
Looking to the long term

Ann Heelan, outgoing Executive Director of AHEAD

This year at the AHEAD Conference 2019 AHEAD introduced the John Kelly AWARD to recognise and celebrate examples of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in practice. The results were astonishing as they showed how simple changes to practice can have a transformative impact on the learning of students. For me, running this award was a measure of just how successful the move to inclusion in higher education has been since Professor John Kelly set up AHEAD in 1988. Back in the day, students with disabilities were missing from higher education, the participation rate in 1998 was 1% and inclusion was not a word in anyone's conversation. Today, that story has changed. AHEAD research shows that the rate of participation by students with disability is 6% of the student population and increasing year on year. There have been many milestones along this journey and I am especially proud of the significant role AHEAD has made in bringing inclusion into the daily conversations that take place across the higher education sector.

The Fund for Students with Disabilities was set up in 1994 following AHEAD research. Not only did it provide for additional supports for students with disabilities, but as importantly for institutions, it took the sting out of the cost of providing supports to students with disabilities. Another milestone was the establishment in the university sector of disability support services funded through the HEA strategic funding and since mainstreamed. Others include the DARE scheme as an alternative route into higher education which emerged from a collaboration between AHEAD and DAWN, and the Better Options Fair which encourages school leavers with a disability to follow their dreams and go to college. The partnership between AHEAD, DAWN and the Access Officers has been very strategic and has led to setting standards for the sector in a range of key areas such as reasonable accommodations, examination guidelines, and latterly an exploration of the future role of disability support services in the rapidly changing landscape of in higher education.

When participation numbers started to grow, we became aware that while employment was an expected outcome of higher education for students who didn't have disabilities, their peers with disabilities simply could not get a foothold on the employment ladder. AHEAD reacted to this with the GetAHEAD Forum for graduates with disabilities, which was launched by the Minister for Employment in 2004. On this platform AHEAD could hear from graduates themselves and start the conversation about inclusion with employers. This successful initiative led to WAM, the Willing Able Mentoring programme set up with EU funding in partnership with DCU and Irish employers. This programme, now funded by the Department of Social Protection, has since led to over 450 jobs for graduates with disabilities, with 77% of WAM graduates in full-time employment a year after their placement.

These milestones tell the story of how the conversation about inclusion has drastically evolved over the 18 years of my time in AHEAD. For this reason, the recent change in AHEADs tagline to **'creating inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities'**, has been a natural progression to keep aligned to the needs of students with disabilities. Today, students with disabilities have an expectation to be included along with school leavers and learners from diverse backgrounds, such as socio-economic disadvantage, cultural and linguistic minorities, and mature students. Irrespective of difference, they all come with the expectation of learning.

Managing this diversity in higher education is complex and requires an intentional solution which we believe can be delivered by institutions who take a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach because it works for all students by giving them flexibility and choice. There are huge benefits for an institution in adopting a UDL approach such as quality standards; improved teaching and learning; improved retention rates; more collaboration; the enhanced reputation of the institution as a leader in human rights, and happier students.

Truthfully, however, we are still some way from our goal. While there are examples of good practice in every institution, we need unity of action on a whole college basis if we are to achieve a culture of inclusion across the entire Higher Education sector. It seems there's a myth emerging from within the sector that UDL can somehow dispense with disability support services. But if inclusion is to work, Disability Support Services need to recognise the vital role they [can] play as a resource to academic and other staff who need assistance to understand the impact of disabilities and how to become more inclusive in their practice. There will always be students whose disabilities require specific supports above and beyond the inclusive teaching and learning programmes, with appropriate assessment and provision from Disability Support Services.

Looking to the future for AHEAD we are pushing ahead with promoting UDL. It is clear from the popularity of the Teaching and Learning Forum Digital Badge on Universal Design for Learning (designed by AHEAD and UCD) that there is a huge appetite for improving teaching practice. As one member of staff commented **'Learners became more engaged and left with a deeper understanding of the course content'**. I recommend that everyone working in education think about where their students struggle the most and as Tobin suggests take a PLUS1 approach to doing something different.

References

Tobin. T. Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone, Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education, 2019, West Virginia University Press, USA.



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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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