The Open University

Open Research Online

Inclusive and accessible social media

A guide for social media content creators

Tyne Stanley / Engagement and Insight
Library Services / February 2023

The Open University

Contents

The Open University

The Open University

Introduction

The Open University (OU) recognises that social media has the potential to support and advance learning opportunities and collaborative working both within the University between current students and colleagues, and externally with our partners, alumni, and prospective students.

While multimedia content provides a fun and expressive outlet for people, the experience isn't the same for everyone. For a large portion of the population, some kinds of content are inaccessible. People of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities study with the OU – for instance, there are over 8,599 international students directly studying with us and in 2021/22, 37,078 OU students declared having a disability (we are the largest provider of higher education for people with disabilities). It is therefore crucial that we consider inclusive design practices on social media to benefit as many people as possible. Additionally, everyone has abilities, and limits to those abilities, so designing for people with permanent disabilities results in designs that benefit people universally.

The 'Inclusive & Accessible Social Media' guide is intended to provide tips for creating accessible content on social media to ensure that we are integrating equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) for the long term. An integral part of ensuring inclusivity involves accurately representing the wide breadth of people – of all ages, races, genders, and abilities - who work and study with the OU. The guide focuses on the main social media platforms we use, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Instagram; however, the guidance provided can be applied to all forms of social media content.

Promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion

Content should appeal to a variety of audiences and be representative of our diverse community and culture. Visuals should feature a diverse range of ethnicities, disabilities, ages, genders, and geography as we are a global university. The OU has an internal [Inclusive Language and Image Guide](#) (OU login required) that provides guidance on using inclusive language and imagery across protected characteristics.

When planning content, here are some things to consider:

Inclusive language and images

- Use inclusive language, such as gender-neutral pronouns and terms. This means using pronouns which don't associate the person being discussed with a specific gender. Try to use pronouns like "they/them" instead of "he/she" and avoid language biased to one gender, such as "mankind", "guys", and "boyfriends/girlfriends". [Stonewall's glossary of terms](#) is useful for guidance on this.

- Never assume gender or identity. Address people by their names or usernames when responding to their comments and messages and make sure the pronouns you are using aren't assuming how they identify.

- The use or not of person-first language is a sensitive, widely debated topic, with varying perspectives. The [Disability Language Style Guide](#) is helpful for writing about disability in general. Be aware of terms that could be considered offensive, keep up to date with inclusive language and

research appropriate terminology. See Section 8: Further Reading for more resources on using inclusive language.

- Avoid ableist language, which is language that reinforces beliefs and practices that are oppressive, harmful and discriminatory to disabled people. Be mindful not to use any terms that victimise or treat disabled people as less than, such as those mentioned in the UK Government's 'words to use and avoid when writing about disability' guide.

- Remember that language is always evolving as a result of social growth and transformation, so it's important to regularly read up on inclusive language and note any changes. The NHS website has a useful inclusive language content style guide which you can use for up-to-date information.

Diverse imagery and assets

Diversify your imagery and icons. Ensure that the imagery you use represents a diverse range of people. There are some great online resources that contain information on locating Stock Photo Sites for Inclusion. Steer clear of images that depict gender and racial stereotypes. Avoid gendered emojis if possible. Use the default yellow emojis when addressing a diverse audience.

Thinking globally

Don't think only domestically. We are a global university so keep that in mind for any holiday. If you choose to celebrate a domestic holiday, make sure your copy is still relevant to your international audience.

Share multiple voices and perspectives. For example, when showcasing student stories, ensure that the students you include are representative of the diverse range of students that study with us – remember, people of all ages return to study at the OU (and at universities in general).

Making text accessible

When writing text, it is important to consider how a variety of audiences will read your copy – such as (but not limited to) people who may be using assistive technologies, those with limited familiarity with the subject matter, speakers of English as a second language, people with dyslexia, or those with learning disabilities. Always ensure that you write with clarity, as this helps to make text more accessible and understandable.

Here are some tips for inclusive text design (Sehl, 2020):

Language

Use clear, simple language. Favour using words with less syllables. Try front loading information so the most important information is at the start of the sentence. Provide a single idea per sentence and a single topic per paragraph.

Write short sentences and use familiar words. Avoid jargon and slang. Where possible, provide a definition for terms that may be unfamiliar to the audience.

