
Coming soon: The new T & L Digital Badge in UDL as a positive step to valuing diversity in education

Diversity is relatively new to third level education and already the term is a bit of a cliché. But building a culture positive to diversity means deliberately recognising the value and unique contribution of every student and understanding their needs. A new Digital Badge on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) being developed for the Teaching and Learning Forum places diversity centre stage. Being developed by AHEAD in collaboration with University College Dublin (UCD) Access and Lifelong Learning Centre, it will affirm staff who have taken part in learning opportunities about UDL.

In reality, there has always been diversity in the student population at third level, but it has not been an issue as most students came mainly from traditional backgrounds. Now, in many higher education institutions, up to 50% of students come from more diverse backgrounds with different cultures, religions, different socio-economic backgrounds, as well as mature students and students with a range of disabilities.

The case for institutions to adopt a UDL approach to teaching and learning is strong, as it is not possible to respond differently to every single student. UDL is an emerging approach that embeds difference and diversity into the design of the mainstream learning experience, takes on board the context of the course, and offers a choice of routes for all students to reach the learning outcomes.

Students with disabilities up until now have been the domain of the Disability Support Services (DSS). But in recent years, rising numbers, staff cutbacks and the freezing of the Fund for Students with Disabilities have cut into the capacity of DSS to provide for the support needs of all students with disabilities. Added to this, the growing voice of students who do not want to be segregated puts pressure on the system to mainstream provision for supports for students with disabilities where possible. Access to professional development for staff is a key factor in developing a culture of diversity across the whole campus. The Teaching and Learning Forum has identified inclusion as a core value underpinning the National Professional Framework, and emphasises how the wellbeing and confidence of staff has a significant impact on their professional practice. If institutions want to make a positive impact on diversity, then it is important to provide all staff across faculties with opportunities to up-skill and to learn new approaches to enhance student learning. The Digital Badge in UDL will be a valuable tool for staff in managing diversity. Watch the AHEAD website www.ahead.ie for more information.

Ann Heelan, Executive Director May, 2017



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Ann Heelan is a consultant on Inclusive Education Practice and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for all students. Originally a teacher and then CEO of AHEAD for 20 Years, she has a track record of working in collaboration with national and international organisations to improve the opportunities and rights of students with disabilities in education. She has written on topics such as "Building Inclusive Learning Spaces," "Getting Started with UDL," "Inclusive Study Abroad," "Accessible Assessment," "Developing your UDL Practice," and "Building Communities of UDL Practice."

In her role in AHEAD, Ann established learning networks with staff in further and higher education, to support them to work together to make their practice more inclusive of students with disabilities. She was the winner of the Miriam Van Acker Award for Innovation in Inclusive Education in 2017, which recognises leadership in promoting inclusive practice for students with disabilities in tertiary education and employment.

Since 2020 she has been working with SOLAS on behalf of AHEAD to research and write the SOLAS publication on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for FET which SOLAS are due to be published in early in 2021.

She now runs a [Consultancy Service supporting staff in tertiary education](#) to get started and reduce the barriers for individual students and to develop UDL practice across the institution.

This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
