
CEO's Corner – How Covid-19 Super-Charged the UDL Badge Community in Ireland

At times of great uncertainty, we look to our communities for support, reassurance, hope and understanding. This was most certainly true as we endured and adapted our way through the Covid-19 pandemic over the past two years. We turned to our local communities, our working communities and our learning communities to comfort each other and figure out how to respond to the unfolding chaos.

In his AHEAD conference keynote of April 2020 as the pandemic emerged, [Dr Etienne Wenger-Trayner delivered a session entitled 'Come Together'](#), which shared his research on social learning and encouraged the development of learning communities for professional development. In it, he discussed the idea of uncertainty as a gift to learning communities, something that fundamentally powers them:

“Caring to make a difference is really at the core of what makes a learning network important and inspiring. Out of this desire to make a difference, people engage with each other in their uncertainty. In that state where they don't quite know how to achieve the difference that they would want to make, and that's what they offer in the space. So, while often learning is thought of as the transmission of certainty, here we are saying learning depends on the engagement of uncertainty. And you can understand that from a social perspective, engaging uncertainty requires a certain context. Where it's OK to be uncertain. Where it's OK to say 'hey I don't know how to do this please help me'. It's OK to offer that as a learning gift to the group”.

- Dr Etienne Wenger-Trayner

I think many tertiary educators in Ireland have always aspired to make a difference in their students' lives, and really cared about the learning experiences they are facilitating for them. But, perhaps the uncertainty of Covid-19 brought the barriers to student learning right into view, magnified the huge variability in our learner populace, and the huge variety of strengths and needs they bring.

Perhaps the uncertainty created the impetus to really come together as a teaching community and say 'right now, I don't know how to do this'.

The penny began to drop for many around this time that Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offered us a sustainable, evidence-based response to the teaching and learning challenges posed, helping us to ensure we could reach and teach everyone. And so, in this maelstrom, the UDL community in Ireland really began to grow and blossom.

A great example of this explosion of interest in UDL at this time is rise of the UDL Badge Community here in Ireland.

What is the UDL Badge?

As part of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning's open courses initiative, AHEAD and UCD Access & Lifelong Learning teamed up in 2018 to create the digital badge for Universal Design in Teaching & Learning.

The course can be delivered in a number of ways, but mostly, participants experience the course by engaging with the following elements over 10 weeks with an estimated 25-hour learner effort:

- 3 live orientation webinars at key junctures in the course.
- 5 short online modules building UDL knowledge and encouraging self-reflection.
- Establishment of a peer group for peer support and peer-to-peer learning via engagement in 4 structured peer group meetings and more informal exchanges.
- The UDL Redesign Activity, where participants reflect on their practice, implement UDL in real-time and report on their experiences.

All of the course materials are freely available in [the Course Facilitator's Pack](#), which is licensed under creative commons, and like all of the Forum's open courses, individuals can also take the 5 hour Facilitators badge to enable them to use this pack to roll out the course and issue badges in their institution. Participants can either take the badge:

- Via the annual National Roll-Out coordinated collaboratively by UCD Access and Lifelong Learning and AHEAD.
- Through a locally arranged and delivered course, should a trained facilitator decide to set up and deliver it locally.

This 'train-the-trainer' model aims to build scalability into the delivery of the badge, however in the initial years of delivering the course, the UDL Badge team experienced that only a small number of the significant pool of trained facilitators actually took the step to set up and deliver a course locally, largely due to the significant workload involved.

Additionally, because of the limited project resources available to AHEAD and UCD, the existing model only allowed for a maximum of 50 participants in each national roll-out, meaning that the initial years saw modest engagement with the badge. In 2018, 94 UDL badges were issued, with 95 issued in 2019.

Reimagining the Model

In 2020, two things happened in concert which completely changed the momentum of the building of this UDL Badge community.

1. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the swift move to online teaching, resulted in an explosion of interest in UDL as a sustainable response to ensure equity and inclusion in the moment.
2. AHEAD and UCD began brainstorming ways to leverage this increased interest in UDL, and the significant community of previously trained facilitators, who were passionate and committed to spreading the UDL message, but reluctant to take the step of delivering the course themselves

We began to realise that the value and potential of the course lay entirely in the community of previously trained

facilitators, and the enthusiastic and eager potential pool of participants. But also, the uncertainty that these groups were engaging in – the trained facilitators uncertain if they had the time, understanding and resources to organise the badge for their colleagues locally, and the uncertainty of this sizeable community recognising the value of UDL in a chaotic moment and asking ‘how do I do this?’.

And so, we set about redeveloping the model, reimagining AHEAD and UCD as mere mediators of a huge community effort to advance equity and inclusion in teaching and learning.

The new model devised has a few key elements which have enabled a much greater capacity for the national rollout of the course, and naturally through the structure of its delivery, facilitated the development of this community:

1. The creation of a new lower stakes ‘Peer Group Facilitator’ role for the national roll-out, enabling previously trained facilitators to join with us to collaboratively roll out the course, acting as local organisers and first points of contact for peer groups
2. The increased role of the peer groups in supporting each other to understand course content and brainstorm their UDL implementations
3. Delegation of verification of course completion largely to the peer groups themselves, with oversight processes conducted by the coordinators to ensure integrity and quality