If you need to use an abbreviation or acronym that people may not understand, explain what it means on first reference. Never assume people will understand the language our industry uses.

Formatting

Don't overuse caps. Full caps can be difficult to read and, on social media, misinterpreted as shouting. Also, full caps can be misinterpreted by screen readers – some will spell out the characters like an acronym, while others will read it as a word. For instance, JAWS and NVDA will say "N V D A" while VoiceOver will say "NivDa".

Use camel case for multi-word hashtags. Capitalise the first letter of each word to make hashtags more legible. Example: #WorldBookDay

Put hashtags at the end of the post where possible, as punctuation marks such as hashtags are read aloud by screen readers. Be mindful of how hashtags, punctuation marks, @mentions, etc. can disrupt post copy and, as a result, the reader's understanding of it.

Fonts

When featuring text in images, font should be sans-serif (e.g., Arial, Calibri, Tahoma). Not all people can read the text from an image, and if your image must include text, make sure all that information is included in an image description. Consider using a solid background or opaque overlay to help the legibility of the text.

Emojis

Use emojis in moderation. When someone uses a screen reader or text-to-speech program to read an emoji, they hear the assigned description for that character. For instance, a post that uses the emojis 🌴😎💃 is read aloud by a screen reader as "Palm Tree, Smiling Face with Sunglasses, Woman Dancing:

Medium-Light Skin Tone." This slows down the user's experience. Keep in mind that some screen reader software, such as the popular JAWS, doesn't read them out (Sheridan, 2019).

Before using an emoji, look up how the emoji translates to text using emojipedia.org. Where possible, place emojis at the end of social posts, rather than interjecting them in the middle of sentences. Place meaningful information, such as call to actions, before emojis to prevent them being skipped.

Sensitive topics

If the content includes sensitive topics, consider including trigger warnings. On social media it is common to put "TW" or "CW" for "Trigger Warning" or "Content Warning" since space is at a premium. Consider following this with a short description explaining that readers may find content distressing, potentially indicating the types of topics covered if relevant. Then leave a space between this and your post. Sensitive topics include things like racism; addiction; sexual assault; illegal activities; experiences of grief and loss, trauma, or violence, etc.

Making images accessible

Image descriptions allow people to visualise images when they can't see them. Several social media platforms provide automatic alternative text, but it's always better to add a custom description when you can.

Alternative text vs. image descriptions

The terms "Alternative (Alt) Text" and "Image Descriptions" are used interchangeably, there are a few distinctions between them (Accessible Influence, 2020):

- Alt text is a very brief description to give the primary details of the image and tend to be 140 characters or shorter; image descriptions are more detailed.
- Alt text is embedded to the photo and not seen when people view your photos; image descriptions are included as part of your caption.
- Alt text is announced by screen readers after your username/location tag and before your caption; you control where in your caption to place the image description (most do it after the content of the caption, but before their hashtags).

Facebook, Twitter and Instagram provide specific fields for you to add alt-text for images and GIFs. Most social media management tools, such as Hootsuite, also allow you to add alt text, but can be limited to certain platforms. Keep in mind that support and implementation of text alternatives varies across platforms so it's important to check each platform's respective help guide for the most up-to-date information (see Section 8: Further Reading).

When alt-text fields are not available, include a description in your caption. Here's how they are typically formatted: [Image description: person with laptop].

The Open University

Writing image descriptions

Here are some tips for writing image descriptions:

