
CEO's Corner - The Pandemic Has Exposed the Myth of the Average and the Need for Universal Design

Back in March 2020, as we vacated the AHEAD office to go into lockdown #1, we could never have imagined what lay ahead over the intervening 20 months.

So much has changed in that period, and yet, as we return to campuses, education centres and workplaces, there is a sense emerging in some quarters of a desire amongst many to return to 'normal', whatever that means.

But if the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that every person's 'normal' is something different to the next, and the myth of the 'average' person has been laid bare by the extraordinary circumstances we have endured. The huge diversity of experiences and responses through Covid-19 showed us that no person is average, and that building policy and practice targeted to the average, which does not factor in the breadth of human variability, is destined to fail many.

For those working on inclusion in education and employment, there can sometimes even be an inclination to think of the needs, supports and desires of 'target groups' like people with disabilities, as homogenous.

However, the findings in AHEAD's recent Learning from Home 2021 research (AHEAD, 2021) are a clear message that the community of people with disabilities in further and higher education is immensely diverse in and of itself, highlighted by the huge variety of both positive and negative experiences of pandemic learning, divided opinions about preferred modes of future learning, and both huge positives and negatives arising from the new educational practices which emerged.

The findings echo a fundamental truth which is borne out by the neuroscience and learning sciences underpinning the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, '**Learning is as unique to individuals as their fingerprints or DNA**'. (Hall et al., 2012), and I believe the same concept applies to how we engage in our workplaces. More than ever, we need to take the learning from AHEAD's research, and other Covid-19 research across the education and employment sector. This highlights the diversity of experiences and desires which we can channel into better systems with more accessibility, flexibility and choice built into their design. In this way, we can ask our students and staff to bend a little less to our education and workplace systems, and start ensuring the systems can bend a little more to fit people instead.

In any case, it's my belief that in the medium term at least, both students and staff simply won't allow a return to the status quo. Just like the expectations of workers all across the country have shifted to expect more flexibility in how and where they engage in work, students' expectations have also shifted. If we don't accommodate these shifts, people will vote with their feet, choosing employers and educational providers that give them the access and flexibility they need.

While reading the findings from the Learning from Home report (AHEAD, 2021) which show that experiences and opinions are very divided on many topics, it may be tempting to ask '**but what actually are these new**

expectations?’ I believe that the key takeaway is that people expect to be able to engage with learning and work more on their own individual terms; that they don't speak with one voice, have one set of wants and needs; and that there is no such thing as an average learner or worker which we can design our policies, practices and systems around.

Now that people have seen that it is perfectly possible to accommodate different modes of learning and working for different individuals, they're asking, 'why didn't we have these options all along?'. They are demanding more responsive systems which embed accessibility, flexibility and choice as standard. These demands highlight the value of Universal Design (UD) and UDL as evidence-based frameworks which can help us to achieve these goals.

The AHEAD Learning from Home 2021 research highlights the consequences of not taking this historic opportunity to embed more flexibility, accessibility and choice into our systems (AHEAD, 2021). Take this quotation from a learner who participated in the research, highlighting the importance of the key UDL principle of providing options for students in how they express themselves and demonstrate their learning outcomes:

This section has reminded me of one thing I'll miss from having things being online - no memory alone based exams. In first year, I failed my psychology exams and scraped passes in my criminology ones. Now in second year, in both of my subjects for my end of term assignments (criminology) and exams (psychology), which was open book but still timed, I've been top 5/10 of my entire year.

The new assessment instruments, which this learner's institution were forced to implement as a result of Covid-19, inadvertently transformed their ability to show what they know, and highlight the lack of alternative to the exam as an instrument to demonstrate their knowledge was a huge barrier to success. Same learner, same subjects, same learning outcomes, but the choice of assessment instrument unlocked the door to success. It shows that UDL is not just important for inclusion, but also for quality and academic integrity and that it can help us to address major flaws in the system which have disadvantaged many learners for a long time.

Another example of positive flexibilities in line with a UDL approach which were introduced during the pandemic, and which must be embedded going forward, is the recording of live classes. Students can watch these back if they missed them, or wish to review them at a later time. Students with disabilities have been calling for this measure for a very long time, but it took the pandemic to highlight that it is an achievable goal. These two student quotes from the research give voice to why it's so important for learners with disabilities, (AHEAD, 2021):

I would love if we could have pre-recorded lectures with in-person Q&As with online options for this. I have found it interesting that when I watch live lectures and then go to watch them back, I realise I have missed tonnes at the live session.

Ensuring all lectures are recorded. This THIS please!!!! The amount of extra emotional and physical harm I've put myself through forcing myself to get to class because I was already behind and the only person missing out was me. I don't want anyone else to go through this. I don't want anyone else to be let down and not have the opportunity to study because of a health issue keeping them from classes. It's not right.

These quotes highlight that for some students, the introduction of recorded live lectures is not just a positive for their learning, it's a huge positive for their health and wellbeing too.

And it's not just students with disabilities that desire these flexibilities. The desire of students with disabilities for the retention of recorded lectures and more choice/variety in assessment, which is clearly evidenced in AHEAD's Learning from Home research, has been echoed in a spate of other research undertaken with the general student population. Take the following examples.

The Irish Survey of Student Engagement Interim Results Bulletin, with data from more than 40,000 higher education students, highlighted that, in response to the question, '**what are the positive elements of the online/blended learning experience you want to keep when on-campus studies resume?**', one answer appeared to dominate and that was students wanting to have recorded lectures available to them, (HEA, 2021).

The Your Education, Your Voice, Your Vision report from the Irish Universities Association (IUA, 2021), with data from 14,000 poll responses from 17–24-year-olds in a variety of educational settings, highlighted that in response to the question '**In an ideal world what does your assessment look like?**', 81% said '**mostly continuous or open book**', with just 19% preferring end of term exams.

So, knowing what we know from the growing evidence base in terms of the benefits and the consequences, can we honestly look ourselves in the eye and say we cannot record lectures, we cannot move away from exams or offer our students' assessment choices which ensure they have a fair pathway to demonstrate their ability?

The students have spoken. It's time for the further and higher education sector to come together and respond to these clear student needs and desires.

References

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After graduating from Queens University in 2005, Dara joined Dun Laoghaire College of Further Education as a lecturer, where he became interested in inclusive education when working first-hand with students with disabilities in his classroom. When the opportunity arose in 2008, he joined AHEAD where he has been working ever since on creating inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities.

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