AI and Accessibility Skills: Building the Accessibility Professional of the Future

Insights from the first *AI and Accessibility Skills* Workshop

5th February 2026

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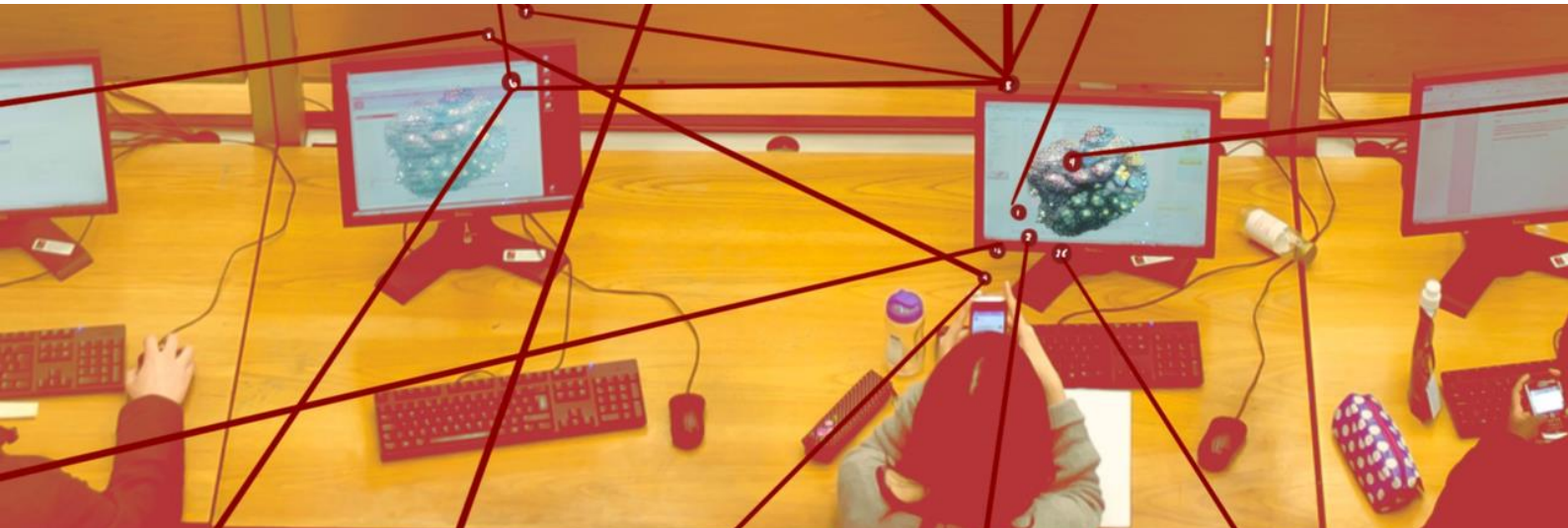

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Teaching Accessibility in the Digital Skill Set

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Cover Image: Hanna Barakat & Cambridge Diversity Fund
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Alternative text: A computer lab with rows of desks, each occupied by students working at computers. Overlaying the computer lab are red lines connecting through nodes, symbolizing the flow of communication, data exchange, and interconnected networks.

About the Authors

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Sarah leads the UK Research and Innovation study 'Teaching Accessibility' (2019-2028) as a Future Leaders Fellow and Principal Investigator. Sarah and her team are researching the teaching and learning of digital accessibility in universities and the workplace, to build an evidence-based understanding of how accessibility can be taught more effectively. Sarah has a background in inclusive education and learning sciences, with 20 years of research experience spanning critical disability studies, digital accessibility, research methods and higher education.

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Andy is a member of the 'Teaching Accessibility in the Digital Skill Set' research team, with expertise in digital accessibility education and conducting inclusive and participatory research with people with disabilities. His research explores the intersections of learning, disability and digital inclusion, and accessibility. He draws on many years of working with people with intellectual disabilities, and is currently exploring inclusive research into Generative AI and accessible communication with those communities.

