HigherEd Accessibility and AI Adoption

Introduction

In a landmark survey conducted by Apex CoVantage at the Accessing Higher Grounds Conference 2024, leading educational institutions revealed the true state of digital accessibility in higher education. The comprehensive study, featuring insights from prestigious institutions, paints a detailed picture of where we stand and where we urgently need to go.



This survey pulls back the curtain on ensuring digital content accessibility in higher education, offering both sobering statistics and pathways to solutions. It explores key areas including:

1. Current state of accessibility in university digital content.
2. The distribution of responsibility for accessibility efforts.
3. The role of AI in accessibility.
4. The adoption of AI-powered tools.

1. The Accessibility Spectrum: Where Do We Stand?

The survey uncovered a nuanced picture of digital content accessibility:

Initial Stages (0-25%):
A small **5.8%** are just beginning their accessibility journey, representing the earliest stage of digital inclusion efforts.

Emerging Accessibility (26-50%):
29.41% are actively expanding their accessible content, showing a promising trajectory.

Substantial Accessibility (51-75%):
35.2% of institutions have made significant progress, indicating a strong commitment to inclusive digital environments.

Near-Complete Accessibility (76-100%):
29.4% are at the forefront, demostrating near-comprehensive accessibility compliance.

1 out of **3** institutions have only managed to make half of their content accessible.

Current State of Accessiblity

Initial Stage

5.8%

Substantial Accessibility

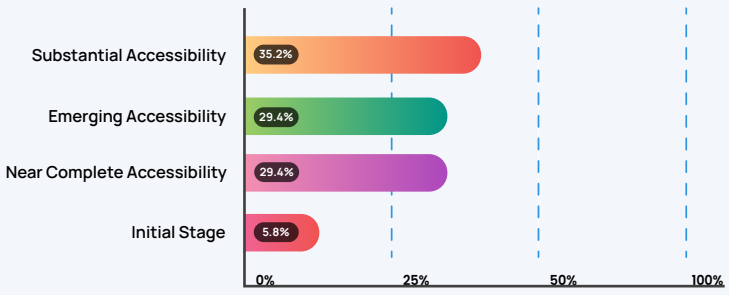
35.2%

Emerging Accessibility

29.4%

Near Complete Accessibility

29.4%



2. Collaborative methodologies: Redefining institutional accountability

The distribution of responsibilities around accessibility reveals an interesting aspect of cross functional collaboration.

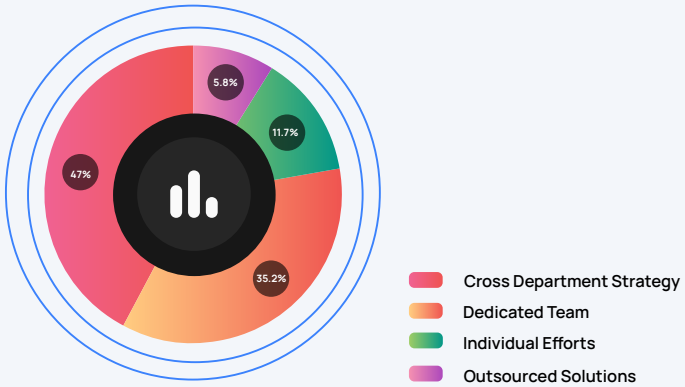
Cross-Departmental Strategy:
47.06% of companies use an interdepartment approach that smashes traditional silos.

Individual Efforts:
11.76% depends upon the efforts of faculty or staff, which would vary from place to place.

Dedicated Teams:
35.29% rely on specialist access teams, building expertise.

Outsourced Solutions:
Only **5.8%** utilize external providers to manage accessibility.

Nearly **50%** of institutions use an interdepartmental approach. This indicates a significant shift in how organizations are tackling accessibility.



Distribution of Responsibility

Cross Department Strategy
47%

Individual Efforts
11.7%

Dedicated Team
35.2%

Outsourced Solutions
5.8%

3. The New Role of AI in Accessibility

With AI leading the tech revolution worldwide, it is no surprise that universities are also leaning towards implementing AI based solutions.

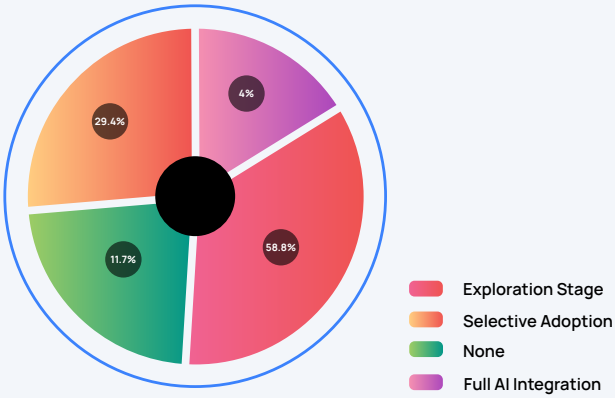
None:
11.76% have not yet incorporated AI into their accessibility strategy.

