BCA Inform March 1, 2022

Accessible online education, in tertiary setting.

Co-hosted by Blind Citizens Australia and Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET).

This session was the soft launch for guidelines on accessible online tertiary access. These guidelines were developed in consultation with students, support staff, educators and sector partners.

A twelve-month long project, with a focus on online learning, has produced guidelines and eLearning resources. In this BCA Inform, we promoted the distribution and use of these resources to make education more accessible for people who are blind or vision impaired.

Inform host Angela Jaeschke BCA General Manager, Operations.

Unfortunately, due to technical issues, the lead for this project, Darlene McLennan, Manager, Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET), was unable to join us as planned.

Blind Citizens Australia has had an active role in improving and advocating for accessibility in education over the years, with contributions to reviews for disability standards for education. BCA has been actively involved in advocating for increased accessibility in education as many made the switch from face to face to online learning during the COVID 19 pandemic.

More recently, the BCA National Policy Committee review of education policy in 2021 promoted equitable education access for people who are blind, or vision impaired to engage in education across all sectors and in the context of lifelong learning.

BCA is also committed to ensuring accessibility to education by supporting tertiary students with scholarships through the BCA Hugh Jeffrey Scholarship Program to increase opportunities available for people who are blind, and vision impaired to participate in tertiary and further education.

Another exciting project that BCA has been involved in is the work we discussed in this Inform session: Influenced by the 2018 Vision Australia report “online but off-track; barriers to online learning experiences by university students who are blind or have low vision.” BCA and ADCET have collaborated to produce a set of guidelines and an eLearning package aimed at increasing the accessibility of (in particular) online learning in the tertiary sector.

Darren Britten was introduced as the National Assistive Technical Officer from ADCET. Darren specialises in inclusive practice and accessible resource development in the tertiary sector.

Darren provided us with a little historical context for disability standards for education, stating that accessibility in education has been something that has slowly moving and coming in and out of focus over the years, with some small progression forward in response to the 2018 Vision Australian report.

However, COVID 19 saw students and staff being forced to move to online learning full time. Accessibility in a broad sense was highlighted, with students with many diverse types of disabilities finding the transition hard.

From the point of view of students who are blind or vision impaired, there were inconsistent practices leading to a wide variety of experiences by students and staff. The areas identified included inaccessible documents, (PDF being used instead of word) screen readers not able to “read” screen shares or power point presentations, and inconsistencies in formatting leading to further accessibility issues.

This is one example where COVID 19 has been a catalyst for positive change, bringing to the forefront the need for a uniform approach to inclusive practice. Learning being accessed in the online space has also increased the numbers of students with disabilities needing support increasing from about 2 % per cohort to about 7 - 14% per cohort (this does not include temporary disabilities or mental health issues).

The Guidelines and eLearning package were developed in consultation with students, educators, universities, developers and support staff.

The Guidelines cover:

* Important tools that people who are blind and vision impaired use (screen readers, various programs, and devices).
* Online learning impacts and challenges experienced by people who are blind and vision impaired.
* Looking at the platforms / learning environment.
* Common resources, PDF, PowerPoint, document presentation
* Presentation of visual information. Especially in the context of blended learning – online and face to face.
* Suggestions for best practice in how to present content, lectures, readings, and assessment tasks.
* . Suggestions for best practice/ etiquette while teaching such as avoiding moving around while on screen, lighting and background suggestions, some phrases to avoid saying
* Suggestions for best practice for video conferencing.

This product is by no means complete, it’s being considered a living, evolving document.

From February this year, these guidelines and eLearning packages are on the ADCET website, launched in media and shared with institutions.

Darren states that this is now an exciting space, where accessibility and inclusion in education will become the point of difference between institutions. enabling students to choose which best suits their needs

Danni McCarthy is a Lecturer in Inclusive Education at Deakin University**.** In this role she provides evidence-based leadership towards the development of education environments that are intentionally designed and capable of maximising the participation and achievement of all learners. She leads the accessibility champions project at Deakin, which aims to develop accessibility leadership capabilities across the university.

Danni states when she started working at Deakin, she decided to separate accessibility and inclusivity into two separate entities and focus on increasing and improving accessibility.

Danni created a group, “accessibilities champions project” of 14 colleagues from across four different faculties to examine and strategies improving accessibility across Deakin and being a leader in the tertiary space for a universal design for learning.

The accessibilities champions project team have been developing basic access strategies, communication strategies, support for staff to increase their own knowledge through the creation of an academic development team – which is a team of accessibility experts to help with the transition across the entire faculty and creating foundations for minimum standard in accessibly approach across all Deakins offerings. Danni, accepts and admits that this is no easy feat, that the work they are doing needs to create institutional change. The creation of an academic development team, with accessibility experts, will help support the transition across the entire faculty.

The topics covered by Darren and Danni lead to impressive general discussion and many questions from those present.

Included below are three links to various documents mentioned in the March BCA Inform session.

1. Guidelines for online tertiary access for students and staff who are blind or vision impaired. <https://www.adcet.edu.au/resource/10843/guidelines-online-tertiary-access-for-students-and-staff-who-are-blind-or-vision-impaired>
2. eLearning package <https://disabilityawareness.com.au/elearning/bvi-online-guidelines/>
3. Vision Australia report “online but offtrack” <https://www.adcet.edu.au/resource/10107/2018-vision-australia-report-online-but-off-track>

If, after listening to this session and or reviewing the documents in the links above, you have any questions, or If you have any further feedback on accessibility, or need support to access education, please reach out to the BCA team and we will find the most appropriate person to answer your questions. You can reach the team via email [bca@bca.org.au](mailto:bca@bca.org.au) or by calling us on 1800 033 660.