About the *AI and Accessibility Skills* initiative

The AI and Accessibility Skills initiative forms part of the Teaching Accessibility in the Digital Skill Set[1] project, a UKRI funded study (2019-2028) investigating digital accessibility education in technical university disciplines and the technology workforce. The research addresses a critical gap; despite advances in digital disability rights and growing demand for accessible services intensified by COVID-19, we lack detailed understanding of how digital accessibility can be effectively taught, learned, and scaled.

Prior work (2019-2025) has established foundational insights into accessibility pedagogy through systematic reviews, policy analysis, and participatory research with international educators and learners across academia, government, NGOs and industry. This work identified three core pedagogical tenets — conceptual understanding, procedural knowledge, and technical skill — and developed a typological framework of accessibility pedagogy currently being operationalized through the Teaching Accessibility Wayfinder.

Current work (2024-2028) expands from teacher-focused perspectives to learner-centred approaches, examining how accessibility learning develops across the career life-course and through networked peer-learning communities.

The AI and Accessibility Skills workshop series

In partnership with Jisc, the University of Southampton is hosting a series of collaborative workshops on AI and Accessibility Skills during 2025-2027. These workshops bring together accessibility leaders, educators, researchers and practitioners from higher education, industry, policy, governance and research-intensive organisations across the UK to examine the evolving relationship between AI and accessibility professional practice.

The workshop series investigates current and potential impacts of AI on digital accessibility as both a professional field and educational discipline. The work tracks emergent relationships between AI and accessibility education, examining challenges and strategic drivers through stakeholder consultation with accessibility leadership, disabled people's organisations, partnerships with national initiatives, and leading universities and professionals.

The workshops provide opportunities for focused discussion, to share knowledge and insights around leading practice, and collectively identify questions and concerns regarding the impact of AI. In collaboration, the series aims to develop research-led understanding of how accessibility skills development can evolve in response to AI integration across accessibility workflows, organisational practices and educational provision.

[1] TeachingAccessibility.ac.uk

This report documents insights from the first workshop, 'Building the Accessibility Professional of the Future', held in-person at Jisc London on 25 June 2025.

Subsequent workshops will build upon these foundational discussions, for sustained sector-wide dialogue.

For further information about this work, please visit http://teachingaccessibility.ac.uk or contact the authors.

About our partner

Jisc is the UK digital, data and technology agency focused on tertiary education, research and innovation. A not-for-profit organisation, Jisc believes in tech for good and saves the sector millions of pounds every year.

The Jisc accessibility team is focused on the continued development of sector support for digital accessibility, assistive technology and inclusive practice - with a strong and unique thread of expert guidance on legal and regulatory compliance encompassing accessibility, copyright, privacy and AI. Highly collaborative, the team has expertise in, and actively partners on, training, strategy, research, community, and policy work.

Meeting accessibility regulations - Jisc

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Executive Summary

Introduction

AI-enabled tools promise scalable solutions for digital accessibility workflows including design, coding, captioning and testing. However, as UK and international regulations evolve and digital populations diversify, professionals require robust accessibility skills to ensure digital products are inclusive by default. This report documents the first workshop in a collaborative series examining the impact of AI on accessibility practice and professional development. Held in partnership between the University of Southampton and Jisc the workshop brought together 40 accessibility leaders, educators, researchers and practitioners to address critical questions about the future of accessibility work in an AI-integrated landscape.

Workshop overview

The first 'AI and Accessibility Skills' workshop took place at Jisc London on 25 June 2025, attended by participants from higher education, industry, policy, governance and research organisations. Four expert speakers provided foundational perspectives: Dimple Khagram examined distinctively human 'power skills' that AI cannot replicate; Dr Sarah Lewthwaite questioned whether meaningful accessibility can be automated; Tim Scannell explored AI's implications for BSL users and Deaf communities; and Dr Benjamin Gorman demonstrated AI's limitations in generating accessible code. Participants then addressed two overarching questions through structured discussions:

(1) How is AI influencing the essential skill set of accessibility professionals?

