Hi everyone. I think I'm the next speaker.

I hope I'm the next speaker,

otherwise, I've jumped in front of someone.

Thanks very much, Paul George.

It's always a pleasure to hear you speak.

My name's Dan and I manage the e-learning team here at the University of Kent.

I'm going to talk to you about digital accessibility or more specifically,

I'm going to talk to you about

digital accessibility and the impact of the global pandemic.

This session is really a quick look at how the higher education sector

has responded to the global pandemic in light of digital accessibility.

The ultimate question I'm asking here is whether the pandemic has been an accelerator

for digital accessibility or whether it's actually

hindered our collective work in this area.

I'll provide some quick initial observations

concerning the immediate effects and immediate impacts of the pandemic, in particular,

around my concerns about accessibility being left behind,

and also what I feel is our growing reliance on

automating digital accessibility or automating accessibility.

What we'll then do is take a quick look at how the sector actually responded so

we can then perhaps have a look at how the pandemic

has maybe re-framed how we think about digital accessibility.

This session is largely based on data that I've gathered from

UK universities between February and April this year.

It's important to note that the data informing a lot of this work has very much come

from a range of sources including freedom of information requests,

discussions with colleagues elsewhere,

and also data that was already in the public domain.

In total, I've actually got data from just over 100 higher education providers in the UK.

Here's a brief reminder,

and like anybody needs it,

about the regulations that are actually

driving a lot of the work around digital accessibility,

the public sector bodies accessibility regulations or PSBAR,

as I'm now going to refer to them,

which were introduced in September 2018.

As everybody I'm sure knows,

this was a phased introduction of

these regulations and they've really guided and framed a lot of

the work that's happened both at

a higher education level and right across the public sector.

September 2019, there's the presence of accessibility statements being made available.

Virtual learning environments needed to be compliant,

that was a big area of work for me.

September 2020, closed captions for time-based media or in other words,

pre-recorded video needed to be in place.

Then June 2021, the introduction of mobile applications as well.

This has really guided and framed our work in this area.

Anyway, if we wind the clock back to March 2020,

which seems like a lifetime ago,

and myself and a number of colleagues were

sitting in the Darwin Boardroom on the Canterbury campus

of the University of Kent and we were preparing our response to the emergent lockdown.

A former member of the university's executive group turned to me and said,

"Dan, you and your team must have been waiting for this day.

E-learning is just everything now."

This was said in jest and it was

said from the perspective of someone that knew the challenges

that my team had faced over the years in getting

academic colleagues to engage with digital learning.

But it did make me think in that moment,

have we really been waiting for this day?

I was quite fearful.

My fear was that in such rapid change,

things tend to get forgotten about

Unfortunately, accessibility is habitually this afterthought.

It's always been regarded as an afterthought.

My concern was that the pandemic may resurface these concerns and resurface

this mindset and actually undo a lot of the good work that we've

done at the University of Kent and indeed across the sector more broadly.

Yes, everything might be online now,

but will accessibility once again fall by the wayside.

That was my ultimate concern.

At Kent, up until that point,

we thought we were actually in quite a good place.

Ben Watson's team had been mainstreaming accessibility for some time,

and this predates the PSBAR regulations by many years.

But under the sharper focus of the PSBAR,

we've been able to put accessibility front and center.

We have the benefit of some technologies like Blackboard Ally,

which provides automated alternate formats for students,

and also automated closed captions of our video content as well.

In that moment, when COVID hit,

it felt like a real distraction both in terms of focus,

but also in terms of just resourcing because

it felt like all the energies and efforts and

channels of communication for those human aspects of digital accessibility,

were just in an instant just absorbed by the broader response to the pandemic,

it felt like digital accessibility was

just a tiny fragment of the challenge that we face.

I think what was most concerning for me is

that the institutional outlook began to change as well.

We began to hear things like, well,

thank goodness we've got Blackboard Ally and

automated captions that can do all of this stuff for us.

People were saying things like, well,

at least we're meeting our obligations.

You could feel our work being undone.

I think the mindset that began to creep in was that

institutions started to place too great a reliance on automation.

Tools like Blackboard Ally,

tools like automatic captions,

they used this as a bit of a safety net so that they could actually go off and

focus on something else and people seem very happy to let the algorithms do all the work.

For me, I think automation removes the human from

the process just as it's done with things

like academic integrity and plagiarism detection.

When you think about it,

what we're doing is we're automating and systematizing

processes that actually have a human at the very start and end of the process.

I argue that automation alone can be quite damaging, that it lulls us into

this false sense of security and actually makes

us neglect our responsibilities as content creators.

All of these concerns now felt really at odds with a lot of

the literature that was starting to float around in the summer of 2020.

For example, quotes like this from

the Universities UK blog in which people were extolling

the virtues of the global pandemic as

this huge catalyzing event had a very positive frame around it.

They talk about revolution and opportunity

being a catalyst and this felt very different from what I was

sensing at an institutional level or indeed the

following quotes which is from the Jisc Learning and Teaching Reimagined report,

where the word opportunity is actually noted no less than I think 28 times.

Again, extolling the virtues,

talking about the pandemic is this huge opportunity.

But actually, I think when you dig a little bit deeper,

you find that in the rapid shift to online delivery,

all is not equal and the sector is actually falling short in this area.

