms of prospective students, yes, just make sure that the interface and the way that the web pages are designed in a way that is very easy to find information, the contact forms work well is a big tip. Sometimes the contact forms would have issues. Make those contact forms work well and make sure it’s really obvious how those contact forms allow someone wanting to find out about disability services because often it’s a fairly generic process to find out information and it doesn’t specifically support the ability for a prospective student to get that extra information about well, how good is the disability service at this education institution and how do I compare with others I’m interested in because that will play a big factor in the success of the education if you need to find out about how good a service is. Provide the opportunity for students to ask questions is a strong recommendation.

There’s just a few there that aren’t too hard to do and I think it would make a huge difference if we could even just achieve those few things.

DARLENE: It’s nearly 20 years I’ve been working in the tertiary sector in disability and I’ve seen technology grow and change over that time, so what role do you think technology plays in enhancing the accessibility of our learning and are there any emerging technologies you believe hold the promise for further improvements in this area?

DR SCOTT HOLLIER: There are. There are some really exciting things. One of the services we provide is a free help desk to support people with disability, families and carers. A part of this project was to expand our help desk so that if you do grab a mainstream device that runs Windows or Mac or iPhone android, we have a great help desk resource on our website in our help desk section that goes through and helps regardless of the disability to set up the best accessibility features on your device.

Right now, there’s a pretty well consistent feature set across our major devices be it desktop or mobile that can help students with disability. I certainly encourage people to have a look at that, but going forward we’re seeing improvements all the time. I was particularly encouraged to see not that long ago the Windows 11 just quietly introduced a full voice navigation feature completely free as a Windows 11 update and just rolled out now using the iPhone or with a new iPhone update. All the iPhones people who are non-verbal now have the ability to use an AI voice to be able to make phone calls. When we think about the implications and the benefits of that for students I think that’s really, really exciting.

I think AI will be the huge gateway and support for people with disability. That’s one example there where AI allows us to detect speech, convert it into a computerized voice based on user preference, be able to make phone calls, to interact with online services and that’s really powerful but there is of course the downside as well and already I’ve heard of banks which are starting to block some of these services because computerized voices could be spam or they could be a scammer.

We always need to get the balance right between security and privacy which I appreciate is important but also making sure that in this new world of AI that people with disability get those wonderful advantages and benefits that it could provide, so I think that’s the space to watch going forward, getting the balance right and ensuring that people with disability can benefit from those emerging technologies.

DARLENE: The current government, Australian Government, are really committed to improving access and participation for a number of equity cohorts. Going forward how do you think tertiary providers and stakeholders can best collaborate with organisations like the Centre of Accessibility Australia and even ADCET to address some of the accessibility challenges and implement positive changes to improve the access for students with disability?

DR SCOTT HOLLIER: It’s a great question and certainly it’s wonderful that we do have these relationships like the chance to have this podcast today and spread out information. I am encouraged whenever I attend conferences and other events that the more we can talk about it the better, but I also hope we see legislative change as well.

The Disability Discrimination Act while it does technically support WCAG with an advisory note that the DDA itself doesn’t have any specific information about ICT at all let alone accessibility of ICT and so we really have to rely on advisory notes to join dots.

The legislation is over 30 years old, we just probably need an update to that and I think what’s been encouraging hearing some of the initial recommendations from the Disability Royal Commission and also we’ve got the NDIS Review coming up. We’re starting to see more and more that the legislation, the frameworks and the policy and legislative ways that we can address accessibility are in desperate need of an update.

I think the more we have these conversations the more we work together to get information out there and, hopefully, more legislative change to ensure that the information that is provided to students is inclusive and collaborative. While it’s always I think a point of frustration that things aren’t better than they could be, I think I also draw a lot of encouragement that the right conversations are happening for it to get better and this podcast is a great example of that, the chance to have these conversations and get the information out there. Hopefully we’ll see thanks to the Royal Commission and other processes improvements in the future.

DARLENE: With the Disability Royal Commission there were no recommendations for the tertiary sector and I suppose also working with NDIA they very much focused on employment. One of the challenges that I see and have been advocating for a while now with nine out of 10 jobs requiring tertiary qualifications I am concerned that students with disability will be left behind because there are none of this big policy pieces looking at tertiary and how to improve it. Do you think that the Disability Royal Commission had a role or is kind of,in kind of providing advice to tertiary providers to be, you know, to be better?