(2) How can, or should, accessibility expertise be developed in view of these changes?

Insights and strategic priorities

Current AI adoption in accessibility workflows remains exploratory and varied, with barriers including implementation costs and risk-averse organisations. Participants acknowledged efficiency gains for routine tasks whilst raising concerns about reliability, potential deskilling, and cost-driven automation displacing human engagement, particularly in usability testing. Discussion emphasised that AI models trained on biased datasets risk replicating discriminatory patterns, bypassing established practices and cultural norms within disabled user communities. Current regulatory frameworks including the European Accessibility Act inadequately address the role of AI. Innovation remains largely siloed and proprietary, limiting transparency and collaboration across sectors. Opportunities exist for embedding accessibility within AI literacy education.

Preliminary policy/practice recommendations

Human-centred AI: Embed accessibility throughout design processes to ensure AI complements rather than displaces human interactions in accessibility work.
Shared practice and collaboration: Move from siloed institutional projects toward coordinated, transparent efforts across organisations and sectors.
User-centred co-design: Involve disabled and Deaf communities directly in co-design, development and policy-making processes.
Regulatory frameworks and standards: Establish robust regulatory environments for ethical and responsible AI use in accessibility contexts.
Professional AI competencies: Develop capabilities for critical evaluation of AI-mediated accessibility work, including technical skills and ethical assessment capacity.

1. Introduction

AI-enabled tools promise time-saving and scalable solutions for areas including digital design, coding, captioning, auditing, testing and remediation; aspects of the industry that appear set to expand.

At the same time, changing UK and international regulations, organisational culture and diverse populations, mean that digital workers of the future will need to be confident in ensuring digital products and content are accessible to all, inclusive of disabled people. To 'design with disability in mind', and ensure accessiblity-by-default, developers require accessibility skills, developed through professional training, workplace learning and academic study to ensure accessible futures.

Across 2025-2027, the University of Southampton and Jisc are hosting a series of collaborative workshops on AI and Accessibility Skills as part of the Teaching Accessibility project[2].

The workshops identify questions and concerns regarding the rise of AI in digital accessibility work and professional practice, and how this will impact UK institutions, and accessibility as a discipline.

[2] Teaching accessibility in the digital skill set study http://teachingaccessibility.ac.uk

2. Workshop Overview

The '*Building the Accessibility Professional of the future'* workshop took place in-person at Jisc London on the 25 June 2025, and was attended by 40 participants from higher education, industry, policy, governance and research-intensive organisations from across the UK.

The workshop focused on the changing nature of accessibility work, of accessibility workflows in view of developments in AI; it offered accessibility leaders an opportunity to consider the impact of AI on both professional practice and skills development to share knowledge and insights around leading practice.

Across small group break-out discussions, participants mapped responses to two key questions:

1. How is AI influencing the essential skill set of accessibility professionals?

2. How can, or should, accessibility expertise be developed in view of these changes?

3. Expert talks and foundational discussions

The workshop was punctuated with presentations from four invited speakers, whose insights prompted subsequent discussions of AI and accessibility work and skills.

Beyond the Bots: Future Skills for a Hybrid World – AI and Humans
Dimple Khagram, Purple Beard.

> *"Be curious, show empathy, practice creativity, take a stand for justice, build community, dream the impossible. Be the human AI can't replace."*

Speaking from her perspective as founder of a digital training provider specialising in accessibility apprenticeships and bootcamps, Khagram explored the fundamental question of how humans can lead with distinctively human capacities in an AI-saturated world. She positioned AI as an established reality already embedded in daily tasks including writing, data analysis, automation and content generation, posing the central challenge of defining human advantage in this hybrid landscape. Khagram emphasised that whilst social media and AI offer glimpses of connection, genuine human survival depends on deeper, authentic human-to-human relationships that technology cannot replicate.