> Be specific, and succinct. Make it as short as possible while describing the message of the photo. The most popular screen readers cut off alt text at around 125 characters, so it's advisable to keep it to that character count or less (Moz, 2021). Take a look at the below example for what an image description should look like.
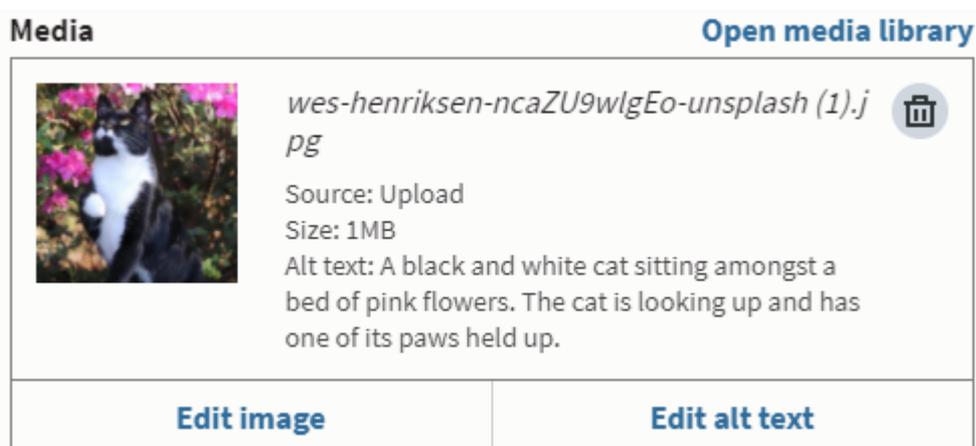
- Avoid saying "image of" or "photograph of" within the alt text description as screen readers will typically convey that the element is an image. It can however be useful to describe the type of image if relevant, e.g., an illustration, a screenshot, etc.

- If alt text is not available, start with "Image description:" and proceed by describing what can be seen and what you want the user to understand from seeing it.

- Mention colour if it is important to understanding the image. Many screen-reader users are partially sighted and use descriptions to clarify blurry images (Inclusion Scotland, 2018).

- Avoid including text in images where possible as it does not scale well, and the text cannot be copied or styled. However, if this cannot be avoided, make sure you repeat the text in the description, as a screen reader or text-to-speech program more than likely won't be able to read the text or properly describe the image. If this is not possible, make sure to capture the words in the alt-text caption.

- When describing people, don't assume. If you are describing photos or representations of people, try not to assume anyone's identity, for example gender identity. Say 'a person dancing' instead of 'a woman dancing'. The exception is if identity is relevant to the meaning of the image.

Making videos accessible: video captions

For video content, you should provide captions for the benefit of those who cannot perceive the audio. As well as being crucial for those who are deaf or hard of hearing, they also enhance the viewing experience for those watching in their non-native language, those with hearing loss, or viewers that are watching the video with the sound off. For instance, according to multiple publishers, 85% of videos on Facebook are watched without sound (Digiday, 2016).

Closed captions vs. open captions

Captions can be either closed (where a user can turn them on and off) or open (where the text is embedded into the video and cannot be turned on or off).

Subtitles vs. captions

Captions include all meaningful audio including dialogue, sound effects, background music, etc. and are aimed at audiences who cannot perceive the audio.

Subtitles include the dialogue only and are aimed at audiences who cannot understand the audio dialogue (typically used for translation).

Video caption guidance by platform

Here is some guidance on including video captions across the primary social media platforms:

Facebook
Captions are generated automatically by Facebook's system. You can then edit the captions as needed. You can also upload a SubRip (.srt) file with captions that you've already created for your video (Facebook, 2021).

YouTube
The online video sharing platform uses speech recognition technology to automatically create captions for videos. Errors can be corrected with the caption editor. You can also upload a supported subtitle and closed caption file (Google, 2021).

Instagram
Automatic closed captioning is now available for IGTV Live and IGTV. Otherwise, video captions must be burned in or encoded in advance (Sehl, 2020). Captions are also now supported in Instagram Stories using a Sticker feature. Read more information on how to add captions to Instagram stories.

Twitter

You will need to upload an .srt file with your video to display captions. See [guidance on how to add captions and subtitles to Twitter videos](#). The platform is however working to add automated captions to video and audio by early 2021 (Brand & Beykpour, 2020).

LinkedIn

You can add closed captions when you share a video on personal accounts or LinkedIn pages, using the desktop experience. You must have an associated .srt file attached to the video before it can be posted (LinkedIn, 2020).

Hootsuite

Hootsuite allows you to upload subtitle files alongside your Facebook and Twitter videos in Compose, so that you can easily publish videos with closed captioning (Hootsuite, 2020).

How to Generate a .srt File

You can generate a .srt file by uploading your video to YouTube, waiting for it to autogenerate the captions, and then clicking the download > .srt button. See guidance on [how to download a .srt file from YouTube](#).

Quality Control! If using auto captions, do go back and edit them to make sure they are correct. We need all our captioning to be accurate and without typos.