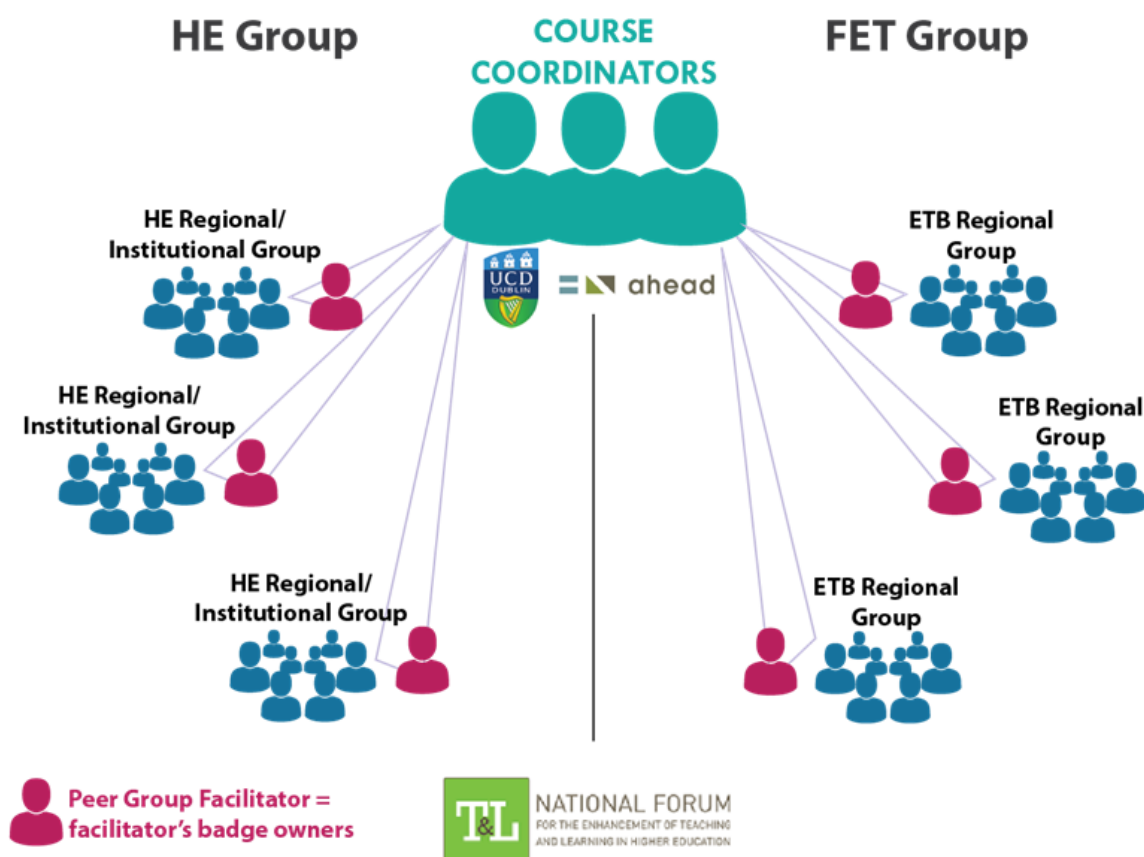


Figure 1 Illustration of the reimaged UDL Badge national roll-out model of delivery

In this model, UCD and AHEAD act as course coordinators, organising course registration, managing the online platform, updating course content, delivering the orientation webinars and

coordinating the weekly course communications.

The Peer Group Facilitators who partner with us, play a vital role in disseminating and getting buy-in for the course locally, managing the local peer groups to ensure they remain on track and resolving issues within the groups.

Through the peer verification model operated, the participants themselves play an important role in supporting each other's learning and verifying to us as coordinators that their fellow participants have, in their opinion, met the learning outcomes, the most important in a range of indicators we as course coordinators use to verify course completion.