Khagram delineated a clear distinction between AI's current capabilities in concrete, bounded tasks and the uniquely human 'power skills' that remain beyond automation. She identified curiosity, empathy, creativity, moral courage, community building and visionary thinking as fundamentally human capacities that AI cannot yet replicate, arguing that individuals should aspire to become "*the human AI can't replace*." This positioning reframes professional development away from competing with machines toward cultivating irreplaceable human competencies.

Central to Khagram's framework were eight future-ready skills essential for AI-integrated workplaces. She emphasised *emotional intelligence* as the capacity to connect, care and lead with empathy where machines cannot feel; *critical thinking* as the human ability to ask right questions and challenge systems whilst AI merely finds answers; and *creativity* as humanity's superpower to imagine rather than simply remix existing content. Khagram stressed *adaptability and lifelong learning* as necessities in contexts of constant change; *ethical leadership* as the human responsibility to determine what is right, and *collaboration and communication skills* as the 'glue' binding future human-machine teams. She argued for *tech fluency*—understanding how to work with AI without necessarily coding—*and purpose-driven thinking*, asserting that meaning and purpose cannot be automated but rather power meaningful progress.

Khagram concluded that whilst AI will change the nature of work tasks, human identity and capabilities remain humanity's greatest advantage. She advocated moving beyond competition with machines toward collaboration, calling for professionals to "*become more human, more present and bolder*" in leveraging AI to amplify rather than replace human potential.

A Fundamental Shift? Asking Critical Questions on AI and Skills in the Accessibility Workflow

Dr. Sarah Lewthwaite, Southampton Education School, University of Southampton

> *"If accessibility knowledge moves from the commons to proprietary AI, what happens to community knowledge? How do we ensure that disabled people's lived experience remains at the centre of accessibility practice?"*

Drawing on findings from the Teaching Accessibility in the Digital Skill Set project, Lewthwaite challenged participants to consider whether AI represents a genuine transformation in accessibility practice. She identified fundamental epistemological tensions between the human-centred, political approaches of Human Computer Interaction, Disability Studies and Crip Technoscience[3], and the tool-oriented compliance culture more prevalent in Computer Science. Lewthwaite argued that disability must be recognised as a site of expertise, requiring processes of un-learning that question established knowledge and make space for multiple ways of knowing[4].

Through a series of critical questions, Lewthwaite examined AI's limitations in accessibility work. She questioned whether accessibility can be automated, noting that generalised AI systems learn from dominant accessibility discourse rather than lived disability experience. This risks epistemic violence[5], as marginalised ways of knowing are systematically denied. She highlighted temporal mismatches created when AI enables exponential productivity gains whilst accessibility testing remains dependent on human timescales. Lewthwaite warned that automated approaches risk severing the essential feedback loop between disabled people's lived experience and iterative design processes, threatening innovation in accessibility practice.

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[3] Hamraie, A. & Fritsch, K. (2019). Crip technoscience manifesto. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 5(1), pp. 1-33. Available at: https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v5i1.29607

[4] Lewthwaite, S. & Sloan, D. (2016). Exploring pedagogical culture for accessibility education in the computing sciences. In *Proceedings of the 13th Web for All Conference* (W4A '16). ACM. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1145/2899475.2899490

[5] Spivak, G.C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271-313). Macmillan.

Lewthwaite raised concerns about the 'enclosure'[6] of community-generated accessibility knowledge into proprietary AI systems, potentially displacing accessibility professionals and eroding the accessibility commons. She contrasted algorithmic ableism—AI that reproduces existing power relations and normative logics—with the need for rights-based interventions, and interventions informed by Disability Futurism.

Lewthwaite concluded by calling on accessibility professionals to maintain "response-ability"[7] in AI-mediated practice, ensuring technology advances in human-centred rather than reductive ways, with implications for how accessibility training, mentoring and education should evolve.

