How Universities Promote and Have Easily Findable Information on Their Disability Support Pages

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Abstract

Web accessibility is becoming increasingly vital for websites and applications, especially universities and their disability support (DS) web pages. This project involved researching how universities promote and provide easily findable information on their DS sites. The research reveals a wide variety in the amount and findability of information universities include on their DS sites. This project aims to determine what information people can locate on these sites and whether it can be found quickly. Participants are asked to complete a survey to assess if they can find specific information on three different university DS sites and rate their experience with each site. Additionally, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and the EU Web Accessibility Directive 2016/2102 were applied to evaluate each university's compliance with these standards. Based on the results, a site will be developed to show both data and options for improving accessibility. This project's primary goal is to showcase how universities' disability support programs ensure that content is accessible and easily findable for everyone.

Declaration

Declaration of Originality
In signing this declaration, you are conforming, in writing, that the submitted work is
entirely your own original work, except where clearly attributed otherwise, and that it has
not been submitted partly or wholly for any other educational award.

I hereby declare that:
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accreditation;

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institution contributing in any way to an educational award;

• with respect to another's work: all text, diagrams, code, or ideas, whether
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attributed to the source in a scholarly manner, whether from books, papers,
lecture notes or any other student's work, whether published or unpublished,
electronically or in print.

Signed: . . . . . .  *. . . . . Date: . . . . . .*

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During the course of this project, many people have supported me to achieve my ambitions to improve accessibility. Without the support of the Department of Digital Humanities I would not be writing this in the fourth year of a course that has challenged me and shown me that we integrate humanities with computer science to make our experience of the world better.
In particular, I would like to thank my Supervisor – Dr Tracy Mehigan and Final Year Coordinator Dr Shawn Day for their mentorship and getting me from an idea to a final project.
Another group of people – my respondents have been instrumental in solidifying my ideas and showing me where we can improve to make sites accessible to all.

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Introduction

In recent years, web accessibility has become increasingly important, particularly since the implementation of the EU Web Accessibility Directive in 2020. One of the key areas expected to benefit from the directive is Disability Support (DS).

For this project, the project examined how various universities have utilised this directive for their DS pages, as a site's accessibility also affects the findability of information.
A survey was conducted as part of the project to assess how people found the contact information on the DS home pages of three Irish University Association (IUA) universities: University College Cork (UCC), Trinity College Dublin, and the University of Galway. In this survey, participants were asked to find specific pieces of information and “copy and paste” their outcome, if any, into the survey form from the university's DS page using the provided link and then rate how easily they found the information and the site's overall layout. The survey also asked participants whether they registered for any UCC supports, via our many access routes and if they knew of a Canvas page containing specific information about each support.

During the project, the research also revealed the varying ways that the universities applied the EU directive to make content accessible to the user. This research found that when creating and maintaining accessible content, you must consider the essential user experience and universal design principles. In doing this, you can follow the directive but also allow users to find information in the best way that suits them. One of the main ideas of accessibility is to ensure that all users can access the same information with ease, no matter the user’s needs; the same can be said for user design, as it puts the needs of the user as the primary focus.
In the context of the project, ensuring that user design and accessibility are a central part of how universities have final information on their DS pages.

Based on the research and survey results, a website was created to showcase how universities ensure compliance with the guidelines and how the best universities can enhance their sites through proper implementation of the directive and user experience. All the information gathered in the survey is presented on the site in an accessible format for all users. The site gave quick fixes that can meet the requirements of the EU

directive on university websites. How these rules can be followed in various ways is at the institution's discretion; ensuring compliance with the guidelines allows for appropriate site use and improves the findability of information.

Literature Review / Environmental Exam

When starting this project, a range of published materials was reviewed. These materials included both peer-reviewed journals and publicly available information. The publicly available materials came from a variety of sources, both governmental such as EU Directives and support information created by community and voluntary organisations such as the AHEAD website.

For clarity in this project, the definition of a university is based on the Irish context. All universities within the scope of this project are governed by the Universities Act, 1997, which is currently held by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovations and Science. (DFHERIS, 1997)

In Ireland, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) leads the strategic development of higher education and research to create a consistent system to support achievements and national objectives. The HEA ensures all collaboration between public bodies and the system, funding, and policy research. The HEA also ensures that universities have autonomy and academic freedom.(DFHERIS, 1997)

Many higher education institutions that are governed by the HEA: University College Cork (UCC), Trinity College Dublin, and University of Galway all responded favourably to the request to participate. These institutions receive all the supports and governance that the HEA can provide. (HEA, 2025)

