
What happens when you support staff to reflect on their practice? - AHEAD's Digital Badge in UDL and the John Kelly Award

Over the last number of years, AHEAD has seen the promotion of the universal design for learning (UDL) framework, and more generally UD approaches to further and higher education, as a key pillar of our strategy in trying to achieve our mission of shaping a future where students with disabilities can succeed.

We knew that since we were asking staff on the ground to reflect on their work using the UDL framework and to see where they could make positive changes for their diverse students, we would also need to provide them with the resources, knowledge and encouragement to support them in carrying carry this out. We realised that professional development opportunities would be key in getting staff on the ground to begin their UDL journey. We also knew that it was vital that these opportunities needed to be scalable and provided at a national level for us to make a real impact and reach significant numbers of people.

As we pondered how best to go about providing these, we were very enthused in late 2017 when we saw a call from the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning for experts to submit proposals to create course content for their Open Access Badge Initiative. So, we partnered with University College Dublin's Access & Lifelong Learning centre and were selected to create the Digital Badge for Universal Design in Teaching and Learning.

The idea behind these National Forum badges is that we as the badge experts create and curate all of the course materials, including online content and we also produce a facilitator's pack which can then be used by institutions to roll out the course themselves. Think of it like a flatpack approach to professional development – we provide all pieces of the course separately to colleges with a set of instructions but it's up to the colleges to build it themselves and run the course for their staff. All participants who complete the course in each college then receive a digital badge from the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. Ours is just one of [16 open access badge programmes that the Forum provide](#) across different areas of teaching and learning.

So, what does Ahead's Digital Badge course look like?

Well, participants first undertake about 6 hours of online training and recommended reading. They then participate in a 2-hour face to face group workshop which is mainly focussed on discussion and challenge-based learning. And finally, the largest amount of learner hours in the course are dedicated to an assignment where participants make changes to their practice based on what they've learned about the UDL framework and report on both their experiences and the reaction of their students to the changes. In the beta phase rollout of this course across 2018, approx. 70 staff members in further and higher education participated in the course. If you want to find out more about the badge and how you can roll it out in your own institution [you can visit the webpage](#).

AHEAD turned 30 years old in 2018

As a parallel to our release of the badge, we wanted to mark the occasion in some way and also to recognise the work of Prof. John Kelly who made an enormous contribution to the foundation and development of AHEAD. Back in the late 1980's, John was the registrar of University College Dublin and when a group of students with disabilities came to him to say they needed more support, he listened. He helped them to organise into a disabled student network and became a key figure in developing the organisation into the fully-fledged NGO we know today. **So, the idea of an award was floated.** When thinking about what this award was to be given for and who it would recognise, we didn't necessarily want it to celebrate 'the experts' - the people who were already writing research papers and keynoting conferences on the subject, important as those voices are. Rather, we wanted to celebrate the ordinary staff up and down the land who were going the extra mile to make their practice inclusive for their students and doing innovative and interesting things which might otherwise go unseen or unheard.

The John Kelly Award 2019

This ideal married really well with the results we were seeing from the digital badge programme because we could see the amazing work that people, who were often new to the framework, were producing as part of the badge and the real difference to student experiences that they were making. **So, we decided to give this award to the graduate of the badge who made the most exciting and innovative changes to their practice as a result of their interaction with the UDL framework through the digital badge.**

We see the award as a celebration of the really impressive work of not just the eventual winner, but also the work of the other shortlisted candidates and indeed all of those who have put up their hands and said 'I want to make my practice more inclusive' by signing up and participating in the digital badge.

After a three-month long application and shortlisting process, we were delighted to host the inaugural final of the John Kelly Award at the recent AHEAD Conference (March 2019) in Croke Park and our three finalists –

- **Ailish Breen (IT Sligo),**
- **Deirdre Campion (University College Dublin)**
- **and our eventual winner Helena Farrell (Kinsale College)**

all presented the work they produced as part of the badge.



The amazing changes they made to their practice to best serve their diverse students really highlights what can happen when you give teaching staff the time to reflect and permission to get creative using a helpful lens like the UDL framework. **We hope that our introductory digital badge programme can be the spark that lights a fire for many in our sector in the coming years.**

Below you can view 10 minute presentations highlighting the changes that our three finalists made as a result of their interaction with the UDL framework via our digital badge.

[Helena Farrell - My Digital Badge Work](#)

[Ailish Breen - My Digital Badge Work](#)

[Deirdre Campion - My Digital Badge Work](#)



Dara Ryder

CEO, AHEAD

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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.

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