DR SCOTT HOLLIER: I think there’s definitely a need to have more conversations and I’m hopeful that yes, some accommodations around the inclusiveness of information and hopefully updates to our legislation. The consultative processes around that will hopefully give an avenue for tertiary education providers to have some of these conversations because I certainly do acknowledge as you say that the direct opportunity hasn’t been there as much.

I’m hopeful that as there needs to be the practical actions associated with the Disability Royal Commission that this will be the avenue and likewise organisations like ours. We didn’t really have much of an opportunity to have input into the Royal Commission because there wasn’t a lot that specifically focused on digital accessibility and information accessibility, but I do think that there are some recommendations that we can hook ourselves onto especially around inclusion and communication aspects of people with disability and getting information provided. I think that does open some doors for tertiary education as well.

I think it will be the case that as individual parts are fleshed out from the recommendations like legislative change then hopefully that will be an avenue for organisations like ours, organisations like yours and the tertiary education sector to be able to have more an input because, yes, we would have loved to have been able to be more involved before but hopefully there will be some more open doors as the broad awareness of the need for people with disability and the terrible outcomes in many sectors of people with disability were highlighted, so hopefully it’s an opportunity going forward.

DARLENE: Yes, definitely hope there’s a great opportunity and it’s good to actually look for those hooks I think going forward.

Talking about going forward, what are the future plans or initiatives that the Centre for Accessibility Australia have in play at the moment or going forward especially anything relating to tertiary education?

DR SCOTT HOLLIER: One thing we are actually having a look at is around secondary education. Actually as part of another grant that we’ve received we’re looking in new year to do a little bit of similar research around secondary education, not tertiary, but we want to continue to provide support around education. Certainly we’ve noticed that a lot of secondary education places just do not have the resources to support read content. They do what they can but their websites are in dire need of updates. That’s an area that we’re keen to also highlight, do a little bit more research on that in the new year.

In terms of tertiary education and higher education more broadly, we do continue to undertake audits. We do have a number of organisations knocking on our door on a fairly regular basis so the interest is there. By memory we’ve audited separate to this project that we’ve discussed, we’ve audited eight tertiary education institutions in the past 12 months and they’ll have some ongoing work with some of them.

It is exciting that there is clearly interest from a number of organisations recognizing the importance of digital access in supporting students and supporting those outcomes for students with disability. I think there is awareness there and it is growing. We’re really pleased to be an ongoing part of that. We’re always on the lookout for new opportunities, so certainly wherever there’s a chance to collaborate we’re very happy to do so.

DARLENE: That’s great. Over and above your responsibilities and your remit is there anything else that you think is critical to advancing accessibility and inclusion across the tertiary sector in Australia?

DR SCOTT HOLLIER: I think it just really comes down to providing information and we’re seeing more focus on disability access and inclusion plans which is great. We have a number of contacts with a number of equity and disability staff that do provide disability services. I know there’s often, you know, trying to do more with less funding is a common situation unfortunately but the willingness and desire to do more is there and so I take a lot of heart and encouragement from that. It’s certainly a conversation that’s on the table. We regularly get contacted, as I was saying before, about undertaking work to support the tertiary education sector, again podcasts like this are a wonderful opportunity to spread the word.

Funding unfortunately always done come up as an issue, you know, the willingness is there and I am hopeful that – it’s been a long time since I’ve seen anything about disability being headline news and something that the Royal Commission has done, it was on the ABC news or it was on Insiders, it was really getting traction and awareness as being a really important point to progress, so I’m hopeful as with more conversation about the needs of people with disability broadly that there will be ongoing conversations and hopefully ongoing opportunities to support the tertiary education sector.

DARLENE: That’s fabulous, Scott. Thank you so much for sharing your time and valuable insight with us. It’s great to talk to such a passionate advocate. You and your organisation have done some very impactful things for not just the tertiary sector but more many sectors across Australia to ensure that they are accessible and inclusive for all.

Do you have any final comments you’d like to make before we finish up?

DR SCOTT HOLLIER: The only one is that every two years we hold the Australian Access Awards to celebrate organisations doing good work in this space and we do specifically have the best education website in that category. It’s something that at least we could do something to acknowledge those which are doing great work in this space and we’re very, very excited to continue providing just that little bit of extra support for recognition. It’s been wonderful to be a part of that but otherwise thank you so much for the chance to be a part of this podcast. It’s wonderful to share the knowledge.

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