
CEO's Corner

Covid-19 – Our Response and What Lies AHEAD?

Firstly, I am delighted to be able to contribute to the first issue of the AHEAD Journal released since taking up my new role as CEO in January 2020. It has been a challenging yet rewarding first few months in office and I am forever grateful to the amazing staff here in AHEAD for their hard-work, resourcefulness and imagination in collectively responding to the Covid-19 crisis.

It's safe to say the crisis has turned our world upside down. It is hard to believe that just 18 weeks prior to the release of this issue of the AHEAD Journal, there were only small rumblings on the airwaves about Covid-19 and not a single case had yet been identified on our shores.

In a short matter of weeks and months, the virus arrived and as the government reacted, everything changed. Our schools and college campuses closed, our economy was placed in hibernation, remote work became the norm and our ability to be close to the ones we love was taken away.

Many of the employers AHEAD works with through our WAM programme were forced to suspend or cancel recruitment and employees suddenly found themselves working from home with little planning.

Overnight, our further education and training (FET) centres and higher education (HE) institutions were pushed into remotely delivering the programmes that are so vital to the lives of our learners, again without the chance to fully plan and prepare. They showed remarkable commitment and innovation in moving quickly and nimbly to support learners through this difficult time and try to ensure they remained engaged with their remote learning in an equitable way. Yet students still face major challenges.

[AHEAD research conducted on the impact of the crises on students with disabilities](#) shows that more than half of students with disabilities studying in FET and HE disagreed (35%) or strongly disagreed (17%) that they are coping well with learning from home.

Many have concerns for the health of themselves and their families, many are juggling childcare and other family demands with trying to adapt to a new form of learning, and some are struggling with limited or poor access to reliable technology and a reliable internet connection. Many are experiencing high levels of anxiety related to both the wider Covid-19 situation and the new mode of their programmes and some are experiencing challenges with the accessibility of materials provided and disruption to support services.

[Another piece of research conducted by AHEAD on the impact of the crises with FET Practitioners](#) shines a light on the difficulties that practitioners are experiencing in continuing to deliver those supports and their programmes more generally. It highlights key issues including a lack of engagement from a sizeable number of learners, a lack of ability to effectively continue the provision of disability support, difficulties for practitioners of juggling unfamiliar remote delivery with family responsibilities, a lack of practitioner experience with online delivery and the unsuitability of some programmes for online delivery (e.g. prison education, culinary courses).

It's fair to say that challenges exist for both students and FET/HE staff in meeting this moment and for AHEAD, it has been no different in our own work. We have had to respond with imagination and resourcefulness to ensure that we continued to provide a quality service to the students, graduates, employers and educational staff we serve and to feed in effectively to the State's educational response to support equity in the measures taken.

The first major stage of lockdown began here in Ireland on March 12th, just two weeks before AHEAD was due to welcome professionals from across the world to Croke Park for our two-day annual conference focussing on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and disability support in further and higher education – Europe's largest annual conference on these topics.

Thanks to the hard work and vision of our staff, we were able to quickly reimagine the conference as a 10-week, 11 session online marathon of weekly webinars, complemented with online interactions and a very special disabled student art exhibition. You can read more about the key themes covered at the conference in this issue of the Journal and [recordings from the webinars are available on the website](#). The online format was a huge success with more than 1200 individuals engaging over the 10 weeks from Europe, North and South America, ASIA and Australia – many multiples of the number we would have had the capacity to host at our face to face event.

Equally, we have produced targeted Covid-19 resources across our projects for educators, employers, students and graduates with disabilities, on many topics such as [accessible online assessment](#), [accessibility in distance teaching](#), [learning from home](#) and [preparing for virtual interviews](#). These digital resources were supplemented with Covid-19 response online events from AHEAD covering topics like the [move to inclusive online assessment](#), [creating accessible documents for online teaching](#), [accessibility in PowerPoint](#), [student wellbeing](#), [accessibility in virtual recruitment](#) and [the future of the post Covid-19 workplace for people with disabilities](#).

All in all we have delivered more than 20 webinars to support our stakeholders since the crisis began and there are already more summer online events planned including the UDL for FET Summer School, [a training event on turning your PowerPoint files into captioned videos](#), a student led session for new entrants on what to expect next year in college and an event focussed on [unconscious bias in recruitment](#).

AHEAD has also been busy contributing to the work of the Department of Education's Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Tertiary Covid-19 steering group by attending meetings every 10 days and feeding in expertise and research to support equity in the state's educational Covid-19 response. This group, of which AHEAD is a member, has collectively developed multiple themed papers to highlight access issues and these papers are then fed into the main Department of Education Tertiary Education Covid group which coordinates the State's response in this sector. Additionally, AHEAD in collaboration with the Disability Federation of Ireland, made a direct submission to the department on [ensuring equity in the leaving certificate calculated grading process](#), which has replaced the traditional state exam as the key mechanism for completion of second level and entry to third level education. All of these actions are part of our effort to ensure that issues for students with disabilities are fully considered by both colleges and the state and make sure that we are playing a positive and collaborative role in the wider response.

So, it's safe to say we've been busy.

The last few months have gone by in a flash but simultaneously, felt like years. With the terrible tragedies unfolding before our eyes nightly on the news, the inability to sit and break bread with the people we love and an increased workload for many of us, it is easy to feel anxious and pessimistic about the future and it feels somewhat glib at times to search for positives. The challenges ahead are obvious.

And yet, as the first wave of the crisis eases and Ireland re-opens from lockdown, it is evident that there are opportunities too for those of us seeking to work for a more fair and equitable system of education and employment where students and graduates with disabilities can thrive.

The environment of enforced change created by the crisis has created opportunities to shift systems and cultures in a way that would never have been previously possible.

For many workers with disabilities, the increased openness to remote working is a major positive, with many companies committing to permanently allow their staff remote working options. It opens up the possibility of full-time work for a whole cohort of individuals who may previously have been excluded by the culture of office-only work.

While many students with disabilities have struggled with the move to online learning, others are seeing the benefits and the likelihood of increased online and blended learning options into the future is good news for many students for whom on-campus learning is a major financial and accessibility challenge.

We are hearing anecdotal reports that many academic staff members are taking a more active role in ensuring their students with disabilities have what they need, resulting in a more mainstreamed approach to inclusion and there are opportunities to ensure this culture and approach is retained post-crisis.

Many disability support staff are reporting that most students are more comfortable with the online meetings/interactions which have replaced in-office support meetings, as a result of the reduced worry of stigma caused by having to physically go to the disability support service.

In short, more flexibility is welcomed and seems to be becoming the norm.

This pandemic has perhaps highlighted the inequalities inherent in our society and thus, given staff within our systems of education and work a greater understanding of issues concerning access and disadvantage. These issues are 'on the table' in a way they were not in the past and that appears to be resulting in more openness to matters of accessibility, inclusion and universal design.

My hope is that the door to environments in education and employment 'where inclusion is everyone's business' is just a little bit more open now than it was prior to the crisis. **AHEAD will endeavour to support the sector in walking through it.**



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.

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