Bridging Science: AI, BSL, and Inclusive Communication

Tim Scannell, Accessibility Consultant.

> *"Bridging Science means connecting Deaf culture, inclusive design, and ethical tech. AI must support respectful, community-led communication."*

Scannell examined the intersection of AI and British Sign Language (BSL), emphasising the imperative for Deaf community involvement in technological development. He established BSL as a complete language with distinct grammar, facial expression and cultural context, fundamentally different from English and requiring more than gesture recognition for meaningful communication. Scannell challenged accessibility professionals to critically evaluate AI-driven solutions through key questions about risk, opportunity, inclusion and exclusion.

Central to Scannell's argument was the principle of "nothing about us without us," stressing that AI solutions must be co-created with BSL users rather than developed in isolation. He questioned whether AI is supporting or replacing human interpreters, cautioning that technology should enhance access whilst preserving the essential human connection that interpreters provide as both professionals and community members. Scannell identified significant shortcomings in current AI applications, including failures to capture facial expression, context, nuance and regional variation, resulting in robotic signing avatars that lack communicative authenticity.

Scannell raised critical ethical concerns regarding data sourcing and consent, emphasising that biased or unrepresentative datasets introduce systemic bias into accessibility tools. He argued for transparency in how

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[6] Bollier, D. (2011). The commons, short and sweet. *News and Perspectives on the Commons*, July 15. Available at: https://www.bollier.org/commons-short-and-sweet

[7] Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press. Available at: https://www.dukeupress.edu/staying-with-the-trouble

sign language data is collected and used, linking ethical practice to trustworthy and genuinely inclusive outcomes. Scannell's concept of "bridging science" calls for connecting Deaf culture, inclusive design principles and ethical technology development to ensure AI supports respectful, community-led communication rather than imposing solutions that diminish linguistic and cultural integrity.

For Scannell, the continued neglect of sign language technologies represents a form of systemic exclusion that causes ongoing harm to Deaf communities. He questioned why sign language is rarely positioned as a primary input language in AI systems. If spoken-language users are supported through voice-first design, Deaf users should have equivalent sign-first systems that translate from sign language into text or speech with linguistic accuracy and contextual integrity.

Scannell recommended that future AI and accessibility funding explicitly require sign language-first design principles, Deaf leadership, and clear definitions of which technologies do and do not support sign language. Without these safeguards, claims of inclusivity risk becoming performative, while Deaf communities continue to bear the cost of exclusion.

Accessible by Default? AI Tools and the Skills We Can't Afford to Lose

Dr. Benjamin Gorman, Bournemouth University.

> *"AI doesn't know what accessibility is. It doesn't check, or care — unless we do. It mirrors us. And we're still learning."*

Gorman examined the assumption that AI will make digital products accessible by default, using technical examples to demonstrate AI's current limitations. He challenged the notion that AI-generated outputs are inherently accessible, showing how AI replicates inaccessible patterns from training data, overlooks visual accessibility requirements, and operates without ethical consideration or genuine understanding of user needs. Through practical demonstrations, Gorman illustrated that AI produces code that may appear functional and pass superficial checks whilst failing fundamental accessibility criteria including keyboard navigation, semantic markup and screen reader compatibility.

From a Computer Science perspective, Gorman identified critical human competencies that AI cannot replicate: critical judgement, contextual understanding of user needs, and the ability to evaluate accessibility beyond compliance checklists. He emphasised that prompting skills do not equate to professional judgement, and that AI lacks the capacity to understand diverse user experiences and contexts that inform meaningful accessibility.

Gorman also stressed the continued need to teach critical evaluation skills, arguing that accessibility education must preserve human capacities for assessing usability, user empathy and inclusive design principles.

