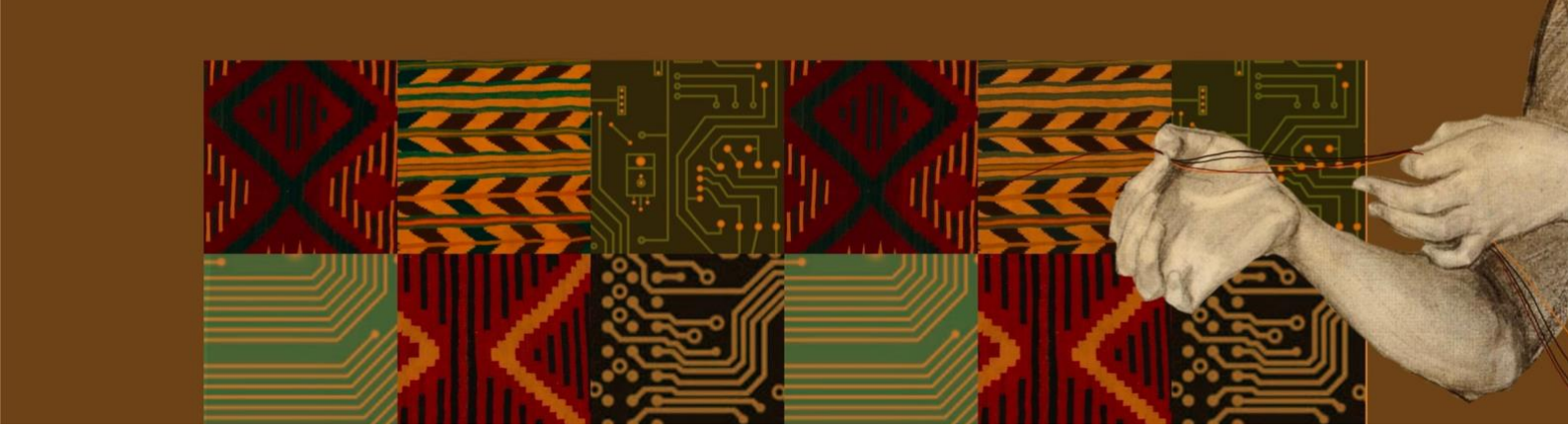

Critical Approaches to AI and Accessibility Capacity Building

Insights from the second *AI and Accessibility Skills* Workshop

1st June 2026

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Teaching Accessibility in the Digital Skill Set
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Cover Image: Textiles and Tech 2 by Hanna Barakat & Archival Images of AI + AIxDESIGN
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Alternative text: Two identical pairs of pencil drawn hands to the top right and bottom left of the image, are shown delicately pulling wire-like threads from a grid of colourful patchwork squares that integrate both traditional woven designs and digital circuitry.

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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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 digital 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 operationalised through the Teaching Accessibility Portal.

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, sharing knowledge and insights around leading practice, and collectively identifying 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

[1] http://TeachingAccessibility.ac.uk

integration across accessibility workflows, organisational practices and educational provision.

The first workshop was held in June 2025, and is reported in:

Lewthwaite, S. & Coverdale, A. (2026) *AI and Accessibility Skills: Building the Accessibility Professional of the Future: Insights from the first AI and Accessibility Skills Workshop* [white paper]. University of Southampton. UK. https://doi.org/10.5258/SOTON/PP0164

This report documents insights from the second workshop held online on 27 February 2026.

Subsequent workshops will build upon these ongoing 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.

https://www.jisc.ac.uk/accessibility

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Executive summary

Introduction

AI-enabled tools promise scalable solutions for digital accessibility workflows: design, coding, captioning and testing. However, as regulations evolve and digital populations diversify, professionals require robust accessibility skills to ensure digital products are inclusive by default. This report documents the second workshop in a series examining the impact of AI on accessibility practice and professional development. The University of Southampton and Jisc brought together 48 accessibility leaders, researchers, educators and practitioners to address critical questions on the future of accessibility work in an AI-landscape.