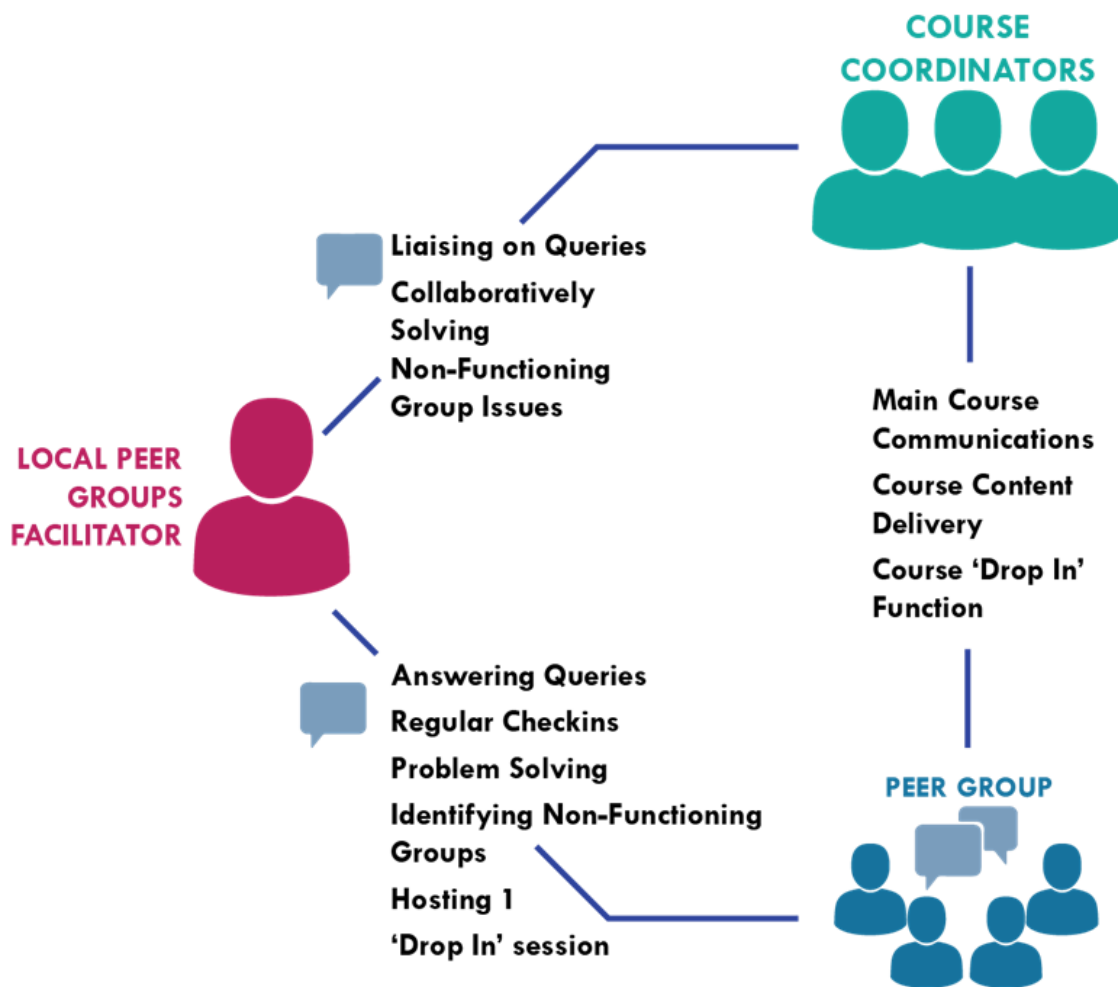


Figure 2 - Roles within the new model of delivery explained

All of this enabled AHEAD and UCD Access and Lifelong Learning the opportunity to open the course (and the community) up to much greater numbers of people, but how would the sector respond?

Something Special Happened

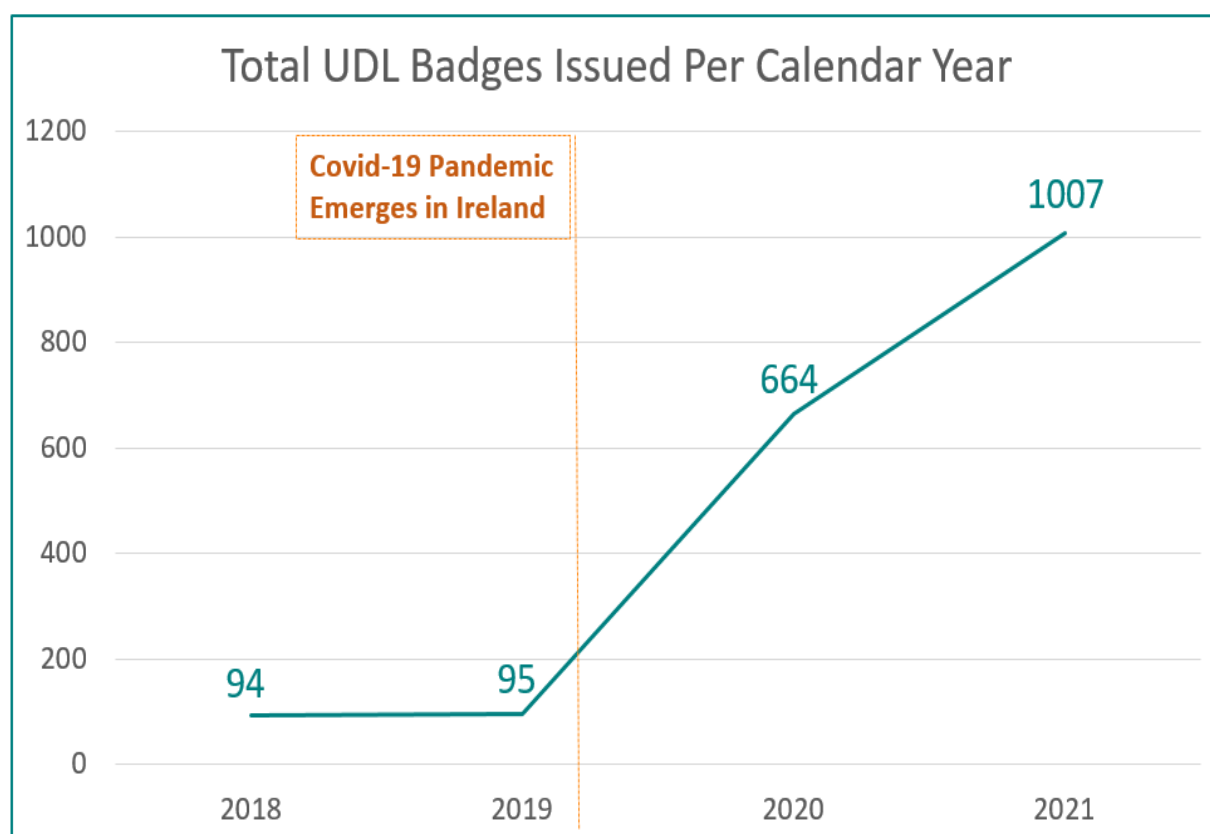
In this amazing confluence of events, something extraordinary happened.