Gorman acknowledged potential for AI support when accessibility requirements are embedded systematically in development workflows. He demonstrated how developers can define accessibility rules upfront through configuration files that enforce WCAG standards automatically; for example, files that instruct AI coding assistants to consistently generate accessible code. However, he cautioned that such approaches require human expertise to establish appropriate rules and verify outputs. Gorman concluded that AI fundamentally mirrors human operators' knowledge, biases and gaps; without deliberate effort and expert oversight, accessibility will not become default in AI-driven development. The responsibility to define, check and uphold accessibility standards remains human.

4. Insights and strategic priorities

Workshop discussions addressed two key questions regarding AI's influence on accessibility professional practice and the implications for skills development. Participant contributions reflected diverse perspectives from higher education, industry, policy, advocacy, and research sectors.

Q1. How AI is influencing the essential skill set of accessibility professionals

Current use of AI: Reported use of AI reflected the workshop participants' roles (i.e., primarily within higher education), with significant reflection on both staff (academic and technical) and student use. Participants related AI to general working practices and more specifically, accessibility workflows with some consideration on the implications for accessibility teaching and training.

Current adoption of AI was broadly described as varied and largely exploratory, dependent on specific roles, needs and contexts. Generally, we are not seeing widespread systematic embedding of AI in accessibility workflows. Barriers to adoption included up-front costs and time pressures, largely implicated through the need for guard rails. Many were continuing to evaluate what is effective and scalable. It was felt by some that these cautious approaches to adoption reflect a 'risk averse' culture in higher education that can be seen as a 'barrier to exploration'. Conversely, it was also observed that academics are right to adopt a 'healthy scepticism' to AI and that they should lead on promoting critical and ethical perspectives and engage in interdisciplinary enquiry.

Work efficiencies: The use of AI for 'routine', 'mundane', and 'everyday' productivity tasks (e.g., transcripts, summaries, minutes) and more specifically, 'low-level' coding and developer work is a 'game changer' compared to traditional manual processes. However, general concerns were raised over the deskilling of professional practices in accessibility work through increased AI automation.

Cost efficiencies: Current discourse on AI reflects previous examples of tech development and adoption, where profit and efficiency gains conflict with human-centred and inclusive approaches. Increasingly, AI automation will be seen by managers as a cost-effective alternative to activities that would otherwise involve human engagement (e.g., usability testing).

AI reliability: In examples given, AI use varied due to concerns over quality and ethical use. AI-generated content is not always reliable or trustworthy, requiring expert validation. Therefore, current engagement frequently involves just as much, if not more work to ensure quality.

Applications of AI for Accessibility: Several established and prevalent applications of AI were highlighted. AI generated auto-captioning is widely used and seen as improving significantly in recent years, although reliability varies across disciplinary contexts. AI generated alt-text for images remains generally unreliable, especially in assessing highly contextualised information, although AI can be useful for detecting missing alt-text at scale. Various examples of how AI technology is incorporated into adaptive and assistive technologies were mentioned, including screen readers, text to speech, mapping tools and apps (e.g. Microsoft Seeing AI). The use of AI-generated BSL avatars for apps and in public information boards was also noted, but prompted critique. Participants questioned BSL avatars' ability to effectively replicate human interpretation.

Q2. How accessibility expertise can or should be developed in view of these changes

Disability representation and inclusion: AI-mediated solutions to accessibility can be inappropriate and impersonal, bypassing established practices and cultural norms within disabled user communities. Many AI models are trained on biased or incomplete datasets, with adverse effects on disability representation, replicating and amplifying discriminatory texts.

Participants placed emphasis on the need for inclusive, user-centred approaches that prioritise insights from lived-experience and practice by including disabled and deaf communities in co-design processes and policy decision-making.

However, current approaches risk 'technological tokenism'. For example, so-called "SignGPT" approaches often focus on text-to-sign avatars rather than sign language-to-text or sign language-to-voice translation, producing visible sign output without enabling sign language users to communicate in their own language.

Ensuring the accessibility of AI tools themselves is also crucial to enabling continued inclusive approaches to design and development.