Workshop overview

In February 2026, the second 'AI and Accessibility Skills' workshop was attended by participants from higher education, industry, policy, governance and research organisations. Three presentations followed opening remarks by Dr Howard Leicester; Prof. Hannah Morgan examined how AI and digital accessibility practices are shaping disability futures; Henny Swan explored how AI is transforming accessibility work and outlined fundamental shifts affecting skills; Dr Louise Hickman focused on AI-mediated BSL and the importance of d/Deaf-led community engagement in development and governance. Participants then addressed questions in structured discussions:

(1) Can we interrogate the futures that AI is already building: are they compatible with disabled life as it is actually lived?

(2) How do we address AI velocity, scale, accountability, the limits of compliance and regulation, and other issues?

(3) How do we mitigate AI risks and harms, develop future standards, ensure disability rights, and engage user expertise?

Insights and strategic priorities

AI is increasingly pervasive across everyday tools and workflows in ways that are invisible and difficult to opt out of, outpacing governance, understanding and evidence-based practice.

Rapid AI development is making it difficult to establish best practice or conduct research-led evaluation to ensure disability inclusion. AI risks scaling inaccessibility; the assumption that automation improves accessibility is not evidenced, and verification demands can double rather than reduce accessibility workloads. Ableist bias in AI is structural, rooted in training data and resistant to technical fix. Disabled communities are excluded from AI design and governance despite essential expertise. The relational expertise of access workers resists automation but remains vulnerable to cost-driven displacement. Regulatory frameworks are insufficient, legal accountability for inaccessible AI systems remains unclear, and accessibility is increasingly marginalised within AI-dominated agendas. Nevertheless, participants identified a strategic opportunity: the current prominence of AI can be leveraged to reposition accessibility as central to responsible AI development.

Preliminary policy/practice recommendations

Human-centred AI: Embed accessibility throughout AI design processes and resist cost-driven substitution of human access workers in high-stakes settings.

Address structural bias: Involve disabled communities in defining representative and non-discriminatory AI deployment. Enforce governance and transparency obligations.

Accountability: Establish legal accountability for AI-generated accessibility failures. Require impact assessments before AI is embedded in services with accessibility obligations.

Professional competencies and education: Sustain foundational human accessibility skills alongside emerging AI literacies. Require that AI competency frameworks incorporate accessibility and disability perspectives.

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 accessibility-by-default, developers require accessibility skills and competences, developed through professional training, workplace learning and academic study to ensure accessible futures. Accessibility underpins digital disability rights, and is essential for the inclusion in our digital society.

In 2025-2026, 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. 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, to ensure more inclusive digital futures for all.

2 Workshop overview

The *'Critical Approaches to AI and Accessibility Skills'* workshop took place online on the 27th of February 2026, and was attended by 48 participants from higher education, industry, policy, governance and research-intensive organisations from across the UK. The workshop focused on engaging critical perspectives from disability studies and digital accessibility to scrutinise the values embedded in AI technologies, and how these are framed for decision-makers.

Across small group break-out discussions, participants mapped responses to three key questions prompted by our invited speakers:

1. Can we interrogate the futures that AI is already building – are they compatible with disabled life as it is actually lived?
2. How do we address: AI velocity, scale, accountability, the limits of compliance and regulation, and other issues?
3. How do we mitigate AI risks and harms, develop future standards, ensure disability rights, and engage user expertise?

Each question was supplemented by the following two sub-questions:

- What does this mean for accessibility educators and professionals?
- What experiences, data and insights are informing our understanding?

3 Expert talks and foundational discussions

Artificial Intelligence Versus Accessibility

Dr Howard Leicester MBE, BCS Chartered Institute for IT, Accessible Info

Opening remarks were provided by our distinguished guest, Dr Howard Leicester MBE via a recorded video. Leicester focused on the Accessible Information Standard (AIS), which under the Equality Act 2010 requires public sector organisations to make reasonable adjustments to meet the communication and local mobility needs of people with disabilities. These needs are outlined in the six essential steps of the standard, which comprise identifying, recording, flagging, sharing, meeting, and reviewing. In reality, for Leicester and many others, delivery remains relatively poor in health and social care and similar services. While acknowledging the potential of AI, he emphasised the challenges that remain in using these technologies to support effective communication and navigation, particularly in relation to costs and know-how. Leicester concluded in typically upbeat and humorous fashion, highlighting his continuing work to influence the sector through advocacy and collaboration with colleagues and national organisations.

