

Accessibility Conferences: “Specific needs, shared goals. Understanding the experiences of people with disabilities in Higher Education”

INFONET Alliance organized a new event within the series “Accessibility Conferences.” November 5, 2025, another online conference was held, this time on the topic “**Specific needs, shared goals. Understanding the experiences of people with disabilities in Higher Education**”.

Guest expert: **Ugo Marsili**, an Associate Professor in the Department of Languages and Cultures. He has previously worked as Disability Officer, Deputy Director of Academic Tutoring, Language Lead for British Sign Language (BSL). A multilingual educator with over twenty years of international experience, he is committed to inclusive pedagogy, curriculum innovation, and the support of diverse learners. As Inclusion, Development and Innovation Lead, and drawing on his own experience as a former BSL student, he established and has since developed the University’s BSL provision (2017-present), while also delivering institution-wide training on invisible disabilities, with a particular focus on Deaf and Blind awareness. His advocacy work on disabilities and languages was awarded with the University Teaching Fellowship for scholarship in action. He works with staff to promote accessible learning and working environments in line with institutional EDI priorities. He has founded student-led sign language and film clubs, fostering meaningful community engagement. His practice-based research focuses on multilingualism, intercultural communication, and accessibility. He has also contributed to EU-funded projects in Poland, Latvia, Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan, training professionals in audiovisual translation and inclusion, and disseminating his work through keynotes and educational initiatives.

The expert’s presentation explored how higher education institutions could better understand, support, and include students with disabilities. After defining disability under the *Equality Act 2010*, which protects individuals with physical or mental impairments, the presentation focused on disability being diverse and often invisible, challenging traditional assumptions through the *Iceberg Principle* and the *Social Model of Disability*—which shifts the focus from the impairment itself to societal barriers that limit participation.

Ugo Marsili emphasized that inclusivity means designing environments that value diversity, enable equal access, and help all students reach their potential without lowering academic standards. Examples of neurodiversity (e.g., dyslexia, ADHD, autism) illustrate both challenges and unique strengths of students. The *Four A’s framework*—**Assumption, Awareness, Acceptance, Adaptation (and Accessibility)**—guides educators toward inclusive teaching practices rooted in empathy and flexibility. Practical strategies include clear communication, advance access to materials, repetition, use of transcripts and captions, group trust-building, and awareness of invisible disabilities. The University of Reading promotes this culture through mandatory training, reasonable adjustments (e.g., extra time, rest breaks, assistive tools), and digital accessibility tools such as **Blackboard Ally**.

The presentation also referenced the **European Accessibility Act (2025)**, which mandates that products and services be designed for universal access. Looking ahead, artificial intelligence (AI) is seen as a powerful ally: supporting students with visual, hearing, or cognitive impairments through adaptive learning, live captioning, text-to-speech tools, and personalised pacing. The future vision is for higher education systems where accessibility is not an afterthought but the *default setting*—making learning environments universally inclusive by design.

This activity is part of the project “**Strengthening Civic Participation in Azerbaijan**”, co-financed by the European Union (EU) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and is implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

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