We knew something big was going on when we first put out a call for previously trained facilitators to volunteer to partner with us in the delivery of the 2020 national rollout, and 21 individuals from across further and higher education put up their hands to support.

Working together with these individuals, we were able to increase the number of participants who successfully completed the national rollout from just 33 participants in 2019 to 544 in 2020. In 2021, a whopping 86 facilitators from further and higher education institutions joined us, enabling a 41% year-on-year increase in the number of completed participants in the national roll-out, with 771 individuals receiving digital badges. All the while, we've continued to train more future facilitators, with a total of 412 facilitator badges issued to date, 138 of which were issued through the national rollout in 2021.

Data suggests that there is a relatively balanced spread of participants across sectors too, with 355 higher education professionals and 416 further education and training practitioners completing in the 2021 national rollout.

And these figures don't include all of the great work being done by individuals and institutions conducting their own institutional roll-outs separate from the national roll-out. The table below shows the full picture of badges issued per year.



Up to the end of QTR 1 2022, almost 2,000 UDL badges (1981) have been issued to professionals in further and higher education since the development of the badge, an amazing impact for what started as a relatively small project.

And the good thing is, we know from both our hard evaluation data and more anecdotal evidence, that the badge and the community model of delivery that enables it, is having a significant impact on individual and institutional practice.



UDL BADGE 2021 EVALUATION



95%

Agree or strongly agree their participation had a

significant impact on their teaching and learning practices

98%

Rated the

quality of the course as Good, Very Good or Excellent

96%

Said that this digital badge

deepened their understanding of UDL



Not only do the vast majority of the 546 participants who completed the course evaluation in 2021 believe the course is of high quality and deepened their understanding of UDL, but 95% agreed or strongly agreed that their participation had a significant impact on their teaching and learning practices.

The qualitative data contained in the evaluation speaks to the kind of profound effect that the course had on some participants.



UDL BADGE 2021 IMPACT



"The programme has shown me how, with small changes, across my practice, I can support a more inclusive and engaging educational experience, respecting the individuality of each participant."



"It completely changed my perspective, I'm more critical of my instruction now"



"I will question structures and processes more. Introduce more choice for students. Encourage a more collaborative approach with students"



We know anecdotally from working closely with facilitators and participants alike, that the community approach taken has helped to spark the formation of long-standing local networks, and stimulated institutional projects and changes to practice too, such as the development of UDL steering groups, hiring of UDL Coordinators and incorporation of UDL into quality practices such as programmatic review.

And guess what, this is just the beginning. This community is just getting started. It's a reminder of the sweeping changes we can make to teaching and learning in Ireland for the benefit of our diverse learners when we come together with a will.

I for one, am very proud to be a part of it.



Dara Ryder

CEO, AHEAD

[@dararyder](#)

Dara Ryder is Chief Executive Officer of AHEAD, having previously managed AHEAD's digital presence and developed a suite of online CPD programmes relating to inclusive practice in his role as Digital Media and eLearning Manager there.

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.

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