Presentations from three invited speakers provided further insights, prompting subsequent Question and Answer sessions and breakout discussions.

Accessible to What? Disability, AI, and the Politics of the Future

Prof. Hannah Morgan, University of Leeds.

> *"The question is whether digital accessibility expands the range of imaginable futures for disabled people, or whether it primarily facilitates participation within predefined futures."*

Prof. Morgan's work sits at the intersection of Disability Studies and Sociologies of the Future. This work considers how ideas about the future shape current possibilities. In her presentation, Morgan invited us to consider *how* we think about the future in the present, to interrogate the 'disability futures' that AI is already normalising. She introduced two concepts:

- **futurity** – the socially organised condition of having a future, and:
- **futurelessness** – the unequal capacity or unequal opportunity to enact these socially recognised futures.

Through these concepts, digital systems are not simply tools we use in the present, they are also 'infrastructures of anticipation' that organise the

future. These infrastructures either mitigate or reproduce the exclusion experienced by disabled people.

Morgan observed how accessibility practice frequently functions as an adaptation, often as a form of bolt-on or retrofitting. This adaptation is typically embedded within compliance regimes, such as standards, audits and risk management processes. This adaptive approach encourages minimal adherence to accessibility requirements rather than meaningful transformation. This frames accessibility as a matter of temporal and technical compliance, rather than a matter of rights and equity, with commitment to disability justice.

Morgan described an AI-mediated future, orientated around speed, efficiency and productivity. AI systems operate through prediction and optimisation, creating norms that don't align easily with diverse embodiments and cognitive styles of disabled communities. Importantly, the normative assumptions embedded in datasets ensure historical patterns of disadvantage and past inequities are projected forward into future decisions.

Morgan's work positions disability as a critical and analytical lens for understanding the wider implications of AI; "a diagnostic vantage point from which we can evaluate the moral architecture of technological futures" and examine "how those futures are differentially allocated." She concluded by asking a question central to accessibility work and the development of AI:

> *"Are we building systems that expand disabled people's capacity for long-term planning for stability and self-determination? Or are we refining infrastructures that manage, optimise and contain disabled lives in narrow parameters of value?"*

Accessibility and the AI shift

Henny Swan, TetraLogical

> *"The 'shift left' is more about speed. It's less directional, it's less predictable, AI literally accelerates production. It introduces variability where once we had stability... and it distributes responsibility further across vendors, systems, teams, and also governance and compliance."*

Swan argued that AI is now deeply embedded across the technology landscape, in design tools, development environments, content systems procurement pipelines and customer-facing services. Its influence on accessibility is both inevitable and expanding. For designers and developers, AI introduces a different dynamic to 'shift left', with speed the defining factor.

She presented four fundamental shifts impacting accessibility skills: scale, expertise, interfaces and accountability.

Firstly, Swan asked, "Is AI solving accessibility? Or is it scaling inaccessibility?" She observed that, while AI is enabling significant progress in generating captions, code and text alternatives at scale, it can industrialise bad practice, producing outputs that may meet technical compliance but may actually be unusable to users. Issues such as hallucinated content, unreliable data sources and flawed underlying code highlight the need for careful oversight of prompts, datasets and safeguards to ensure accessible outcomes.

Secondly, accessibility expertise shouldn't only be confined to specialists, but part of the skills sets of designers, developers, testers and other roles. Drawing on parallels with the Industrial Revolution, Swan suggests accessibility skills are evolving. While AI automates lower-level tasks like coding and testing, there will be greater emphasis on human judgement, critical thinking and understanding real human experiences. Different roles must adapt accordingly, from developers understanding AI-generated code to testers designing new methodologies and product owners embedding accessibility into procurement and planning.

Thirdly, AI is also transforming interfaces themselves: from static, fixed deterministic interfaces – that perform in largely stable and predictable ways – to dynamic and probabilistic, shaped by human inputs and interactions that generate content 'on the fly'. This shift complicates both testing and compliance: emerging generative and adaptive systems are harder to evaluate using existing frameworks.

Finally, accountability becomes more fragmented in AI-mediated practices. Responsibilities are no longer clearly defined within linear workflows but layered across teams and vendors. In a pivotal shift in inclusive design, Swan explained how accessibility must move beyond evaluating outputs to governing inputs.

