

Website Accessibility: Overview and Guidelines (R016G)

Access and Equity in Online Learning

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Website Accessibility: Overview

The Disability Discrimination Act, 1992, is Commonwealth Government legislation that has been implemented by States and Territories. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission hears complaints for this Act and the other Acts as listed. HREOC is the body that VET learners, who believe they have suffered discrimination, would turn to if they did not receive a satisfactory response, in their view, from an educational provider.

HREOC has provided advice on web site development to assist government organisations in meeting their legal obligations. The expectation that e- learning materials are accessible to everyone is complying with the current Australian Law.

HREOC favours World Wide Web Consortium –W3C®- Guidelines as by their nature they are global and wide accessibility will be assisted by a universal performance standard.

A complaint of disability discrimination is unlikely to succeed if accessibility has been considered at the design stage of e-learning resources and reasonable steps have been taken to provide access. HREOC would take into consideration the extent to which the best available advice on accessibility had been followed.

Reasons why Accessibility is Important

- Web usage is spreading rapidly into all areas of society and information must be available in formats that are readily accessible by all Internet users;
- Potential barriers exist on the Web for people with a disability which may limit the number of people that have access to the full range of information available on the web;
- Web accessibility has carry-over benefits for other users, including those in low bandwidth areas and users of small Internet devices (PDA's, mobile phones);
- HREOC states: 'Commonwealth Government departments and agencies and other organisations where they are involved in administration of Commonwealth laws and programs, do not have the benefit of an explicit unjustifiable hardship defence under the DDA. These organisations are required to provide equal access free from unreasonable barriers'.

Creating Accessible Websites

The World Wide Web Consortium has developed a series of Web Content Accessibility guidelines, which have been accepted as industry standards. These guidelines identify the areas that organisations:

- **must** (priority 1),
- **should** (priority 2),
- and **could** (priority 3) address web content accessibility.

Priority 1 checkpoints are the minimum standards for access to information that developers of e-learning materials should apply to resources being developed for information and communication technologies.

Priority 1 Checkpoints

These are available at: w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/checkpoint-list.html

The first statement in bold is the plain English meaning of the following Priority 1 checkpoint from the W3C® website.

- **Provide content that, when presented to the user, conveys essentially the same function or purpose as auditory or visual content - provide a text equivalent for every non-text element.**

Provide a text equivalent for every non-text element (eg. via "alt", "longdesc", or in element content). This includes: images, graphical representations of text (including symbols), image map regions, animations, applets and programmatic objects, ASCII art, frames, scripts, images used as list bullets, spacers, graphical buttons, sounds (played with or without user interaction), stand-alone audio files, audio tracks of video, and video.
- **Ensure that text and graphics are understandable when viewed without color.**

Ensure that all information conveyed with colour is also available without colour, for example from context or markup.
- **Use markup that facilitates pronunciation or interpretation of foreign text. Expand acronyms and abbreviations.**

Clearly identify changes in the natural language of a document's text and any text equivalents (eg. captions).

- **Organise documents to be read without style sheets (specify the presentation style of a document) – text generated by style sheets is not available to assistive technologies.**

Organise documents so they may be read without style sheets. For example, when an HTML document is rendered without associated style sheets, it must still be possible to read the document.

- **Update text equivalents when there is a change in a non-text element.**

Ensure that equivalents for dynamic content are updated when the dynamic content changes.

- **Ensure that moving, blinking, scrolling, or auto-updating objects or pages may be paused or stopped by the user.**

Until user agents allow users to control flickering, avoid causing the screen to flicker.

- **Use the clearest simplest appropriate language.**

Use the clearest and simplest language appropriate for a site's content.

- **The following additions to the priority 1 guidelines are taken from the W3C® website:**

- ✓ **And if you use frames (Priority 1)**

Title each frame to facilitate frame identification and navigation.

- ✓ **And if you use applets and scripts (Priority 1)**

Ensure that pages are usable when scripts, applets, or other programmatic objects are turned off or not supported. If this is not possible, provide equivalent information on an alternative accessible page.

- ✓ **And if you use multimedia (Priority 1)**

Until user agents can automatically read aloud the text equivalent of a visual track, provide an auditory description of the important information of the visual track of a multimedia presentation.

For any time-based multimedia presentation (e.g., a movie or animation), synchronize equivalent alternatives (e.g., captions or auditory descriptions of the visual track) with the presentation.

- ✓ **And if all else fails (Priority 1)**

If, after best efforts, you cannot create an accessible page, provide a link to an alternative page that uses W3C® technologies, is accessible, has equivalent information (or functionality), and is updated as often as the inaccessible (original) page.

Priority 2 and 3 Checkpoints

Priority 2 and 3 checkpoints are available at: <http://w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/>

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In Summary

Government organisations do not have the benefit of pleading unjustifiable hardship as a defence. Good planning to provide access to the information contained in all e-learning materials for all learners meets the obligations of the Disability Discrimination Act.

The next step is to consider access to learning for all learner groups and embed Priority 1 in the Universal Design of Learning.

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