Universities can ensure their websites are accessible to everyone in various ways. One approach is to adhere to the EU Web Accessibility Directive (European Union, 2016b), which mandates that all public services and information on websites and mobile applications be more accessible and harmonise the differing standards available in the EU. Universities are included as a public service. The legislation was first adopted in 2016 and fully effected in 2021. In September 2020, the directive was implemented for universities as their sites were published before 2018.
The directive requires that all file formats published after September 2018 be accessible, as well as audio and video formats published after September 2020. This means that any content made now must be accessible to all users. (European Union, 2016a)
The directive also ensures that everyone follows the same accessibility guidelines, as there have been different ones and

in some cases conflicting advice in the past, depending on who managed the site or application. The primary purpose of the directive is to ensure that regardless of which site the user visits, they will have the same basic accessibility experience as the subsequent user. The guidelines utilised by the directive are the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). These are a set of rules that indicate what is acceptable. They are divided into sections addressing the key areas that require attention: Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust.
Perceivable means what the user can see on the page or application; this refers to any information, e.g. text or video. This section pays close attention to colour contrast, video captioning, and alternative text on images. Perceivable is the section to which the creator pays the most attention, as it is considered the area where the most can be accomplished. You don't have to make changes once you have completed it the first time.
Operable means any form of navigation the user has to do, e.g. moving from one page to the next. The site should be compatible with screen readers and keyboard shortcuts.
Understandable applies to the content on the site or application, which is written in clear, precise language, regardless of the skill level or understanding of the language. It also pays attention to the ease of interaction with the site.
Robust means that it can cope with a wide variety of assistive technologies available to users.
The guidelines also have a rating scale for the different levels of compliance: A, AA, and AAA. A is the easiest to achieve, and AAA is the hardest. It works on a moving scale: You must achieve A before AA, etc.
The guidelines mean that the creators of content, both the written and the overall interactivity of a site or application.
Another part of the directive is that all public sites have an Accessibility Statement, which states that they (the creator) are following the directive and what they are doing to ensure that the guidelines are being met. There also has to be some way of contacting the creator if any issues arise; this can be in the form of an email address or a feedback form on the site page. The statement must also be prominent on the site; many are in the site's footer.

All of the directives and guidelines impact students in universities.
Based on HEA data, we can see the number of new entrants in the three universities reviewed and the ever-changing profile of university students.

From this we see that 19.3% of new entrants have registered with some form of disability and could require disability supports accessed by the pages reviewed. Year-on-year data was also reviewed, and the varying needs of students continue to grow as we better support students with access needs in the secondary and further education systems. To meet or better, supports for new entrants accessibility is key so this important group knows how to avail of supports

Tools

The tools used can determine how the project functions and is successful. Based on what the project hoped to achieve, the following tool types were used for this project: an online form system, a web hosting site, and a data analysis and graphing tool.

There are many different online form systems that we have access to as UCC students. The main ones are Google Forms (European Union, 2016), Microsoft Forms (Microsoft Forms, 2025) and Qualtrics Survey (Qualtrics, 2025). There are various reasons to use each of the tools.

Criteria	Google	Microsoft	Qualtrics
UCC login for user and creator	Yes	Yes	Yes
Multiple question styles	Yes	Yes	Yes
Connected with Excel/Google Sheets	Yes	Yes	No
Cloud storage	Yes Google Drive	Yes OneDrive	Yes in a third party e.g. Google/OneDrive
Ease of use for user and creator	Yes	Yes	Need training

Based on the research for each tool, Microsoft Forms best meets the project's needs. It integrates with OneDrive, complying with the UCC GDPR policy (UCC, 2025). Additionally, Microsoft Forms connects with Excel, simplifying the creation of graphs and data analysis. Its user interface is familiar to many, with various question types available to elicit the most concise responses from participants. Examples include Choice, Text, Ranking, and Rating.

Furthermore, Microsoft Forms has settings that restrict access to users with a UCC email, which is crucial since they are the project's target audience. Participant protection and safeguarding personal information are essential to meet. The ethical approval requirements reassure participants that their data will be used with care. The creator of a Microsoft Forms survey can also do so.

Microsoft Forms allows for ease of use and understanding for both creator and participant.

Another tool type that was required for this project was a web-hosting site. Web hosting is vital as it provides the user with easy access to the survey results and as a digital artefact. There are many different web hosting sites. WordPress (WordPress, 2025) was an easy choice for this project as it is the Departmental preferred web host and reviewer already had access making it the best choice, allowing the project to achieve its best results. WordPress is a web hosting platform for both commercial and private use. It can also be a digital platform to showcase the project's work.

