# Accessibility maturity model interview

**Amy Low**

Hi folks, welcome to the AbilityNet podcast with me, Amy Low and our guest, Alistair McNaught.

It’s fair to say that there is a sense of panic in the air!

The public sector web accessibility legislation was a wake-up call to colleges and universities. They were just beginning to recognise the challenges their digital systems and online content posed for disabled learners when along comes COVID19 and forces staff to put all their lessons online.

At AbilityNet, we’ve been joining up our expertise - accessibility within the commercial and third sector - with Alistair McNaught’s expertise in further and higher education.

And one of the many things we’ve been working on together includes an accessibility maturity model.

So, Alistair, why do we need an accessibility maturity model?

**Alistair McNaught:** very simply, we need a maturity model to make accessibility visible to the organisation.

**Amy Low:** but surely accessibility is more visible now than it has been in the previous 20 years?

**Alistair McNaught:** well, it’s getting more visible but at the moment it’s like doing a dot to dot picture where some of the dots are missing. So some people end up drawing camels and others draw donkeys but neither of them are right. It’s actually a picture of a car. And we are in this position because most organisations still look at disability as a binary concept - you either have it badly enough to get specific support or you don’t. It’s a very outdated model - like travelling by donkey and camel. The social model of disability identifies the problem in the way the environment is constructed. If I use a wheelchair my disability becomes irrelevant in buildings with ramps and lifts. If I am dyslexic or visually impaired, my disability becomes irrelevant if online resources are designed so they work with the assistive technologies I need.

**Amy Low**: I like the idea of the “join the dots” picture but how does maturity model fit into this?

**Alistair McNaught**: the maturity model makes sure that, before people join the dots, they see what the final picture should look like. It’s helping to fill in the missing dots.

**Amy Low**: what are the missing dots? Are they the same in most organisations or do they differ from one place to another?

**Alistair McNaught**: every organisation has its own missing dots. Each dot in the picture is someone who understands accessibility within their role. Every organisation will have people passionate about accessible practices, but in some organisations it will be a librarian. In another it will be the IT manager or the head of e-learning. Maybe it will be the head of Department whose own child had a disability. The issue is that the accessibility good practices in one part of the organisation can be undermined by lack of accessibility awareness in another.

**Amy Low**: so the maturity model provides a framework, or big picture, that helps an organisation see where their own gaps are?

**Alistair McNaught**: exactly. Once you can see the big picture, you can see which dots you already have in place and which ones are missing. That helps you with priorities and strategies.

**Amy Low:** Maturity models have been around for many years and, indeed, AbilityNet have developed a maturity model for use with businesses and commercial organisations. How is this one any different?

**Alistair McNaught:** This one has been around for years too! I first developed it around 2006 while conducting research for a Further Education senior manager briefing[[1]](#footnote-0). Shortly after, my colleague Simon Ball at Jisc TechDis did similar research amongst higher education leaders. We worked together to develop an online accessibility self-assessment service[[2]](#footnote-1) based on the model. The critical difference between your business models and an education model is that education is more complex and multidimensional.

**Amy Low**: multidimensional! We’re getting into the realms of Star Trek or Doctor Who here!

**Alistair McNaught**: Funny you should mention that, because a teaching group is a little bit like the Tardis. There’s a lot more going on inside than appears from the outside. It’s not just about pouring content into students, it’s about building rapport, creating supportive networks, engaging the disengaged, finding alternative ways for students to demonstrate their understanding. That’s why accessibility isn’t just about technology and standards. Inclusive practice is also about pedagogy, the way you teach. The higher levels of the maturity model are not focused primarily on standards but on awareness, transparency, creativity and collaboration.

**Amy Low**: Sounds brilliant! Do you want to take us through some of the key points of the model?

**Alistair McNaught**: yes of course. Let’s do it together.

**Amy Low**: Ok, so the model is matrix with five columns, one for each stage of accessibility maturity. Stage I is “luck”…

**Alistair McNaught**: Yes - and at this stage, you’re just hoping for the best that you don’t have any disabled learners - or you have disabled learners who don’t complain!

**Amy Low**: ..yes.. [laughs] ok, good luck with that! Stage 2 is tokenism - what you mean by that?

**Alistair McNaught**: well, it means there is an awareness of disability and, probably, a very committed disability support team, but their job is to help learners negotiate barriers which *shouldn’t even exist* in the first place. That’s why I describe it is tokenism. It is not a reflection of the work of the disability support team, but a reflection of the organisations lack of understanding of the social model of disability.