Best practices for online subtitling

Good subtitles convey to the viewer as much of the experience of watching with sound as possible. The text needs to be readable, match the dialogue as closely as possible, be well timed and not obscure important parts of the video.

Here are some basic good practices in online subtitling (EngageMedia):

- Avoid presenting too much text onscreen at one time. Make sure the subtitles are easy to read and follow. Always allow enough time for each subtitle to be read.

- Subtitles should appear and disappear exactly when the words are spoken. However, ensure captions appear on-screen long enough to be read. There should be two lines of text on-screen, at most.

- Subtitle lines should end at naturally occurring pauses in speech-sentence boundaries, or changes of scene.

- Show sound effect captions in lowercase italics enclosed in brackets, e.g., *(cat meowing) (child shouting)*

- If there are multiple people talking, consider using the names of the people in the subtitles to identify the different speakers. When people are seen talking, but there is no audio, caption as [no audio] or [silence].

- Do not emphasise a word using all capital letters, except to indicate screaming.

- Use a large enough text size and a font that is clear and easily readable. There should be a high contrast between the caption (text) and the background.

- Try to position subtitles at the centre/bottom and avoid clashing with any on screen texts.

- For more details, see [best practices for online subtitling](#).

Making videos accessible: video descriptions

Videos don't need to be audio-described, as long as they are audio-led. This means that the audio must be as important as what's on screen. The video should send the same message, both audibly and visually. If it doesn't, try to add a description of what happens in the video either as a follow-up post, or as part of the caption (RNIB, 2020).

There are a few ways to provide video descriptions (Sehl, 2020):

- Descriptive audio. Any important non-verbal elements in your video should be given a narrated description. This can be recorded to fit within the gaps between important audio elements. On social media, described video is typically "baked in" and cannot be turned off.

- Descriptive (media alternative) transcript. These transcripts provide descriptions alongside dialogue, much like a script. The transcript could be something the user can toggle on if required. It may be that the player, like YouTube, supports this or that this is provided on the page and hidden behind a disclosure (a button you activate to reveal the transcript).

- Live described video. There are descriptive video techniques that live video hosts should be aware of, such as taking pauses to describe what's happening on screen. Accessible Media Inc. has a good described video best practices guide.

Other design considerations

Colour and contrast

When designing accessible social media content, an important consideration is the colours you choose. The choice you make can affect some people's ability to perceive the information (in other words, to be able to receive the information visually). But how do you know if a colour choice is accessible? It all comes down to colour contrast and the ratio between your background and foreground colours.

The ideal contrast between a text colour and its background should be at least 4.5 to 1, as recommended by the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#) (W3C, 2016). For larger text, that ratio decreases, but it increases for smaller text (WebAIM, 2021). You should ensure that all graphics (for example icons, graphs and charts) have a contrast of at least 3:1 to the colour around them.

Here are some tips when it comes to colour and contrast on social (Sehl, 2020):

- Avoid green and red or blue and yellow combinations, as they're difficult to read. When foreground and background colours are too close to the same hue (e.g., light blue writing on a dark blue background), they may not provide sufficient contrast when viewed using monochrome displays or by people with colour vision deficiencies, so should be avoided where possible.
- When featuring an image with text, consider using a solid background or opaque overlay, as otherwise the text can be difficult to read.

- Don't rely on colour to convey meaning – consider those that may have some form of vision impairment, including colour blindness, low vision, near vision, and blindness. In graphs or infographics, for example, use symbols or patterns as an addition to colour to differentiate data. Also consider that colour can also mean different things for different cultures.

If you're in any doubt when it comes to colour contrast, WebAIM offers an online colour contrast checker that will present the contrast difference between two colours and will help you identify a colour that meets the desired level of contrast.

Animations and flashing content

When creating video content, it's important to be aware that animations with flickers or movement can trigger epileptic seizures. Not only can it cause seizures, but it's likely to be annoying or distracting for users in general.

Here are some things to consider when creating animations:

- Try not to use flashing graphics or animations (i.e., something that flashes more than three times in any one second period).
- Try to avoid using parallax (scroll jacking). Parallax scrolling is a special scrolling technique where background images throughout a web page move slower than foreground images, creating an illusion of depth on a two-dimensional site.
- Keep motion animations to an absolute minimum.
- Reduce contrast for any flashing content.
- Avoid fully saturated reds for any flashing content.