Another tool type needed was for data analytics and visualisation; there are many ways to do this, both technical and non-technical. A technical example would be Matplotlib, and a non-technical one would be Microsoft Excel. Given the simplicity of the data set for this project, a non-technical way was preferable. Excel was chosen as an Excel sheet is generated when participants completed the survey. Excel also provides a way for data visualisation through graphing, allowing a quick and easy understanding of the data.

Methods

The main method used in this project was a survey, which required a process in order to achieve the goals of the project. A survey allows for the collection of data from a range of respondents and removes some of the bias that other data collection methods can generate. An anonymous survey allows participants to express their thoughts and direct change without the more time consuming requirements of focus groups or individual interviews. As this survey was aimed at staff and students a short online survey allowed participants to complete it in their own time rather than having to schedule participation

Before the survey could be distributed ethical approval has to be achieved. The main purpose of ethical approval is to ensure that the project is thinking of the safety and mental health of participants, and the impact of the survey on themselves and others. It also asks how people's data is going to be stored and for how long. For this project we found that using the access that we already have with OneDrive as it is secure with accordance with the UCC GDPR guidelines (UCC, 2025). Also with this project being about disability support pages ensuring the safety of participants as they may not wish to disclose that they are a part of the support groups. Making sure that the survey was anonymous was also adds an extra layer of safety as it allows participants more freedom to answer question as they would not feel judged by their answers. Ethical approval confirmation reassures participants allowing them the freedom to comment without concern that their answers will be misused or applied to a context outside the one stated.

Once ethical approval was granted to survey was sent to both UCC staff and students for completion. For this project, a survey was the best option as it means we could find people's real at the moment feeling on institutions within the project. It was important to get participants' honest opinions as we needed their opinions as they navigate site and find the required information. The specific information was chosen as this is common information needed by students in a moment of need where accessibility and removal of frustration support access.

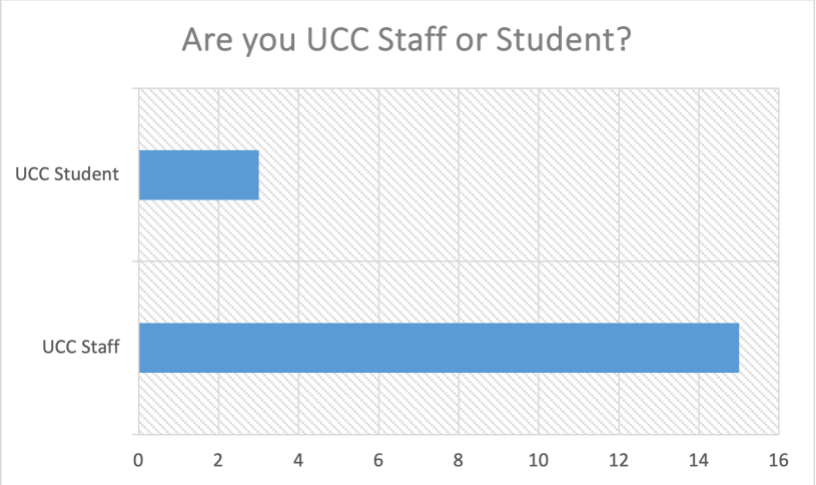
The use of the survey allows the project to ask different questions and give people tasks to complete. One of the main concerns that we had was how we prove that participants had

completed the survey tasks; we found that asking people to ‘copy and paste’ a specific piece of text would allow us to check that people were looking at the sites and to see how people find information on these sites.

Using a survey enabled us to engage with people about their thoughts and opinions on disability support pages. Within the project's scope, prompting people to interact with the sites was vital as it encompassed the main areas of the research question: the ability to find information and how it is promoted. A survey allows for the collection of real-world data at that moment in time.
Once we gathered several responses, we used Excel to analyse how the participants interacted with the three university sites and how they perceived the overall experience. Creating the spreadsheet provided a means to view all the data in one location and ensure all responses were completed thoroughly. With the results, data visualisation was performed using Excel to verify the accuracy of the results.
Based on everything learned from the research and survey, a site integrated all aspects of the EU directive, WCAG guidelines, and survey results. The site needed to include three main areas: the background of the project, the survey results, and different ways that people could improve their own sites.