The role of Access Workers and how we buy access?

Dr Louise Hickman, University of Cambridge

> *"Rather than thinking about accessibility AI as something that is already embedded, there are ways that we can intervene, and we can start building teams that can lead on the impact it has."*

Reflecting on her experiences as a deaf PhD student, Hickman began by introducing the concept of 'access intimacy', the relational trust and understanding between people with access needs and those who support them. Access workers can include interpreters, captioners and classroom support assistants and Hickman described the deeply relational and skilled

nature of their work as a form of invisible labour, prompting the question, "what do we lose when that type of work is handed over to AI? What relationships are we losing?"

Throughout her presentation, Hickman drew heavily on her recent report, *BSL is Not for Sale*[2], a critical examination of the procurement lifecycle of British Sign Language in the age of AI. She outlined the two main functions of AI-mediated BSL: the translation of pre-recorded material, and the simultaneous interpretation of real-time interaction, arguing these present different opportunities and risks and should be evaluated separately. Drawing on a case study of a medical consultation, Hickman highlighted the limitations and serious risks of using AI in complex and sensitive contexts, where only human interpreters are able to recognise nuances and misunderstandings and intervene.

Moving forward, key work will involve pushing back on some of the dominant narratives and challenging industry claims that are used to justify AI solutions, such as interpreter shortages. Crucially, investing in d/Deaf-led infrastructures will provide opportunities for communities and advocacy groups to intervene in the development of BSL AI.

Hickman concluded with several key recommendations. Fundamentally, BSL AI evaluation should be led by d/Deaf teams. She suggested funding a national network of BSL expertise, the inclusion of d/Deaf advisors in Government Digital Services, and called for greater transparency from companies developing BSL AI.

[2] https://bda.org.uk/bsl-is-not-for-sale/

4 Insights and strategic priorities

Workshop discussions addressed three critical 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 and research sectors.

> Q1. Can we interrogate the futures that AI is already building – are they compatible with disabled life as it is actually lived?
>
> Q2. How do we address AI velocity, scale, the limits of compliance and regulation, accountability, and un-fixed interfaces?
>
> Q3. How do we mitigate AI risks and harms, develop future standards, ensure disability rights and engage user expertise?

4.1 Ubiquitous, invisible, unavoidable: pervasive AI

AI was variously described as increasingly ubiquitous, pervasive and intrusive, embedded across everyday tools and workflows to the point where engagement is unavoidable and opting out feels difficult. Participants observed that AI features are being introduced indiscriminately, without user consent, adequate training, or the ability to disable these features. The increasing invisibility of AI within systems is making it harder for users to identify where and how it operates and influences tasks. Importantly, participants highlighted how AI can and is reshaping platforms and software in ways that disrupt original accessibility features.

Navigating hype, acceleration and uncertainty
As AI becomes increasingly embedded in practices related to work, education, and wider society, a 'balancing act' emerges between opportunity and risk. There is a clear conflict between optimism about productivity gains and concerns about the erosion of human-centred practice. AI was framed as transformative but unstable, requiring accessibility practitioners and educators to critically assess what it can realistically achieve.

And while AI was described as following familiar technological hype cycles, it is accelerating faster than previous innovations. This perpetually dynamic state indicates several key concerns. At the individual level, the rapid pace of AI development was widely perceived as overwhelming, with participants describing a sense that the technology is 'running away', making it difficult for educators and professionals to establish best practices in both the use of AI and in providing guidance to others. At a more structural level, uncertainty about mid- and long-term outcomes, and constant change create resistance to scrutiny and research (and with

it, developments in research-led or evidence-based practice) creating fundamental challenges for accessibility governance.

Inclusion cannot be automated
A critical tension was identified, between the rapid and seemingly relentless pace of AI development and adoption, and the need for slower, experience-based understanding required to meet human needs, particularly in relation to accessibility practices and the process-oriented nature of inclusion, which requires time, consultation, and iteration.

The frequent updates and instability of AI tools create twofold risks. First, that AI accelerates existing exclusionary practices that position accessibility only as nice-to-have, rather than essential; as a result accessibility is a 'bolt-on', added retrospectively following design and development (if at all). Second, where AI is purposed for assistive activities, its instability means it cannot be relied upon, compounding inequalities and disabled-subjectivities.