**Amy Low**: I see, ok. And stage 3 is standards - by this I assume you mean Web content accessibility guidelines?

**Alistair McNaught**: indeed, here the focus is on making sure the website and the VLE are all standards compliant. It’s the first sign of institutional awareness that accessibility belongs to everyone but it can have unintended consequences.

**Amy Low**: what sort of consequences?

**Alistair McNaught**: well if it is implemented in a heavy-handed way, it discourages people from putting content online, it discourages people from using videos or interactivities et cetera. Improved technical accessibility can lead to decreased pedagogical accessibility.

**Amy Low**: Ok, I guess that takes us to stage 4, ownership

**Alistair McNaught**: exactly. This is the point where staff are trained to be flexible, creative and adaptable with digital tools. Not all the tools they work with all systems they work on will yet be 100% accessible and yet the staff will know what to look for and how to minimise or work round barriers.

**Amy Low**: so much more creative approach to accessibility at this level – I love it! Which brings us to the final stage, Partnership.

**Alistair McNaught**: yes, the nirvana of accessible practice where disabled staff and students are actively involved in advising on course design, course assessment, tool choices et cetera.

**Amy Low**: so, if an organisation is using this model, how do they decide which level they are at?

**Alistair McNaught**: well, we’ve just described the five columns in the model but there are nine rows that go below it, each covering a different question. Questions include some of the following: what is the main driver? Who is responsible? Which disability model is in play? What is the student’s digital experience? For each of the nine questions we have different statements to reflect each stage of the model, depending on which statement is closest to where you are as an organisation.

**Amy Low**: so it’s quite reflective; an organisation could be at different maturity levels depending on the question?

**Alistair McNaught**: almost certainly, Amy. More to the point, depending on who you ask in the organisation, you are likely to get different answers.

**Amy Low**: doesn’t that make the model less useful?

**Alistair McNaught**: no, far from it. It makes the model more useful. Remember we are trying to explore the big picture. If the big picture is a car but one department thinks they’re looking at a camel and another think they’re looking at a donkey you need to have that information or the experience of your disabled student is going to be significantly compromised.

**Amy Low**: How do you imagine organisations using the model?

**Alistair McNaught**: Well, I think the starting point is to get senior managers and relevant steering groups involved at the beginning. Any sort of self-assessment is potentially vulnerable and it needs to be sold in a positive way. It also needs to be solution focused and we’ve done some work signposting, for each level, how you might move your organisation to the next level. And once you get a sense as to what level you’re on (or even how it varies across institution) we suggest options for DIY improvements - things you can do yourself, resources you can learn from as well as external support that AbilityNet, myself or others could give .

**Amy Low**: Sounds great - can organisations only go up one level at a time? Could an organisation move from level 2 to level 5 all in one go?

**Alistair McNaught**: I think it would be tricky because we are talking about cultures here, even down to the level of job descriptions , quality assurance processes et cetera. They’re all part of the model and part of the final mix. Accessibility is a journey. The two golden rules of any journey are to know where you’re heading and to put one foot in front of the other.

**Amy Low:** So I am sure all of our listeners are keen to know how they can get hold of our accessibility maturity model and make use of it to help them gauge where they are in each area and what they should be prioritising to get to the next level?

**Alistair McNaught:** Well there are a number of ways actually. First we published the basic maturity model at (if people are handy with their pens!) <https://bit.ly/HE-FEmaturity> Second, we also working on an interactive version that guides the user through the questions and gives them feedback at each point and thirdly, you can book a guided session with AbilityNet and McNaught where we will set up an online meeting with the institution and the key stakeholders and walk with you and talk with you through the questions, either from an insititution wide perspective or looking at multiple departments/stakeholder responses and you will receive a personalised report recommending next steps and any services that might be of use to help you move forward.

**Amy Low:** Great - that sounds like a really good range of options that people can tap into! Well, thank you so much Alistair for your time today and thanks for listening, everybody. We’re really looking forward to getting your feedback on the model and working with some of you at a deeper level on it.

Alistair McNaught: Indeed, thank you very much for the time, Amy.

1. <https://web.archive.org/web/20071012190147/www.techdis.ac.uk/getbriefings> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. [https://www.slideshare.net/simonjball/icchp-ball-mcn this aughtwatsonchandleroases](https://www.slideshare.net/simonjball/icchp-ball-mcnaughtwatsonchandleroases) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)