

# Blackboard Ally: Information for Staff

## What is Blackboard Ally?

A tool within Blackboard, which can check (and improve) the accessibility of files uploaded to Blackboard. This will help ensure that students with a range of needs are able to engage effectively with the teaching material.

## What can Blackboard Ally do?

Put simply, Blackboard Ally can do three things:

1. **Data:** provide data about the accessibility of digital content within Blackboard and academics'/ students' engagement with Blackboard Ally (e.g. number of alternative format downloads).
2. **Instructor Feedback:** provide guidance to instructors (e.g. academics) about how to improve the accessibility and quality of their content.

**Example:** An academic uploads a seminar handout to Blackboard, as a PDF file. Blackboard Ally provides an [accessibility score](#) for the handout and tells the academic what the most pressing issues are. Blackboard Ally also provides guidance on how the academic can improve this score and address the identified issues (i.e. instructions on how to improve the accessibility of the handout). (Note: students cannot view the accessibility scores or guidance).

3. **Alternative formats:** provide students with immediate access to course content in alternative formats.

**Example:** A student wants to download the seminar handout as a MP3 file, so that they can listen to the content. Within Blackboard, the student

selects the handout and [chooses the “Alternative formats” option](#) to download the handout as a MP3 file.

### **Which alternative formats are available through Blackboard Ally?**

- **Tagged PDF:** for improved navigation and use with assistive technology (e.g. screen-reading software).
- **Optical Character Recognition (OCRed) PDF:** for scanned documents (e.g. converts an image of text into ‘machine-readable’ text for use with assistive technology).
- **Mobile-friendly HTML:** for viewing in web browsers and on mobile devices (e.g. adapts to mobile screens).
- **ePub:** for reading as an e-book on e-reader (e.g. iPad) and can also customise/ annotate the text.
- **Electronic Braille:** for use on electronic braille displays.
- **Audio (MP3):** for listening.
- **Translated version:** a machine translated version of the original document (currently 50 languages available).

### **What are the limitations of Blackboard Ally? (Hazard Warnings)**

There are, however, limitations to Blackboard Ally’s functionality and usefulness; both in regards to the instructor feedback (i.e. guidance for academics) and alternative formats.

1. **Blackboard Ally can be turned off (i.e. disabled):** academics and students can’t benefit from the accessibility scores, guidance or alternative formats when Blackboard Ally is turned off.

**Example:** an academic ‘inherits’ course content from a different creator, who disabled Blackboard Ally for the course. The (‘new’) academic isn’t

aware of Blackboard Ally and therefore doesn't know that they have to enable the tool to benefit from its features. (Note: [Blackboard Ally can be turned on](#) again).

2. **Instructor participation:** academics have to 'actively' follow Blackboard Ally's guidance and make the recommended changes themselves (i.e. Blackboard Ally cannot address accessibility issues 'automatically'). Academics can also choose not to follow Blackboard Ally's guidance; meaning that the accessibility issues are not addressed.
3. **Quality of alternative format:** if the accessibility of the original document is poor, the quality (and accessibility) of the alternative format document will also be poor.

**Example:** A student downloads a seminar handout as a MP3 file, using Blackboard Ally's "Alternative Format" option. The seminar handout was originally uploaded to Blackboard as a PDF file, but the images in the PDF are missing alternative descriptions (e.g. alt text). When the student listens to the handout as an MP3 file, the intended meaning/learning outcome of the images are lost (they may hear "alt text not included" instead).