As reported in Workshop 1, participants also identified how AI is beginning to shape 'accessibility solutions' that do not reflect the authentic needs of disabled users – scaling practices that have the veneer of inclusion, that in practice present major and substantive risks to disabled communities (for example, a BSL translation avatar in a doctors surgery that has been developed from a hearing/spoken language perspective is unable to effectively translate BSL dialects, technical terms, or cultural cues. In such high-stakes medical environments, language errors can result in physical harms). As such, participants emphasised the importance of caution, incremental adoption, and thoughtful and informed development that is genuinely inclusive of disabled communities.

4.2 Critical perspectives

Inflated promises: assumptions and expectations around AI
Participants observed inflated expectations and misguided assumptions about AI's capabilities, leading to over-reliance and lack of critical engagement. There is growing concern that AI is being applied to accessibility without sufficient evidence of its effectiveness. Questions arose about whether AI narrows creativity and explorative thinking. And particular concern was directed at the assumption that mainstream AI technologies are increasingly capable of automatically resolving accessibility issues – an assumption that is both empirically unfounded and politically convenient. Such assumptions risk deferring responsibility for accessibility, and obscure the ongoing need for human oversight and accountable design. Collectively, these trends point to a wider shift away from shared responsibility, encouraging passive reliance on technology at the expense of active, inclusive practices.

Partial tools, partial solutions: the effectiveness and limits of AI in practice

Workshop participants observed that AI is frequently treated as an umbrella term covering diverse technologies and applications, though in practice many tend to equate it with Generative AI and Large Language Models. Several participants suggested viewing AI as one component of a broader toolkit, rather than a singular or complete solution. While AI can support tasks such as note-taking, summarising and basic coding tasks, its effectiveness is often offset by the verification it requires. As in our 2025 workshop, participants questioned whether AI currently saves time at all, particularly when outputs must be checked for accuracy and (ableist) bias; a process that can double workloads. The non-deterministic nature of AI was also identified as a particular limitation in domains requiring precision, including mathematics. Broader concerns were raised about a loss of creativity, nuance, and human connection, and about a shift toward a 'post-literacy' modes of working where content is generated and consumed without deep engagement.

Quantifying the costs: ethics, risks, harms of AI

Limited understanding of AI contributes to over-trust in its outputs and difficulty in recognising its limitations. Ethical concerns were raised about AI tools that mimic human interaction, particularly in contexts involving vulnerable communities – including those seeking support in mental health or therapeutic settings. Participants highlighted risks including privacy violations, psychological harm, and misuse of AI in sensitive contexts. There was concern that harms are frequently underestimated, particularly when AI systems reinforce harmful behaviours. Ultimately, risks were seen as tied to how AI tools are deployed and used. And current mechanisms to monitor and manage these AI impacts are insufficient.

Bias in AI: a feature, not a bug

AI bias remains a fundamental issue, rooted in training data and resistant to technical fix. Examples such as facial recognition failures, exclusionary algorithmic systems and growing evidence of user-data profiling within AI platforms, illustrate how AI systematically reproduces and compounds existing inequalities. While technical improvements are possible, participants stressed that systematic change depends on deliberate prioritisation and robust regulation. Without intervention, biased systems will persist and continue to scale.

Political and sociocultural dimensions of AI

AI was explicitly framed as political, shaped by deeply embedded cultural values, economic systems, and power structures. Participants raised questions about who controls AI development and whose voices are excluded, with disabled people consistently identified as marginalised and excluded from design and governance processes. The growing power and influence of tech companies, combined with environmental costs (such as data centre resource consumption), continues to raise ethical concerns about sustainability and global inequity for accessibility professionals and disability advocates. Participants emphasised that technologies embed the priorities of those who design and fund them: dominant, productivity-

driven narratives of AI promote efficiency and cost-cutting gains that reflect capitalist imperatives over human-centred goals.

Concerns were raised about the influence of tech leaders and companies in shaping public discourse, including instances where systems are aligned with specific ideologies. The shift toward more right-leaning political biases was observed to undermine progress in inclusion, with technological repercussions.

