

Education tech's future: Accessibility

Accessing digital materials can be as important as physically entering the classroom

By Abby Sewell
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BEIRUT: For many, the word “accessibility” might call to mind wheelchair ramps, railings and elevators. But in the web-centered environment of today’s higher education, being able to access digital materials can be as important as being able to physically enter the classroom.

Rima Kaddoura, who has been blind since she was 13 as a result of retinoblastoma, a form of eye cancer, had experienced firsthand the obstacles to digital access while completing her bachelor’s degree in math and master’s degree in public health at the [American University of Beirut](#).

Kaddoura uses a screen reader – a software application that converts written words to speech – and a Braille display to access web content. But even with that technology, she encountered obstacles. “Sometimes, especially in my master’s degree, our lectures were written on PowerPoint,” she said. “The issue is that screen readers don’t read math. So in my statistics courses, anything that involved equations, I couldn’t read.”

Kaddoura was speaking at the Accessibility for a Bolder Learning Experience summit hosted by AUB Thursday and Friday. The event brought together local and international experts with university faculty, staff and students to explore the challenges of digital accessibility, and introduce some potential solutions.

“Here in the MENA region, sadly, there is limited dedicated support for students with disabilities, and the technology they need has been slow to arrive,” AUB President Fadlo R. Khuri said in opening remarks at the event. “The regrettable result is that many students are driven to seek solutions abroad or to drop out of the system.”

AUB and other educational insti-



The Lebanese School for the Blind & Deaf choir performs at AUB’s ABE summit on digital accessibility for people with disabilities in higher education in Beirut.

tutions in Lebanon and the region, he said, are “at the very beginning of a very long but absolutely necessary journey toward being able to provide an entirely accessible higher education experience, regardless of the diverse abilities of our students.”

The ABE summit was part of AUB’s larger effort to implement web accessibility on its own campus, as well as to join with other Lebanese universities in a broader consortium on the issue, Maha Zouwayhed, the organizer of ABE and IT business development manager for AUB, told The Daily Star.

Zouwayhed said AUB’s current efforts were largely focused on training faculty and staff to make their course materials, e-mails and other digital content accessible via existing tools like screen readers.

Other types of assistive technology might include eye-tracking systems for those unable to use hands to control a mouse, or sign language avatars to convert speech or text to sign language.

But even with these technologies, the people creating online content also need to be thinking about accessibility, Zouwayhed said.

“If you plug a screen reader into a website that is not accessible, it will read Chinese,” she said, pointing to Kaddoura’s example. “What we’re trying to do today is to teach educators, staff – everyone that is creating content – to learn with them how to make this content. ... It’s daily practice, it doesn’t cost \$1 million – it’s just culture.”

Rami Farran, the university’s director of academic IT services, said for now, the priority was to make sure that all new course content introduced is accessible, but the eventual aim was to update all pre-

viously published content for accessibility. Farran added that AUB staff had developed institutional policies for accessibility that will be adopted.

As for Kaddoura, she made it through her courses with human help from her friends and professors, as well as technological assistance. She is now a research assistant at AUB Medical Center’s Emergency Medicine Department. Kaddoura said she has a message for those who pity her for her disability: “I’m happy you can see, but in my opinion, technology is the eye-sight of the future.”