The Open University

In general (according to the W3C Web Content Accessibility Guidelines), if content flashes more than three times per second, it is considered unsafe. However, the W3C provides a more precise technical formula for calculating general flash and red flash thresholds. There is also a Photosensitive Epilepsy Analysis Tool (PEAT) that measures whether web or computer applications are likely to cause seizures.

Further reading

Facebook accessibility

Facebook help centre: accessibility

The Facebook Help Centre accessibility page.

Facebook accessibility account

The 'Facebook Accessibility' Facebook account – featuring the latest news about the built-in features and technologies that help people with disabilities get the most out of Facebook.

Twitter accessibility

Twitter help centre: how to make images accessible for people

An article on Twitter's Help Centre on how to make images accessible for people.

Twitter accessibility account

The 'Twitter Accessibility' Twitter account - Dedicated to making Twitter as inclusive as possible.

Making Twitter more accessible

Blog article with guidance on making Twitter more accessible.

Creating video captions on Twitter with .SRT files

Blog article on how to add captions and subtitles using .SRT files to Twitter videos.

[Twitter Able account](#)

The 'Twitter Able' Twitter account – Focusing on being 'Disabled and Able'.

Instagram accessibility

[Instagram accessibility support](#)

Instagram's improved accessibility through alternative text support.

YouTube accessibility

[YouTube accessibility settings](#)

YouTube's guide to managing accessibility settings on the platform.

[Using YouTube with a screen reader](#)

YouTube's guide to using YouTube with a screen reader.

[Add your own closed captions](#)

YouTube's guide to adding your own closed captions to videos.

[YouTube – automatic captioning](#)

YouTube's guide to using automatic captioning on videos.

Alt-text

[Alt text techniques](#)

An article that presents an expert's interpretation of appropriate use of alternative text through the use of examples.

Accessible social media

How to do accessible social media

A helpful guide that demonstrates how to make social media channels accessible to meet the needs of all users.

How to write 'Alt Text' for social media

Advice for writing alt text on social media, including some examples.

Language

Talking about people, including deaf and blind, age, faith, family origin, gender

NICE style guide - guidance on how to talk about people, including deaf and blind, age, faith, family origin, gender.

Inclusive language

NHS content style guide – how to write for and about people in a way that is inclusive and respectful. Includes guidance on: Age; Disabilities and conditions; Mental health; Race, ethnicity, religion and nationality; Sex, gender and sexuality.

Stonewall glossary of terms

A glossary of terms from Stonewall, a charity that campaigns for the equality of lesbian, gay, bi and trans people.

A guide to the appropriate use of language

The Open University

TUC Diversity in Diction, Equality in Action: A Guide to the Appropriate Use of Language. Includes guidance on: Sex and gender; Race, colour, nationality and ethnicity; Disability; Sexual orientation; Religion and belief; Age.

[GSMA inclusive language guide](#)

Inclusive Language Guide from the GSMA. Includes guidance on: Pregnancy and parents; Disability; Gender and sexual orientation; Race and ethnicity; Social inclusion; Age.

[Self-defined modern dictionary](#)

An open-source dictionary that seeks to provide more inclusive, holistic, and fluid definitions to reflect the diverse perspectives of the modern world.

[Emoji for copy and paste app](#)

Emoji Keyboard Online – displays a full list of emojis and emoticons and how each one is described.

[The OU's EDI Inclusive Language & Image Guide](#) (OU login required)

Internal document that provides guidance on using inclusive language and imagery across protected characteristics.

Design considerations

[Choosing an accessible font](#)

A guide from Recite Me on choosing an accessible font, what makes a font accessible and tips on web accessibility.

[Contrast and colour accessibility](#)

Understanding WCAG 2 Contrast and Colour Requirements

[Photosensitive Epilepsy Analysis Tool](#)

A tool developed by the Trace Center at the University of Maryland for measuring whether web or computer applications are likely to cause seizures.

[W3C how to calculate general flash and red flash thresholds](#)

A precise technical formula from the W3C for calculating general flash and red flash thresholds.

[WCAG 2.0 Success Criterion 2.3.1 Three Flashes or Below Threshold (Level A)](#)

Chapter within the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 that outlines the three flashes or below threshold.