Deskilling and displacement? AI and the accessibility workforce

The association of AI and deskilling across the professions was highlighted. Increasing reliance on automation is seen to reduce opportunities to develop expertise, particularly at the entry-level, creating a mismatch between graduate skills and job availability. Participants noted shifts in career pathways, with interest moving toward AI-related roles at the expense of other fields, including accessibility. Concerns were also raised about threats to specific professional roles, including interpreters; members of the d/Deaf community whose relational and culture expertise resists automation, but who remain vulnerable to cost-driven replacement.

AI literacy across higher education

Wider discussions around education and training in AI emphasised the need for new literacies and critical thinking to ensure AI enhances rather than undermines learning experiences. While specific benefits for neurodivergent students were highlighted, preservation of educational integrity and inclusivity remain key concerns.

Crucially, participants highlighted significant gaps in AI knowledge and skills across higher education, reporting that many teaching staff lack the expertise and confidence to guide students in using AI effectively or critically. Overall, engagement in AI varies widely, from enthusiastic adoption to more guarded and sceptical approaches. Participants emphasised that effective use requires critical literacy and domain expertise. But the gap is not only technical: accessibility and inclusive design are largely absent from emerging AI competency frameworks and institutional training provision. Current approaches to AI literacy rarely incorporate disabled perspectives on the challenges AI poses for disabled students or wider communities.

Further, within the sector, leadership and institutional support were largely seen as insufficient – mirroring parallels in other aspects of digital accessibility (e.g. university responses to legislations such as the European Accessibility Act, 2025) where grassroots accessibility initiatives require institutional leadership and co-ordination to succeed[3].

[3] Gordon & Lewthwaite (2026) Why digital accessibility is now a leadership issue for universities. *THES Campus*. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/why-digital-accessibility-now-leadership-issue-universities

4.3 AI and accessibility

Digital inequality and the accessibility of AI itself
AI risks deepening digital inequality by repeating failures of earlier technological transitions – neglecting accessibility at the outset and failing to embed participatory, accessible and inclusive design. As AI continues to proliferate, the need to urgently address existing accessibility challenges before advancing further becomes acute.

Access to more effective AI tools is frequently contingent on financial resources, meaning disabled people — who face disproportionate economic disadvantage — risk being systematically excluded from the benefits AI promises. As institutional (and governmental) pressure to engage with AI intensifies, responsibilities for providing equitable access, training and resources fall to organisations that are often unprepared to meet them.

Accessibility awareness and knowledge
Participants reinforced findings from the first workshop: a persistent lack of awareness and understanding of accessibility remains across higher education and industry sectors. Accessibility continues to be treated most frequently as a compliance issue rather than a core design principle, generating a persistent gap between expectations and actual practice, with accessibility unevenly integrated into curricula and processes of professional accreditation. Participants highlighted the need for broader training and institutional support.

With growing prioritisation of AI, participants raised concerns that accessibility is becoming less visible and less valued within current technological discourses. However, participants also identified a countervailing opportunity: the current focus on AI can be strategically leveraged to re-emphasise and re-energise accessibility research, education and practice. This reflects similar approaches adopted by educators seeking to harness movements such as Equality Diversity and Inclusion, or sustainability to promote accessibility[4].

Assistive AI and AI-mediated accessibility
AI can and is providing significant benefits for some disabled users, including more flexible access to tools and support for tasks such as writing or voice interaction. The potential to support further development exists— for example through user customisation and personalisation— but these benefits typically seen as incidental rather than intentional. There is a risk of assuming that increased automation will improve accessibility, despite evidence that AI solutions can diminish established practices. Participants emphasised the need for critical evaluation and human oversight to ensure that AI enhances accessibility in authentic ways. High-quality, unbiased training data was identified as foundational to accessible AI outcomes, and as frequently lacking.

[4] Coverdale, Lewthwaite & Horton (2024) Digital Accessibility Education in Content: Expert Perspectives on Building Capacity in Academia and the workplace. *ACM Transactions on Accessible Computing*. https://doi.org/10.1145/3649508

The social impacts of AI-mediated accessibility were also raised, including risks of isolation and disruption to established communication practices and access communities. At the same time, well-meaning but over-cautious institutional reactions and restrictive policies can also disproportionately disadvantage those who rely on assistive-AI. The assistive-use, and non-use of emerging technologies is often hidden; benefits are unevenly distributed due to differences in digital competencies, literacies, context, opportunity and resource.

