

Access all web areas

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What use is a flashy website if people with special needs can't use it too? New legislation is likely to change that for the better, writes Heather McLean

Imagine being excluded from a school, a classroom or an activity because your disability hadn't been taken into account. Last September the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (Senda) came into force. This requires all educational establishments in the UK to make "reasonable" adjustments to both physical access to the classroom and to ICT facilities for special needs students. The aim is to ensure pupils with special needs have access to, and are able to use, anything that's necessary for them to learn in the same environment as mainstream pupils.

"Schools have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to make sure that a disabled student won't be placed at a disadvantage, or discriminated against," warns Neil Crowther, policy manager at the Disability Rights Commission (DRC), which has been producing the act's guidance for schools.

"The idea is that schools should become more inclusive, with the transition occurring over time. Resources should become routinely available, rather than be attached to just one child. So if you're buying 20 new monitors, include two big ones."

As training in ICT becomes more prevalent in educational institutions, one area that raises concern for special needs pupils is website accessibility - it's crucial to many curricular ICT activities.

Chris Stevens, head of inclusion and special educational needs for the British Educational and Communications Technology Agency (Becta) explains how Senda can help. "This is about providing technologies to aid communication for kids. Think of students with Stephen Hawking-type disabilities; with the right type of technology these pupils can function in the same way as any other kid in mainstream education." He adds: "We need to move on from the idea that additional provisions need to be made for disabled pupils. This act is a way to approach the future. It's about creating inclusive environments that develop benefit for a whole range of children, not just those with disabilities."

While the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) covered the legal rights of special needs pupils, its amendment, in the form of Senda, makes it illegal for any establishment involved in education to discriminate against the rights of special needs students to be educated in mainstream institutions. It also specifies that educational institutions should create a three-year inclusion plan.

Julie Howell, who leads the campaign for good website design for the Royal National Institute for the Blind, said Senda will hopefully improve on the DDA. "With the DDA, the onus was on disabled people to make a case. As a stick, the DDA wasn't one that was beating people very hard."

Howell is passionate about website accessibility: sites should be developed with consideration for the full range of people that may try them.

"Accessible websites are those that work, whether or not someone is disabled. A site that supports any technology that anyone may be using and supports people logging in from any device. Any school involved in web design concerned about Senda should follow the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) from the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), part of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C).

Fancy software can lessen accessibility, says Howell. "If you use proprietary software, make sure it works with software used by people with disabilities."

Paul Nuttall, director of special-needs firm Semerc, says simple software adjustments can help students move around online. "Partially blind pupils can use enlargement software. Pupils with worse sight will need ScreenReader, a technology that scans the screen and reads text out loud.

Sometimes the functionality of the site means you have to understand icons, so developers need to tag on associated text, so ScreenReader can explain what's there to the pupil."

Making sure a pupil can use ICT classroom equipment is also necessary for website accessibility, says Chris Stevens. "For a kid with cerebral palsy, a key guard for the keyboard is an inexpensive yet effective solution to help them target the right buttons. There are also switches and joysticks available for other types of physical disabilities that work with on-screen software."

Terry Waller, education officer at Becta, concludes: "You can't make a website accessible to everyone, but you can make sure that a person with a range of difficulties, who has his or her own access tools, can access a well-designed website."

ACCESSIBILITY TIPS

Tips for creating accessible websites:

- * Colour: make sure foreground and background colours contrast, particularly when viewed by someone who's colour blind, or using a black and white screen.
- * Font and language: use the simplest language available in a distinct, large and simple font.
- * Images: provide a text equivalent of every non-text item.
- * Multimedia: create synchronised text alternatives to accompany animations or video, such as captions or auditory descriptions.
- * Hypertext links: make sure everything makes sense by providing full auditory explanations, not just "click here".
- * Page organisation: navigation must be consistent. Use headings, lists and straightforward structures.
- * Proprietary software: check software has been developed with special needs in mind, or provide alternatives in case a plug-in isn't supported.
- * Graphs, charts and tables: summarise the content in text and make line-by-line

reading possible so they make sense.

CONTACTS

World Wide Web Consortium

www.w3.org

Becta

www.becta.org.uk/technology/infosheets/html/senlegislation.html

Royal National Institute for the Blind

www.nib.org.uk/digital/