AI innovation: Much of the current innovation in AI is bespoke, siloed and proprietary, leading to a lack of transparency and collaboration within and across organisations and sectors. There were calls for greater shared practice and coordinated efforts inclusive of leadership, practitioners and user communities.

Regulation and governance: Legal and ethical concerns were raised in relation to GDPR and copyright / Intellectual Property. Existing accessibility regulatory frameworks (e.g., the European Accessibility Act, 2025) are not currently addressing the role and influence of AI. Participants asserted the need for new and adapted regulatory

frameworks and standards to inform ethical and responsible AI development and use.

Embedding accessibility: Teaching and training around the use of AI should include accessibility, underpinned by ethics, and informed by research-led insights. This will ensure AI development is inclusive of the user community and that AI tools are accessible.

Leveraging accessibility: The intense focus on AI is eclipsing other priorities, including accessibility. However, some see this as an opportunity to leverage accessibility practices through association with AI discourse, providing greater prospects for funding, tool development and leadership buy-in. Similarly, in the teaching of accessibility, increased focus on AI can be seen as a hook for motivating students to engage with the topic.

5. Preliminary policy recommendations

These recommendations are aimed at industry, policy makers, and education providers.

Industry (Product managers, designers, developers, usability specialists, content authors):

- **Human-centred AI:** Embed accessibility and inclusivity throughout AI design and development processes to ensure AI complements rather than displaces meaningful human interactions in accessibility work.

  This principle maintains the centrality of human expertise and lived-experience of disability whilst leveraging AI's capabilities for appropriate tasks.

- **User-centred co-design:** Involve disabled and Deaf communities directly in co-design, development and policy-making processes.

  Authentic participation ensures AI applications address genuine needs and respect community knowledge and cultural practices.

Cross-sector leadership:

- **Shared practice and collaboration:** Move from siloed institutional projects toward coordinated, transparent efforts across organisations and sectors.

  Knowledge sharing and collaborative development can advance accessibility practice more effectively than isolated initiatives whilst reducing duplication of effort.

Policy-makers:

- **Regulatory frameworks and standards:** Establish robust regulatory environments for ethical and responsible AI use in accessibility contexts.

  Updated frameworks should address AI-specific challenges whilst maintaining alignment with existing accessibility legislation and human rights principles.

Educators, training and accreditation organisations:

- **Professional AI competencies:** Develop accessibility professionals' capabilities for critical evaluation of AI-mediated accessibility work.

  This includes both technical skills for working with AI tools and critical capacities for assessing their appropriateness, reliability and ethical implications.

6. Conclusions

This report highlights both the opportunities and challenges of AI in digital accessibility education and practice, emphasising the enduring importance of disability and lived-experience and inclusive design.

The rapid growth of AI presents an opportunity to scale accessibility practice and create new frontiers for innovation. Participants recognised AI's capacity to streamline routine tasks and scale certain workflows, potentially enhancing efficiency in accessibility work. However, significant concerns were raised regarding reliability, bias, ethical risks, and the potential for deskilling professional roles. At present, the quality and trustworthiness of AI-generated accessibility outputs remains variable, requiring expert validation and often equivalent professional effort to traditional approaches.

A consistent message emerged across workshop discussions: meaningful accessibility cannot be automated. Human expertise and criticality, and the insights of disabled and Deaf communities remain essential to ensuring technologies address accessibility needs responsibly and effectively. Participants emphasised the need for governance and standards to guide ethical AI use and noted that current regulatory frameworks are inadequate in assessing the role of AI in accessibility practice.

Whilst AI offers clear efficiencies for specific tasks, its limitations and risks reinforce the need for the continued development of critical, skills-based practice. Expert speakers emphasised that accessibility professionals must cultivate not only technical competencies but also distinctly human capacities and human-centred skills – including empathy, contextual awareness, and innovative, creative and critical thinking.

Future workshops in this series will build upon these insights, providing continued opportunities for sector-wide dialogue and knowledge-sharing as AI's role in accessibility practice continues to evolve.

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