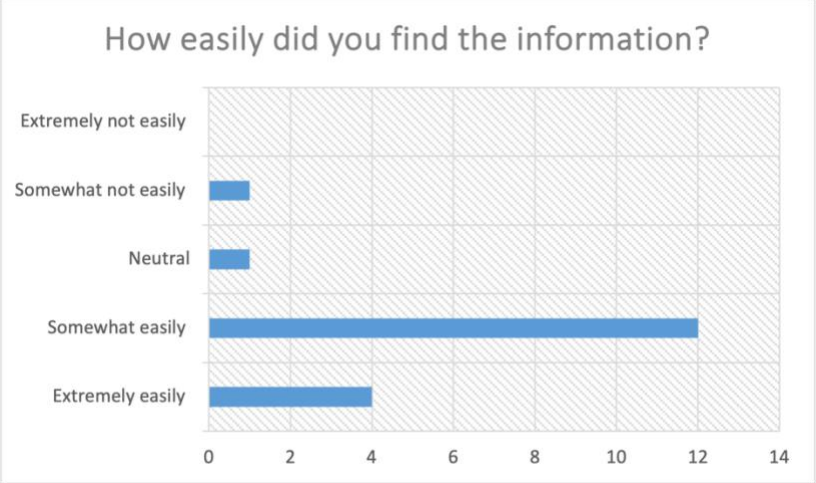
Analysis and Reflection

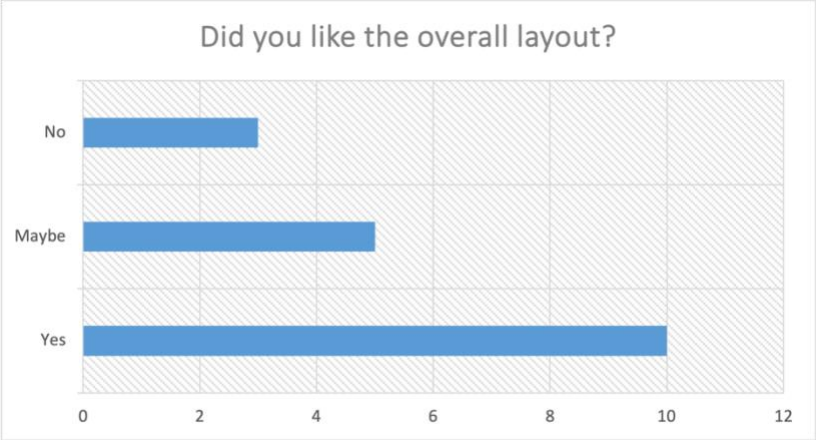
Overall, the survey results provided the most insight into the findability of information on disability support sites.



Overall, there were 18 participants, with three students and 15 staff. This means that many of the questions will be responded to from the viewpoint of a staff member.

UCC

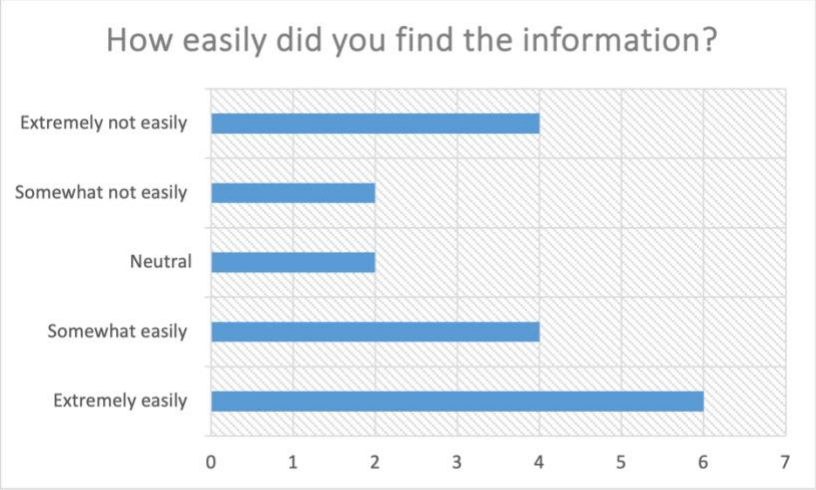


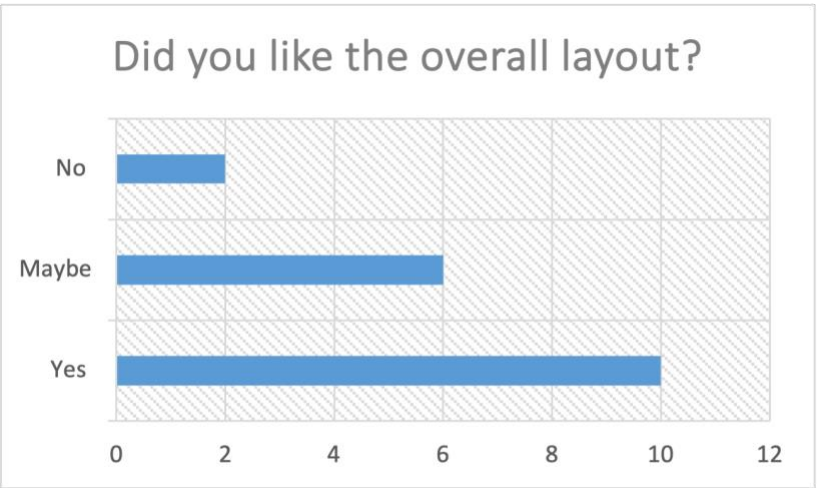


For UCC, over 2/3 of people could find the information somewhat easily. Overall, 89% of people found the information easily, which means that many people were able to find the contact information.

