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Good practices on Digital Accessibility by UAb

**Field of subject related to
diversity and inclusion**

Digital Accessibility

Introduction

Universidade Aberta (UAb) is the public Portuguese distance education university. Pioneer in distance higher education in Portugal, it was founded in 1988 and it has been promoting actions related to higher education and continuous education. It has also contributed to develop important know-how that allows it to be the biggest provider of online courses in the country.

At present UAb is considered to be amongst the European mega-providers of e-learning, playing a prominent role in 1st and 2nd cycle (graduation and master's) educational offering. It also has PhD programs.

UAb is deeply involved with digital accessibility by flexibly empowering many individuals who, by attending Higher Education at UAb and, consequently, by training, qualifying, and developing new skills, reach new possibilities for inclusion, and intervention in the global world. Moreover, according to the Portuguese law DL 83/2018 that encompasses the European directives 2016/2012, public sector and organizations should take the necessary steps to make websites and mobile applications more accessible.

Good Practices

Developing policies

Aligned with the guiding principles of the Bologna process, the Universidade Aberta of Portugal designed, in 2007, its Virtual Pedagogical Model (MPV-UAb) (Pereira et al, 2007).

The MPV-UAb assumes a clear relevance in the identity of the UAb and in Distance Education in Portugal. In a very brief way, it is important to say that it anchors the educational organization of teaching-learning activities, the development of virtual pedagogical practices and the courses' evaluation process.

The MPV-UAb is built around four axes: Student-centered learning; The primacy of flexibility; the primacy of interaction; and the Digital Inclusion Principle. Of these 4 axes, digital inclusion is clearly aimed at increasing digital accessibility and it reflects the institutional thinking of the UAb in the recognition that digital access and competences influence

Disability Statements

At UAb, students with special needs are covered by the current specific internal regulation (available at <https://portal.uab.pt/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Regulamento-do-Estudante-com-Necessidades-Educativas-Especiais-da-Universidade-Aberta.pdf>), and followed by the Student's Monitoring Committee.

Research and Projects

"Projeto Acessibilidades" (Accessibility Project) acts both at the level of practical intervention in the field, and of research (participation in conferences, publishing).

The UAb has both conducted and participated in projects in the area of inclusion, namely Erasmus + projects.

References

Dias, Isabel Barros; Seara, Isabel Roboredo & Barros, Daniela Melaré Vieira de (2016) "Projeto Acessibilidades: Modelo de Inclusão no Ensino Superior a Distância". Paulo Dias, Darlinda Moreira e António Quintas-Mendes (Coord.), *Práticas e Cenários de Inovação em Educação Online*. Lisboa: Universidade Aberta, pp. 75-98

Pereira, Alda; Quintas Mendes, António; Morgado, Lina; Amante, Lúcia & Bidarra, José (2007), *Modelo Pedagógico Virtual da Universidade Aberta. Para uma Universidade do Futuro*. Lisboa: Universidade Aberta.

opportunities for social participation and citizenship and, therefore, should be a universal right. In addition, this principle unequivocally contributes to the development of a set of digital skills, and throughout commitments made to students for education and training, it offers an introductory module for the acquisition of digital skills.

At national level, UAb collaborates with GTAEDES – Task force for the Support of Higher Education Students with Disabilities - <https://www.gtaedes.pt>

Institutional integration

At Universidade Aberta, every new student is offered an eLearning Familiarization Module ("Módulo de Ambientação ao Ensino Online") that provides the basic training and essential guidelines to be more at ease in an e-learning environment. In this module, students train, not only the most common situations that they will face (e.g., how to participate in a forum; how to do group work) but they are also informed about the pedagogical model adopted at the UAb, and other fundamental issues, such as the existing resources in the library, netiquette and what is plagiarism. It is also during this time that students with special needs are often identified and reported. Applying students have the possibility to state if they have special needs during registration, but some do not do it. In these cases, it is only during the online study setting module that they begin to feel more comfortable to disclosure difficulties. These students are forwarded to the Student's Monitoring Committee (where the adjustments more adequate to each case are determined), and to a supporting structure called "Projeto Acessibilidades" (Accessibility Project).

Accessibility Training and Guidelines

Within the scope of the action of Accessibility Project, documents were produced with recommendations to UAb's staff, mainly programme coordinators, and teachers regarding various issues related to accessibility, including digital accessibility (e.g., how to design Moodle pages in a way that is more convenient for students with special needs; how to make accessible pdf...).

Raising Awareness

To reinforce the documents with recommendations and guidelines available to the UAb's staff, two other ways are used to increase teacher's awareness regarding digital accessibility of students with special needs. On the one hand, the presence of the coordinators of the various programmes in the Student's Monitoring Committee, and, on the other hand, the availability of the Accessibility Project's team to attend sectorial meetings with the teachers of the programmes with students with special needs.

Regarding students, the awareness about different situations occurs by way of the provided online socialization since the Accessibility Project's team maintains a space in the Moodle platform destined to the interaction among students with various special needs. In here, apart from the teaching staff, there are also some former students that act as mentors and examples of success. It is in these forums that some students verbalize questions, some of them regarding digital accessibility, that they do not feel at ease to place in their curricular units.

Online Learning Tutorials and Instructions

At UAb, the "Módulo de Ambientação ao Ensino Online" (eLearning Familiarization Module) provides the basic training and essential guidelines for new students to become online students.

The Accessibility Project has produced a document with suggestions for programme coordinators and teachers on the main challenges and possible approaches regarding student's special needs.

The Documentation Sector offers tutorials and personalized assistance (when needed) to help students with difficulties to become autonomous as Library users (namely accessing adapted study materials) - https://portal.uab.pt/dsd/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2021/03/Acessibilidades_UAb_GUIA.pdf

Moreover it is necessary to consider the access of the entire UAb community to this "Accessible Document Templates" space, since the accessibility of digital documents must also be considered for documents produced by the entire academic community, that is, in the interaction between professors and students, and between services and students.

Likewise, training in accessibility should be extended to all University employees (tutors, teaching staff and non-teaching staff), adapting the training to the user profile.

(Centralised) Technical Support

At UAb, central technical services provide tools and templates in accordance with universal design, to be used by teachers (for teaching materials, assignments, exams, as well as ppt, audio and video production).

The Virtual Campus support division is responsible for online parametrization of the final exams, taking into consideration time extensions for students with Special Needs.

Following a decision taken by UAb's Editorial Committee, all e-books edited by the Institution are produced in accordance with accessible format rules.

03 Functional Disabilities