

Case study: Access audits

Library Services
University of the Arts London

About the organization

Organisation: University of the Arts London (UAL)
Department: Library Services.
Size: 6 libraries in 6 colleges, 100 + staff in total.
Industry Sector: Higher Education.

Background

Following an access audit of the physical spaces of one of our colleges (London College of Communication) by an external company, we felt that we needed more information on the different ways library spaces are used. So we undertook our own access audits in each college library to identify issues and areas where the accessibility of our spaces could be improved. We based our audits on the RIBA/Centre for Accessible Environments Access Audit Handbook, but with a focus on our students and how they use our spaces.

The process

The aim of each audit was to assess the accessibility of the Library environment, to identify physical barriers that may prevent existing and potential library users accessing the full range of library services. We identified our key library users as current students, members of staff, alumni, applicants and visiting members of the public.

At each library the audit team consisted of the library manager or assistant manager, the local rep from the Libraries access and inclusion group plus the access and inclusion librarian to provide consistency across the colleges. Before each audit we produced a checklist of things to look at (an example checklist is attached). For each different area of the library we looked at:

- Circulation.
- Help desk.
- Seating and tables.
- Shelving.
- Lighting, flooring and acoustics.

The report

Following each audit we produced a report highlighting good practice and identifying recommended actions which we categorised into 3 priorities:

- **Priority 1:** actions that can be done in the short term, requiring little cost or time. These included making the edges of our security gate fins more distinct with coloured tape and ensuring any new signs complied with our accessibility guidelines (left aligned, sentence case, sans serif text on cream paper).
- **Priority 2:** actions to be done in the medium term, which required more time or budget. These included adding task lights (floor standing or desk based) in areas with shadow, purchasing height-adjustable tables and ensuring the colours chosen for any new seating provided a good visual contrast with the carpet and tables.
- **Priority 3:** actions to be considered during procurement or refurbishment projects. These included replacing heavy internal and external doors with accessible alternatives.

Benefits

We have found the audit process useful in highlighting and sharing good practice around our 6 libraries and also been pleased that some actions, such as consistent signage, were easy to implement. An unexpected benefit of the Priority 3 “wish list”, has been that library managers have been able to bid for funds that become available at short notice. This has meant that some of these projects have been completed relatively quickly, such as accessible doors into the Silent Zone at London College of Communication (pictured below). We are aiming to repeat the audits every 2 years at each college, to maintain the momentum of improvements.



Image credit: Sara Osman

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Part of our access audit checklist

1. Library entrance

Areas to check	Questions
Circulation	Entrance doors: Suitable door furniture? Suitable opening mechanism? Route to help desk clear and unobstructed? Adequate circulation space? Signage clear and well designed?
Help desk	Induction loop? Clearly signed? Working? Away from potential sources of noise? Adequate visual contrast? Unobstructed access to both sides? Desk height suitable for people standing and seated? Exposed desk corners well rounded? Seating available for longer enquiries?

2. Individual study area

Areas to check	Questions
Seating	Variety of heights and types? With and without arm rests? Seats with back available? Access clear and unobstructed? All seating on level floor? Adequate visual contrast between seats and background surfaces? Seating allows flexible use of space?
Tables	Height adjustable tables? Adequate space for manoeuvring within rows?
Book shelves	Adequate width between aisles? Suitable height of shelves? Clear signage?
Lighting	Level of lighting sufficient for long periods of study? Adequate natural light? Windows, blinds, lamps all kept clean? Can users control and adjust artificial lighting? Any issues with glare, reflection, shadows?
Flooring	Suitable floor finishes? Smooth, level, slip-resistant?
Acoustics	Ceilings and flooring absorb noise?
Other issues	Anything not yet covered?

Reference

Grant, A. (2013) *Access audit handbook*. London: RIBA Publishing.

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