

Can you see us?

by Paul Booth, Project Officer, Disability and Information Systems in Higher Education (DISinHE)

Higher education in the UK is exempt from legislation protecting the rights of disabled people to equal access to information. But pending changes to the law may remove this status, leaving many universities with potentially illegal information and courseware on their web servers. But don't panic yet: on 5 May 1999 the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) announced the release of its *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines Recommendation*, a set of definitive guidelines for web developers.

'It has always been difficult to know which changes are critical,' said Tim Berners-Lee, Director of W3C. 'These guidelines answer that question, and set common expectations so that providers of web sites and users can be much more strategic. The bar has been set, and technologically it is not a very high bar. Some of the items in these guidelines will be unnecessary once authoring tools do them automatically. Now it is time to see which sites can live up to this.'

The W3C have also released checklists for web designers to review web sites, delineating three different levels of priority in the guidelines:

1. Points *must* be satisfied by the developer, or one or more groups will find it impossible to access information on the page.
2. Points *should* be satisfied by the developer, or several groups of people will have difficulty in accessing the information on the page.

3. Points *may* be satisfied to improve the access of the page.

The full checklist is available online from the W3C web site (see below).

In addition to these W3C guidelines, accessibility validation tools are also available. These tools (for example 'Bobby' from the Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST)) validate and rate entire web sites against many of the checkpoints and issues raised by the W3C.

For more information about Disability and Information Systems in Higher Education, please visit the DISinHE web site (the DISinHE Centre is a JISC funded project): <http://www.disinhe.ac.uk/>

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and checklists are available from the W3C web site:

W3C Web Accessibility Initiative:

<http://www.w3.org/wai/>

Guidelines:

<http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/>

Checklist:

<http://www.w3.org/TR/1999/WAI-WEBCONTENT-19990324/full-checklist.html>

The Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST)'s 'Bobby' tool:

<http://www.cast.org/bobby/>

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[*Editor's note:* the current version of EDINA was designed with accessibility guidelines in mind, and was validated using 'Bobby'. See *Newsline*, vol 3.1, 'Making EDINA services more accessible', <http://edina.ed.ac.uk/newsline/newsline3-1.html>]

10 Quick Tips

Key concepts of web accessibility

- 1 *Images & animations.* Use the alt attribute to describe the function of all visuals.
- 2 *Image maps.* Use client-side MAP and text for hotspots.
- 3 *Multimedia.* Provide captioning and transcripts of audio, descriptions of video, and accessible versions in case inaccessible formats are used.
- 4 *Hypertext links.* Use text that makes sense when read out of context. For instance, do not use "click here."
- 5 *Page organisation.* Use headings, lists, and consistent structure. Use CSS for layout and style where possible.
- 6 *Graphs & charts.* Summarise or use the longdesc attribute.
- 7 *Scripts, applets, & plug-ins.* Provide alternative content in case active features are inaccessible or unsupported.
- 8 *Frames.* Label with the title or name attribute.
- 9 *Tables.* Make line-by-line reading sensible. Summarise. Avoid using tables for column layout.
- 10 *Check your work.* Validate the HTML. Use evaluation tools and text-only browsers to verify accessibility.

AGDEX launch

On Wednesday, 1 September 1999, EDINA launched its AGDEX service.

Profiled in the last issue of *Newsline*, AGDEX is an information service aimed towards practical agriculturalists, horticulturalists, and others involved in rural businesses. The AGDEX service is based on a database of references and abstracts compiled by the Scottish Agricultural College, Edinburgh.

Whilst the majority of users will come from the UK Higher Education community, EDINA hopes also to attract users from outside higher education, including producers and distributors of agricultural products, advisory services, charitable bodies, and marketing agencies. Contact edina@ed.ac.uk for a free trial.

ATHENS access accounts

In view of the continued use of 'shared' ATHENS access accounts in higher education, staff at EDINA have been working over the summer to allow access from shared accounts to a variety of EDINA services.

EDINA now provides access via ATHENS access accounts to the following services: AGDEX, PCI Web, Art Abstracts, INSPEC, CAB Abstracts, ESPMD, Ei Compendex®.

The functionality of these services may be reduced with ATHENS access accounts, as user information cannot then be held between sessions. Sites using EDINA services are strongly recommended to issue their end users with personal ATHENS accounts.

Digimap update

Since the last issue of *Newsline* there has been much enthusiasm surrounding EDINA Digimap (see *Newsline* 4.2 for details). Around 60 sites have expressed an interest in the service, many of which are already committed to subscribing. Our planned launch date is 10th January 2000, and the Digimap team are working hard to meet this.

The raw OS data available in the EDINA Digimap service amounts to around 60 gigabytes. Support pages are being written and continuously updated to help institutions understand their role in supporting the end users of the EDINA Digimap service.

Under the JISC/OS agreement only 30% of the national coverage for Land-Line is

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