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## Welcome to Journal Number 3

The vision of AHEAD is shaping a future where students with disabilities can succeed. We recognise that employment is a critical piece in that success, as graduates with disabilities are no different from their non disabled peers in that they want well paid careers after their years of study. The recently published National Skills Strategy 2025 states that 'unemployment correlates with the level of educational attainment', so we could assume that the career opportunities of graduates with disabilities would be very good as they have the same first and second class degrees as other graduates.

However this is not the case. Many graduates with disabilities are losing out on highly skilled and highly paid career opportunities because of the subject and career choices they made early on in second level education. We know that this is the case because in higher education, these students are over represented in arts/humanities and the social sciences, while being under represented in the very areas identified in Ireland's National Skills Strategy as areas of future demand (AHEAD 2016).

The sectors identified as having high skill demands in the coming years are clearly identified in the National Skills Strategy 2025 as: the sciences, finance, ICT, technology, engineering, health sciences, agri food industry, retail & marketing, and construction. These sectors are seeking highly skilled graduates as 85% of jobs created in the coming years will require high tech skills such as ICT and data analytics.

So the question is, why are students with disabilities not choosing these sought after careers? How can they be encouraged to shift their career aspirations from arts into a broader range of careers?

The answers are complex, as we know from other research carried out by AHEAD, the OECD and others that the education system is riddled with potential pitfalls for students with disabilities, and that they are frequently encouraged to drop essential subjects such as maths, languages and sciences, not because they do not have capacity and aptitude to do them, but because the system lacks the infrastructure to include them.

Often, teachers have not been trained in inclusive practice, the technology is inadequate and the examinations system unnecessarily bureaucratic. For example, very few students with text disabilities such as visual impairment or dyslexia are granted the use of computers in state examinations. Furthermore, guidance professionals are not confident in giving career advice to students with disabilities, and too many end up in generic type subjects like arts and social sciences, while dreaming of another path. The system is creaking and needs to change. This edition of the AHEAD Journal shares stories from practitioners who are change agents and who are doing things differently, changing thinking, developing innovative approaches to improve the experiences and opportunities of students with disabilities. It will give you a brief glimpse of the AHEAD Symposium on Universal Design in DCU in March and the creativity of the students in Blanchardstown in giving us a visual representation of their experiences of education. We would like to hear more of these stories to share with you in further editions.

**April, 2016**



## Ann Heelan

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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.

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