Nothing about us, without us: the case for meaningful engagement with disabled people

The complexities and contradictions outlined above reinforce the need for greater user engagement in AI design and development processes, most crucially in the pursuit of accessibility solutions. Recognition of disabled people's user expertise and lived-experience was identified as essential. Yet industry's engagement with disabled communities is clearly insufficient. Increased participatory approaches and co-design are required. Further, human oversight remains critical: automated testing cannot fully capture user experience. Barriers to effective engagement, including limited accountability, lack of accessibility knowledge and unclear feedback channels, hinder effective engagement and remain significant.

Participants called for structured engagement mechanisms, such as citizen assemblies and continuous feedback systems, to ensure that disabled users' input translates into to genuine action (rather than performative consultation). Education was identified as a key site for involving disabled voices early in development processes, to demonstrate and model ways forward. Priority should be given to those most severely excluded, with accessibility understood as extending beyond compliance to address real-world barriers and lived experience. Meaningful engagement ultimately requires systemic change: embedding user perspectives throughout the development lifecycle and recognising their central role in shaping accessible technologies that work for all.

The regulatory gap in AI and accessibility

AI governance was widely assessed as insufficient, with regulation consistently failing to keep pace with technological change. In the UK, existing frameworks are fragmented and often lack enforcement, while accessibility is not prioritised within regulatory agendas. Participants noted that standards such as WCAG evolve slowly, creating gaps between guidelines and current technological realities. Legal accountability remains unclear, particularly regarding responsibility for inaccessible AI systems - and meaningful change has tended to depend on high-profile legal cases rather than proactive governance. In the UK specifically, the absence of mechanisms analogous to class actions was identified as a structural limitation on accountability. Participants call for stronger, more pro-active regulatory frameworks.

5 Preliminary policy recommendations

These recommendations are aimed at industry, policy makers, education providers, and disabled people's organisations.

Industry (product managers, designers, developers, usability specialists, content authors, procurement leads)

- **Embed accessibility from the outset, not as a retrospective fix.** Accessibility is a foundational requirement. Assess AI-enhanced workflows to identify where accessibility is currently deferred.
- **Structural bias requires structural change.** Move from ad hoc bias mitigation toward systematic governance, transparency and accountability, with disabled communities involved in defining representative and non-discriminatory deployment.
- **Ensure AI tools are themselves accessible.** AI platforms must meet accessibility standards.
- **Address AI consent and transparency deficits in accessibility statements.** Organisations must ensure transparency about how AI operates in their products, what data is used, the accessibility impact, and how disabled users can opt out.
- **Evaluate AI-mediated accessibility tools by function.** Real-time interpretation, pre-recorded translation, captioning and adaptive interfaces present distinct risks.

Cross-Sector leadership (accessibility leads, senior institutional leaders, professional bodies, standards organisations)

- **Invest in disability-led infrastructures for AI evaluation.** Sustained, funded structures are required for effective, community-led evaluation of AI-mediated accessibility tools.
- **Resist the displacement of accessibility by AI discourse.** Leverage the current 'AI moment' to reposition accessibility as central to responsible AI development.
- **Prioritise human access workers.** The relational and cultural expertise of interpreters and support assistants is irreplaceable. Resist cost-driven substitution of human access workers with AI tools, particularly in high-stakes settings.
- **Move from siloed innovation to coordinated, transparent sector-wide practice.** Prioritise shared frameworks, open practice

and transparent reporting of both successes and failures in AI-mediated accessibility.

- **Address deskilling risks through workforce planning.** Develop strategies that sustain foundational accessibility skills alongside AI competencies, and monitor the impact of AI adoption on career pathways.

Policy-Makers (Government, regulators, standards agencies, funders)

- **Establish regulatory frameworks that address AI-specific accessibility risks.** Assign clear legal accountability for the accessibility of AI-generated outputs and AI-mediated services, developed in consultation with disabled people's organisations.

- **Address the accountability gap in AI-mediated accessibility.** Strengthen equality and accessibility legislation to provide accessible routes for disabled people to get collective redress.

- **Develop structured for disabled user engagement in AI governance.** Resource standing advisory panels, citizen assemblies and feedback systems to embed disabled users' perspectives throughout AI regulatory processes.