Selective Adoption:
29.41% adopt AI for specific activities, including checking or compliance and captioning.

Exploration Stage:
58.82% of organizations are exploring AI-enabled accessibility solutions.

Full AI Integration:
Only **4%** are fully AI-driven accessible solutions.

40% of organizations are exploring AI-enabled accessibility solutions. This indicates a significant interest in AI integration.



Role of AI in Accessibility

Exploration Stage
58.8%

None
11.7%

Selective Adoption
29.4%

Full AI Integration
4%

4. AI-Augmented Solutions: An Expert Analysis

The survey revealed which AI tools are currently in use or under consideration:

Automated Compliance Checkers:
Considered or used by **36%** of organizations, these tools provide critical insights into digital content accessibility.

AI-Generated Alternative Text:
15% are adopting or exploring technologies to improve image descriptions.

Real-Time Captioning:
24% of institutions are implementing or planning solutions to enhance video and live event accessibility.

Intelligent PDF remediation:
15% are showing interest in this emerging solution.

Nearly **1** out of **3** universities have yet to adopt intelligent PDF tagging, highlighting a significant gap in achieving comprehensive digital accessibility.

Adoption of AI Power Tools

Automated Compliance Checkers

36%

AI generated Alt Text

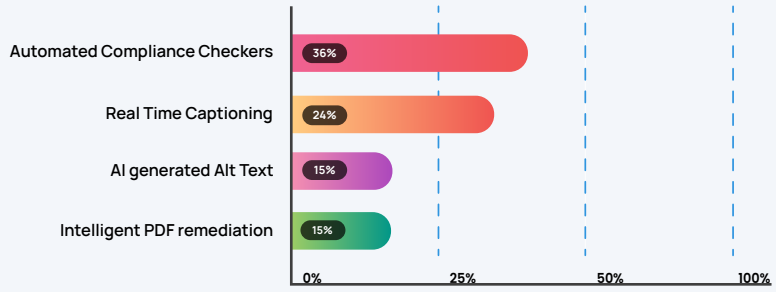
15%

Real Time Captioning

24%

Intelligent PDF remediation:

15%



Key Takeaways: The Imperative for Immediate Action

1. The Cost of Inaction is Too High

The survey data paints a stark reality that demands immediate attention:

Student Exclusion:
Institutions with less than **50%** accessibility are effectively shutting out nearly half of their potential learners from full educational engagement.

Legal Risk:
With only **29.4%** of institutions achieving near-complete accessibility, **70%** remain vulnerable to potential legal challenges under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 508 guidelines.

2. Technology as an Enabler, not a Barrier

The AI revolution in accessibility offers unlimited opportunities:

Efficiency Gains:
58% of organizations are already exploring AI-based tools that can dramatically reduce the time and resources required for content remediation.

Scalable Solutions:
Automated compliance checkers and AI-generated alternative text can transform accessibility from a manual, time-consuming process to a streamlined, intelligent workflow.

Immediate Actions for Educational Leaders

1. Conduct a Comprehensive Gap Analysis

- Assess your institution's current accessibility status.
- Identify key challenges and opportunities for improvement.
- Use this analysis as the foundation for developing an actionable strategy.

2. Establish Robust Measurement Systems

- Set realistic KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) in collaboration with your accessibility partners.
- Monitor progress regularly and adapt strategies as necessary.
- Conduct frequent progress reviews to ensure initiatives stay on track.

3. Partner with Accessibility Experts

- Collaborate with experienced vendors who bring specialized knowledge and tested methodologies.
- Leverage their expertise to avoid common pitfalls and accelerate compliance efforts.
- Build internal capabilities by learning from their proven implementation processes.

4. Adopt a Long-Term Perspective

- Recognize that digital accessibility is an ongoing journey, not a one-time task.
- Continuously improve and refine efforts, whether starting fresh or enhancing existing initiatives.
- Work with the right partners to navigate the complex accessibility landscape efficiently and effectively.

5. Form Cross-Functional Teams

- Combine internal institutional knowledge with external accessibility expertise.
- Ensure collaboration across departments to address unique institutional needs.
- Define clear accountability structures to allocate roles effectively between internal teams and external partners.

Transform Your Digital Accessibility with documenta11y

As the specialized accessibility division of Apex CoVantage, documenta11y stands at the forefront of digital accessibility transformation in higher education. We're proud to partner with leading universities to streamline their digital accessibility projects.

What sets documenta11y apart is our deep understanding of the higher education landscape. Our team of accessibility experts works closely with each institution, providing tailored strategies and ongoing support that address unique challenges and goals. From initial assessment to full implementation, we guide you through every step of your accessibility journey.

The path to digital accessibility doesn't have to be overwhelming. Let our experience guide your transformation. **Schedule a consultation** with our experts today to discover how we can help make digital accessibility a reality at your institution.

Let's Transform Together

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