Subtitling and captioning

[Best Practices for Online Subtitling](#)

A guide from EngageMedia on the best practices for creating online subtitles.

[Guidelines and Best Practices for Captioning Educational Video](#)

Guidance from the Described and Captioned Media Program on captioning educational videos, featuring a section on audio description.

[Subtitle Guidelines](#)

Guidance from the BBC on creating subtitles – broadcast specific but useful breakdown of considerations.

Assistive technology

[Assistive technology devices: How disabled people use the web](#)

A brief guide to the devices, software and equipment that disabled people use to navigate the web.

References

Accessible Influence (2020) Alternative Text vs. Image Descriptions for Instagram. Available at: https://accessibleinfluence.com/alternative-text-for-instagram/ (Accessed: 16/07/21).

Brand, D. & Beykpour, K.(2020) Making Twitter more accessible. Available at: https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/making-twitter-more-accessible.html (Accessed: 06/01/21).

Digiday (2016) 85 percent of Facebook video is watched without sound. Available at: https://digiday.com/media/silent-world-facebook-video/ (Accessed: 16/07/21).

Facebook (2021) Add captions to your video ad. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/business/help/1675722002698686?id=603833089963720 (Accessed: 06/01/21).

Google (2021) Translate videos & captions. Available at: https://support.google.com/youtube/topic/9257536?hl=en&ref_topic=9257610 (Accessed: 06/01/21).

Haynes, M.L. (2018) Image descriptions on Twitter – a quick guide. Available at: https://www.rnib.org.uk/rnibconnect/image-descriptions-twitter-a-quick-guide (Accessed: 06/01/21).

Hootsuite (2020) Work with videos. Available at: https://help.hootsuite.com/hc/en-us/articles/217417907-Work-with-videos- (Accessed: 06/01/21).

Inclusion Scotland (2018) Accessible Social Media Guide. Available at:
https://literatureallliancescotland.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Accessible-Social-Media-Guide-2018.pdf (Accessed: 06/01/21).

Later (2021) How to Automatically Add Captions to Instagram Stories. Available at: https://later.com/blog/add-captions-to-instagram-stories/ (Accessed: 16/07/21).

LinkedIn (2020) Add Closed Captions to Videos on LinkedIn. Available at: https://www.linkedin.com/help/linkedin/answer/93997/add-closed-captions-to-videos-on-linkedin (Accessed 25/03/21).

Moz (2021) Alt Text. Available at: https://moz.com/learn/seo/alt-text (Accessed: 06/01/21).

RNIB (2020) Making your social media accessible. Available at: https://www.rnib.org.uk/rnibconnect/technology/making-your-social-media-accessible (Accessed: 06/01/21).

Sehl, K. (2020) Inclusive Design for Social Media: Tips for Creating Accessible Channels. Available at: https://blog.hootsuite.com/inclusive-design-social-media/ (Accessed: 06/01/21).

Sheridan, A. (2019) Emoji and Accessibility. Available at: https://www.ashleysheridan.co.uk/blog/Emoji+and+Accessibility (Accessed: 06/01/21).

The Open University (2021/22) Facts and figures. Available at:

https://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy-and-policies/facts-and-figures

(Accessed: 09/02/23).

W3C (2016) Contrast (Minimum):Understanding SC 1.4.3 Available at:

https://www.w3.org/TR/UNDERSTANDING-WCAG20/visual-audio-contrast-contrast.html (Accessed: 06/01/21).

WebAIM (2021) Contrast Checker. Available at:

https://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/ (Accessed: 06/01/21).

WebAIM (2021) Contrast and Color Accessibility. Available at:

https://webaim.org/articles/contrast/ (Accessed: 06/01/21).

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank the following individuals for their contributions to and guidance on this document:

- **AbilityNet**

- Caroline Barratt and Keren Stiles from The OU [Library's Engagement and Insight team](#).

- Steven Price, Kirsty Baker Jade Matos Carew and Ciaragh Hubert from The OU's [Accessibility and Usability Evaluation team](#).

- Frances Morton and Claire Lever from The OU's [EDI team within People Services](#).

- [Ned Potter](#) – Academic Liaison Librarian (University of York) and Library Marketing Trainer.

- Greg Harwood from The OU's [Social Media team](#).