The HE sector is actually falling short in this area.

In the Arriving and Thriving report,

it was noted that a quarter of the students that were surveyed felt that

their courses were completely inaccessible in relation to digital resources.

This is a survey after the pandemic hit.

Similarly, the NADP report on COVID highlighted numerous issues relating to

digital resources and just the overall lack of

awareness amongst academic colleagues concerning digital accessibility.

It painted quite a frightening picture really.

At Kent, the picture was quite similar.

We've done a lot of good work.

But when you delve into some of the feedback from students,

we're getting quotes like this,

"The subtitles on my recordings are useless.

There's loads of errors in them,

so the automated captions are useless."

"I'm a visually impaired student and my screen reader absolutely hates the module guide."

Then the final quote, "Whilst it's really good having captions on

my recordings and being able to download my readings as an MP3,

the Moodle module, that's the BLE,

is a complete mess.

It takes an age to find things and to navigate through the content.

It really doesn't help that the files and resources don't even have sensible names."

That final quote really indicates two things.

Number one, automation is no panacea and

the presence of automated captions and the presence of format

shifting software don't actually guarantee anything.

That also we're not getting the basics right.

Sensible file names, that's an easy win.

If we now start to look at some of

the institutional data that I gathered as part of my research,

73 percent of the 101 institutional responses indicated that

they'd actually undertaken work specifically

in the area of digital accessibility because of the pandemic.

Now some of the responses did note that it's actually

probably quite difficult to disentangle whether

this was a direct result of COVID or

just the continued work towards the PSBAR compliance.

But broadly speaking, there's an upward trend.

Institutions appear to have been very reactive to the pandemic in some form or another.

If you drill down into that data a little bit more,

there's actually an obvious trend towards

the procurement of format shifting software like Blackboard Ally

and like census access software that will take, for example,

a scanned PDF and turn it into an OCR,

an optical character recognized document.

There's a huge shift in the sector with

institutions paying out lots and lots of money for this software.

You can see that the responses perhaps indicate that

it's actually fascinating to see that

Blackboard Ally may have always been on their roadmap,

but actually they accelerated the purchase of it and many said, well,

we actually bought this software earlier than we planned to.

Now the majority of institutions also note that there's been an increase in the number of

queries from academic colleagues specifically relating to digital accessibility,

I think 72 percent to be precise,

so there's been this huge ramp-up of queries.

But again, the elaborations on that data are more telling in that it indicates that

the majority of those queries received relate to

automated accessibility technologies like census access,

like captions, like Blackboard Ally.

At the top right-hand corner there,

editing or correcting automated captions

or the use of format shifting software there on the bottom right-hand corner.

You can see that the picture was forming that a lot of

those queries are coming around the automation of that data.

From the discussions that I've had and held with colleagues at other universities,

when asked if they thought the pandemic was a catalyst or a distraction,

the responses were actually quite mixed.

This learning technologist said,

"Well, it's definitely a distraction.

We just don't have the resource to be fully accessible whilst we're trying to

convert ourselves from the face-to-face institutions to one that delivers for now online."

The next quote is interesting from this technology enhanced learning manager that,

"The utopian digitally accessible university will remain nothing but a dream whilst we

continue to perpetuate re-purposing analog content into digital systems."

So reusing content and trying to make it

digital, stuff that wasn't born digital in the first place.

Then this final quote is slightly different.

This digital learning designer suggested there is an opportunity.

"What more can we do?

The world didn't end in the rapid shift to online learning."

I think I agree, the world didn't end,

but I think it's more nuanced than that.

If we return to my initial question,

was the pandemic a catalyst or distraction?

Has it given universities this much needed impetus to bring

about real change in the realm of digital accessibility?

Or has it actually done the inverse of that and just sacked resources and focus?

I'd actually argue it's a combination of the two.

The positives are that the data shows that the majority of institutions

have reacted to accelerate their support for digital accessibility.

The data also shows that institutions have made huge investments,

thousands and thousands of pounds to introduce

systems and processes that support digital accessibility.

We can see that there is this upward trend of

engagement from academic colleagues and from professional services colleagues.

However, what we must remember is that students continue to report issues

with many of them feeling that actually there's

less support available now than before the pandemic.

Some academic staff still seem to be unaware of

their responsibilities and perhaps this message is just

getting lost amongst everything else that they have to do.

Personally, I think we've developed an over-reliance on automation of accessibility.

It's not the fault of the technology,

but it does nudge us down this road of a box ticking and forgetting

that content creation is a human process.

There continues to be this lack of clarity around the regulations.

It's taken sector-wide working groups to try and interpret aspects of the legislation.

It just makes it so much harder for universities

and colleges and public sector bodies to then implement that.

There continues to be a perception that digital accessibility is for the few.

I've heard academic colleagues say that this doesn't apply

to me because I don't have any visual impairments on my module.

I don't have any students with visual impairments on my module.

I think most of these issues can actually be

addressed and resolved with more meaningful and better communication,

but the challenge is always getting people to listen.

Finally, I would say that the global pandemic,

if it is a truly catalyzing event, then we need to

stop thinking that digital accessibility is something that we're obliged to do.

Our systems, resources, and processes,

they need to be born accessible and people need to take an active responsibility in that.

Okay, that's me done.

Thank you very much for listening.