

Using Anthology Ally to Make Accessibility Second Nature at University of Staffordshire

After making the most fixes during Anthology's 2024 Fix Your Content Day across the Europe and Middle East region, University of Staffordshire is looking to make fewer going forward—the goal is to make all content accessible from the start.



Originally founded in Stoke-on-Trent, United Kingdom, in 1914, University of Staffordshire has gone through a great deal of evolution in its 100+ year history. Beginning by educating workers in local industries, the institution became a polytechnic school and then a university. Their most recent shift came just last year, in 2024, when they rebranded from Staffordshire University to University of Staffordshire.

Now with three campuses total—located in Stafford and East London, in addition to the flagship campus in Stoke-on-Trent—University of Staffordshire offers both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in various programs across its two schools, the School of Digital, Technology, Innovation, and Business and the School of Health, Education, Policing, and Sciences. The university prides itself on making use of the latest in technology and innovation throughout its course offerings, investing in cutting-edge equipment, EdTech, and facilities.

INSTITUTION TYPE:
THREE-YEAR PUBLIC

LOCATION:
STOKE-ON-TRENT,
UNITED KINGDOM

STUDENTS:
24,000+

ANTHOLOGY PRODUCT:
Blackboard
Anthology Ally



The Challenge

Ensuring that Education is Accessible to All

University of Staffordshire has always been a big part of the community in Stoke-on-Trent, and it's something that the institution is both proud of and sees a responsibility. "We're a civic university; we're based within the community," said George Hill, online distance learning designer at University of Staffordshire. "We're kind of a core hub for everyone locally. So ensuring that our learning was accessible to everyone locally meant, to us, not just ensuring that it's [accessible to] people that are physically nearby, but that the learning is accessible to anyone and everyone."

"We've got all different diverse ranges of students," said Rowan Walker, student digital engagement officer. "From young students to maturer students with various different accessibility and disability needs."

"Learning should be accessible and university should be accessible to anyone."



—George Hill

Online Distance Learning Designer, University of Staffordshire

Of course, accessibility is a journey, not a one-time fix, and the digital learning team at Staffordshire wanted to do everything they could to move the university further along on that journey. "We did already have Ally at the university, but it was something that wasn't really being utilized or looked at," Hill said. Added Walker, "Our Ally score was averaging between 30 and about 50%."

"There's a knowledge gap in, what is digital accessibility?" said instructional designer Simran Cheema. "We always throw around the terms 'accessibility' and 'inclusivity', but what does that actually look like in terms of delivering digital learning content?"



Integrating Ally from the Start

Hill and Walker joined the team at around the same time, and they found a perfect opportunity to begin integrating Ally right into the university's digital learning landscape. "When me and George joined, the technology team was going through a little bit of a reshuffle," Walker said. "And at the same time, we're also shifting away from Blackboard Original to Blackboard Ultra. So new team, new direction as well as the new platform. It allowed us to snowball everything into one cohesive thing."

A big piece of this was to seamlessly include Ally in Blackboard trainings. "The main focus in the early days was, here is Blackboard, you need to learn about this right now," Hill said. "There's also Ally, and we can cover that later. It's now, here's how you're going to use Blackboard, you're an instructor, you know how to use a VLE [virtual learning environment]. Here's how we're going to make the best of it, here's how you can actually level up your content, and here's how you can use Ally to do that."

In order to continue to help faculty and staff fully utilize the Ally tool and get them thinking about creating content that is accessible from the start, the team ran workshops, created guides and resources, and answered questions as needed.

They also established, at the beginning of the 2024-2025 academic year, a requirement that all content in Blackboard must meet at least an 80% accessibility score in Ally. This made [Fix Your Content Day](#), an event run by Anthology in October in which institutions are encouraged to compete to see who can make the most accessible content fixes in a 24-hour period, perfectly timed for University of Staffordshire. As such, the team prepared diligently and focused on getting the word out to the campus community: they met with instructors and staff, made tutorial videos on using Ally to make fixes, and sent out communications through different channels as well to make sure everyone was ready for the event. And on the day itself, participation was made easy. "During the day, we did both in-person and online drop-in sessions," said Walker. "We held a space where people could come in and just try different stuff with us, and if they needed help and support, that was all available to them."

And their push paid off: University of Staffordshire had the most fixes in the entire Europe and Middle East region with 7,282 total, which also put them in fifth place globally. Talk about taking a big step on the accessibility journey!



“[Fix Your Content Day] was a springboard for us to implement these initiatives and start those important discussions.