- **Require disability-first design principles in publicly funded AI.** Procurement and funding frameworks require disabled and d/Deaf community leadership, sign-language-first design, and clear specification of which tools do and do not support accessibility and BSL.

- **Assess risks of embedding of AI in public services.** Public services have accessibility duties. Equality impact assessments are needed before AI is embedded in critical public services.

- **Fund participatory and community-led AI and accessibility research.** Prioritise research that centres disabled people's expertise, with particular attention to groups most excluded by current AI development, for example, people with intellectual disabilities.

Educators, training and accreditation organisations

- **Add accessibility to AI literacy curricula.** AI competency frameworks can explicitly incorporate accessibility, inclusive design and disability perspectives as a condition of professional recognition.

- **Preserve and teach the skills that AI cannot replicate.** Sustain foundational human accessibility competencies that AI cannot

perform: critical evaluation, usability testing, assistive technology proficiencies, empathy-led design and contextual judgement.

- **Develop educator confidence and expertise in AI and accessibility.** Invest in sustained professional development to equip educators to address the technical and ethical dimensions of AI and accessibility.

- **Model accessible assessment practices in AI-integrated learning environments.** Accessibility education can lead in developing robust approaches to assessment.

- **Address the equitable-access dimension of AI in education.** Ensure that institutional caution does not disadvantage disabled learners, who rely on Assistive AI for participation in education.

Disabled People's Organisations and advocacy bodies

- **Build and sustain disability-led capacity to intervene in AI development.** Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) require sustained resourcing to challenge industry claims, commission independent evaluation and participate meaningfully in standards and regulatory processes.

- **Challenge and reframe dominant narratives used to justify AI-mediated accessibility.** Industry justifications, including claims of interpreter shortages and cost-effectiveness, require critical scrutiny. DPOs are well placed to surface evidence and propose rights-based alternatives.

- **Advocate for disabled people's right to long-term planning and self-determination.** Address ‘futures’ beyond current access, to challenge AI systems that contain rather than expand disabled lives and advocate for AI infrastructures that support stability and self-determination.

6 Conclusions

This report highlights both the opportunities and challenges relating to the impact of AI on digital accessibility practice, emphasising the enduring importance of lived experience and inclusive design.

AI is increasingly pervasive, reshaping accessibility practice at speed, embedding itself across tools, workflows and services in ways that are often invisible, ungoverned, difficult to contest, and opt-out of. Our workshop participants engaged critically with these issues, acknowledging the potential of AI to enhance productivity. However, a persistent tension between opportunity and risk was observed.

Discussions gravitated around several key issues. First, 'AI futures' are not neutral, or inevitable: AI systems function as infrastructures of anticipation, projecting historical patterns of disadvantage forward and narrowing the imaginable futures available to disabled people. Participants critically engaged with the geopolitical and cultural dimensions of AI development, and the risk of reinforcing dominant ableist ideologies. Second, the acceleration of AI development is at odds with the iterative, experience-based processes on which meaningful inclusion can depend. Effective accessibility practice requires time, collaboration, and human judgement, resources that are minimised in current framings of AI optimisation. Third, the regulatory environment is currently structurally inadequate: accountability is fragmented, enforcement mechanisms are unclear. Disabled people and d/Deaf communities continue to be excluded from design and governance processes at precisely the moment their expertise is most needed.

Workshop participants engaged critically with the intersection between AI and digital accessibility, warning that AI risks reproducing and scaling existing inequalities. They advocated embedding democratic values, environmental responsibility and inclusive perspectives into the design and development of AI and highlighted how emerging interfaces may introduce new accessibility challenges.

Against these concerns, participants identified significant opportunities. The current salience of AI across policy and institutional agendas provides a strategic opportunity to reposition accessibility as foundational for responsible AI development, rather than a bolt-on compliance obligation after the event. Growing rights infrastructure, including the European Accessibility Act (2025), disabled-led advocacy, and participatory research offer models for anticipatory and community-centred governance that the broader AI sector urgently needs.

The impact of AI on accessibility demands sustained structural investment in disabled people's expertise, and a commitment to futures that expand, rather than contain, disabled lives. In conclusion, improving accessibility in the AI era requires sustained effort, cultural change, and integration across all levels of education and practice.

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