For the overall layout, people liked it, with 10 saying yes that they did like the site layout. There were also three participants who did not like the overall design of the site, meaning there was a majority who liked the site's layout.

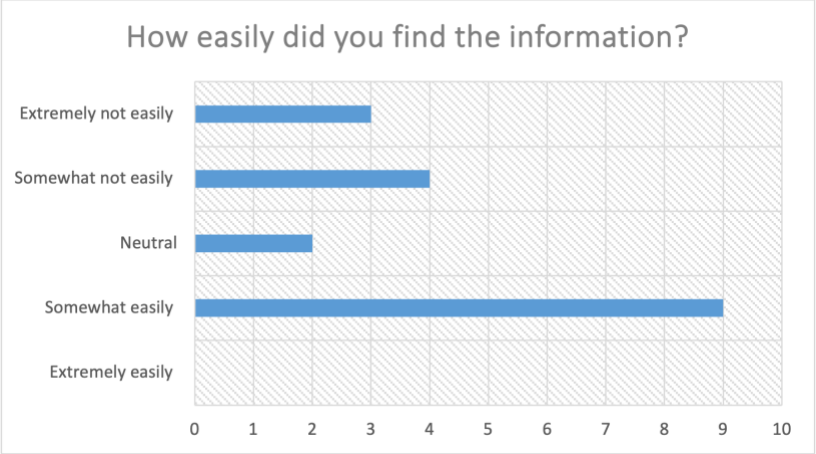
Trinity College Dublin

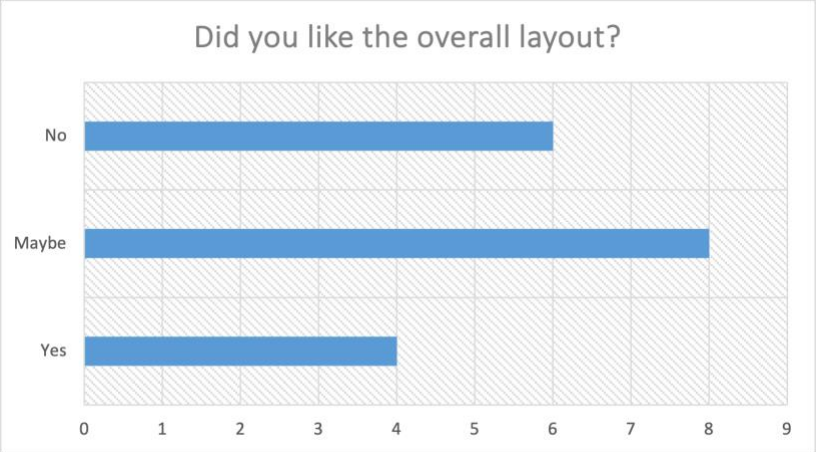




For Trinity overall 55% of people found the information easily, whereas 33% of participants found the contact details. This highlights that more people found the information than did not. In terms of layout and user experience, the response to Trinity was the most polarized. With the same positives as UCC and negatives as the University of Galway. Such a split could prove harder to resolve the issues as they may be due to personal preference rather than identifiable problems.

University of Galway





For Galway, 50% of participants found the contact information 'Somewhat easily'. Also, 33% of people did not find the information easily. A zero "extremely easily" result highlights a need to improve in this area.
Galway has the lowest positive user experience rating. Overall, 44% of people said 'Maybe', indicating that participants were unsure about the site's layout. But still, there were 33% said 'No' to like the overall design. This means that there are areas in Galway's site that could be improved to improve the user experience quickly.

Overall, the survey was very insightful. It gave real-world views of the sites and how each of the different universities may wish to improve in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project has enhanced my understanding of the directives and guidelines involved in creating accessible content, as well as how users and creators can consciously choose to produce more accessible content for everyone. There are multiple opportunities to expand this research, given time and resources. Perhaps this could be furthered by projects such as Inclusive UCC or AHEAD.

Appendix

Link to survey https://forms.office.com/e/Z04073fTPp

Raw data is not included as it is outside the scope of the ethical approval of the survey.

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