— **Simran Cheema**

Instructional Designer, University of Staffordshire



**Insights
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Making Accessibility Part of the Day-to-Day

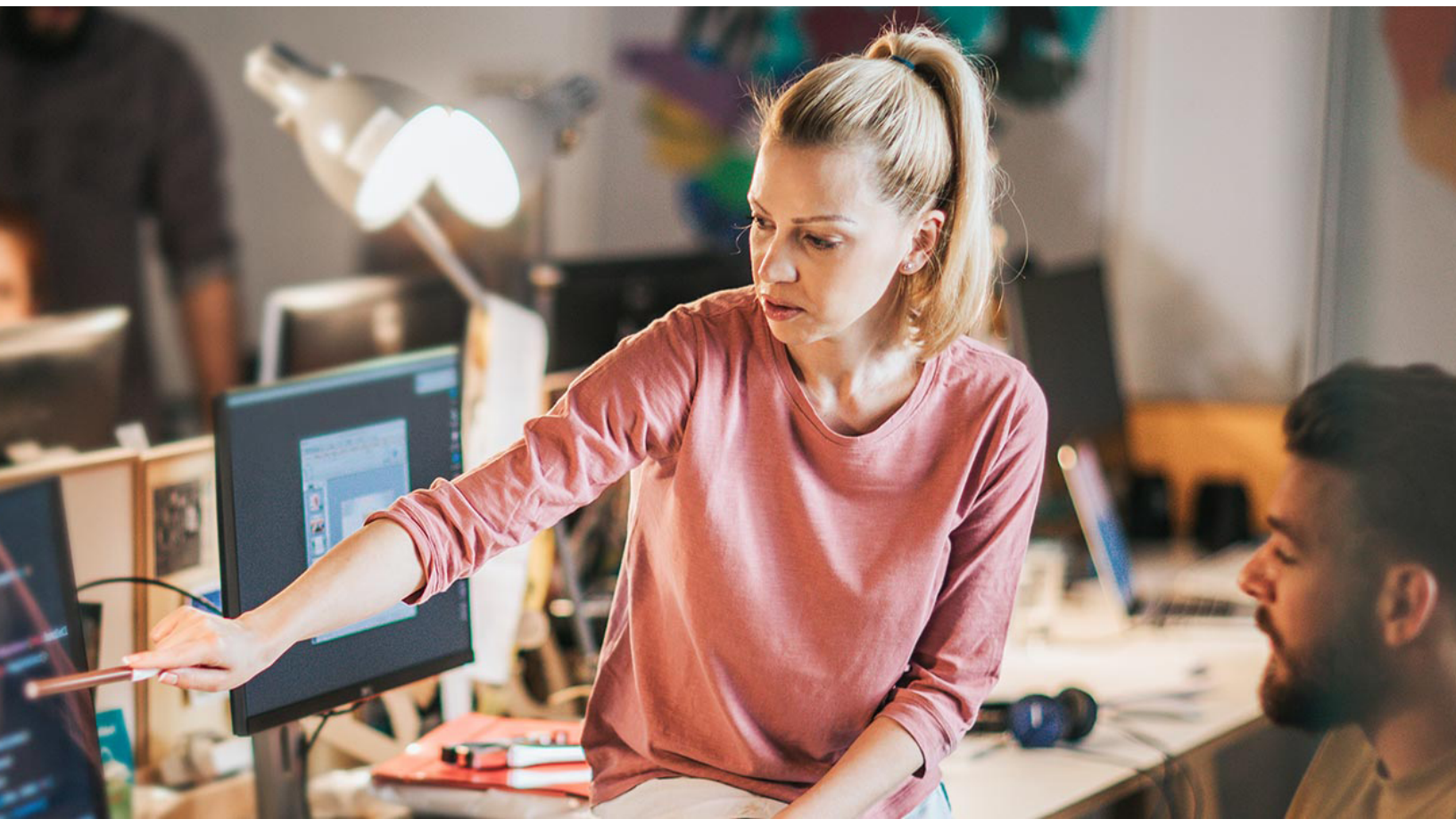
The response from university staff, instructors, and students has been positive, especially since Ally puts the power of making these fixes right in their hands. “It actually shows you where the accessibility changes need to be made and gives you guidance on how to make those changes,” Cheema said. “Staff are able to then go in themselves, develop those skills and that understanding.” Hill added that the fact that Ally is integrated right into Blackboard has also helped adoption and usage immensely. “The fact that they’re not having to go to another site and having to load up another tool makes it so much easier.” he said.

Students have also been sending in fewer questions to the technology team asking for assistance accessing documents at the same time as reports show that Ally usage is jumping, which indicates that the

tool is having an impact: in 2024, there were 18,747 total unique user downloads, which was up 22% from 2023. And students are downloading the content across all formats, with tagged PDFs, HTML, and ePub being the most popular. In addition, the university prioritizing accessibility has led to students doing the same. “This has led to some students asking questions about accessibility and how they can be accessible as well...so they can generate that content themselves,” Walker said. “Which we’re very happy about.”

Another benefit the team has found in using Ally heavily is that it creates a clear standard for what accessible content looks like. “It takes the guesswork out of what makes something accessible,” Cheema said. “You’re actually able to define what is accessible on your VLE and then you have a great way of monitoring it.”

And, of course, greater accessibility benefits all learners and staff, not just those with disabilities. “It’s that UDL, Universal Design for Learning principle, where an automatic door benefits everyone,” Hill said. Overall, there’s been huge buy-in across the university to Ally and making all materials more accessible. “We’ve seen massive adoption of a lot of these different initiatives even from our own executive director,” Hill said. “Every paper that is submitted from our department must be accessible and must be meeting the same criteria that we treat learning materials with.”





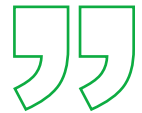
Epilogue

Moving forward, University of Staffordshire remains committed to integrating accessibility best practices into daily workflows and content creation. “We don’t know how much we’ll participate in next year’s Fix Your Content Day, because the aim of it is to have staff post accessible content all the time,” Walker said. “So we’re not looking for that massive increase like we did last time. We want the content to be accessible before it hits that VLE.”

When asked for advice for universities looking to implement Ally, Hill said, “It’s something to invest in sooner rather than later, and have a strategy going alongside it. Putting together that plan makes it so much more effective and it gives you the full power that that tool has.”

Walker added, “It’s really important to go out and talk to students and see what issues they’ve got. And that goes for staff as well...just asking questions like, ‘How have you accessed your content during this time?’ It gives you the chance to reflect, but also, tools like Ally can come in and help you implement something new, which is what we’ve tried to do at University of Staffordshire.”

“Ally is our automatic door at the front of the building that’s there for everyone that comes in to learn.



—George Hill

Online Distance Learning Designer, University of Staffordshire



To learn more about what’s new in Blackboard, [check out the Anthology blog](#) or see for yourself with a [free 30-day trial](#).

