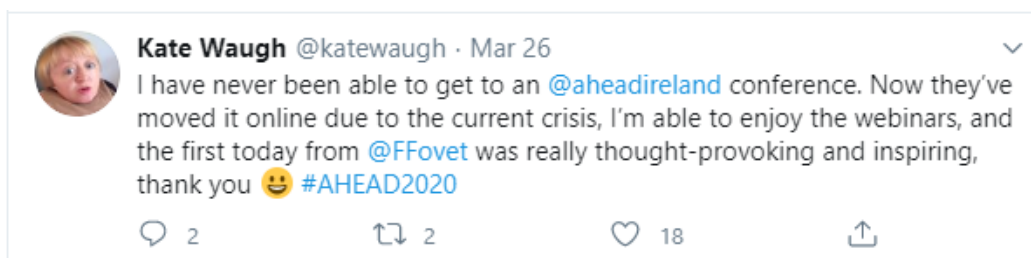

Some surprising findings from the AHEAD Online Conference during a pandemic

This year, The AHEAD Conference stepped through the looking glass into a new reality as the COVID-19 pandemic meant a sudden change of course for this event. The conference, which was originally set to take place in Croke Park, Dublin at the end of March for two days, was transformed into an online series of webinars which would stretch across 10 weeks while we were all confined to our homes. This new approach allowed us to reflect on inclusion from a new remote perspective and meet a few new friends along the way. This article will look back at the 10 week AHEAD Conference Series and reveal some findings which we had not expected, and were pleasantly surprised by, when taking the conference online.

How online enabled access in ways which we had never considered before

The AHEAD Conference is one of the biggest UDL focussed conferences in Europe and is constantly developing to engage a wider audience of educators, students, policy-makers and other key stakeholders across the globe every year. This year, in this new online format, AHEAD engaged with over 1,200 people across 16 different countries including participants from Australia, Canada, Chile, South Africa, India and Poland.

The webinar format helped to reduce one additional access barrier by hosting the event online. Participants from around the world who, for a range of reasons, may not have been able to travel the distance to attend the physical event, were now engaging and joining a large conversation during our conference every week. Colleagues from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives attended, resulting in a rich discussion on inclusive education allowing us to get an insight into the global scale of some key issues at the moment.



Finding tools to reduce the barriers - Frederic Fovet (Royal Roads University)

Throughout the Conference we were enabled to find the tools our keynote speaker, Frederic Fovet (Royal Road University) encouraged us to seek. As our first presenter, Fovet highlighted how the disability services in higher education are now at a tipping point. Fovet played the oracle as he foretold of a dystopic future of ever increasing demand for accessible services and funding in tension with the development of inclusive learning (UDL) practice. He presented an alternative utopian future for supporting students with disabilities in higher education through developing faculty resources and working with students, reframing the concept of 'disability' and the image of disability services. He emphasised the need to repeat staff training regularly and to keep the language accessible.

Depending on the approach we chose regarding support for students with a range of learning differences, it was

important to identify leaders of change and identify tools which would embed inclusion across campus in line with UDL (Universal Design for Learning) and remove barriers in the interface between the institution and students. In solving these tensions for the future within institutions Frederic advised

'Make sure you are at the table!'

This shift in thinking was prevalent throughout the series as other presenters shared some of the progressive research and practices to embed inclusion across campus in further and higher education happening across disciplines, sectors and states.

'We are all part of the solution' (Patricia McCarthy, Trinity College Dublin)

This began in week 2 of the series, where the finalists of The John Kelly Award for Universal Design for Teaching and Learning stirred great debate when they showcased the impact of the changes they made in their teaching to embed inclusion when designing their programmes. The finalists were Catherine Deegan from The Technical University Dublin, Laura Hegarty from Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and the eventual winner Jennifer Lynch from Marino Institute of Further Education. Jennifer spoke about the importance of removing any barriers to give students equal opportunities to succeed, quoting how '**we all think differently so why should we learn the same way**'.

Sharron Sturgess from The University of Leicester spoke about how '**common sense is not always common practice**' in her study on the experiences of autistic undergraduate students. As part of the Good Practice Principles Sharron developed, she emphasised the importance of strengthening the relationship between the teaching and disability service staff on campus to provide a more inclusive educational experience.

In consideration of inclusive practice being embedded institutionally, Maureen Haran (IT Sligo) warned against UDL stagnation, where staff can think of inclusive practice as a once-off exercise. Maureen detailed part of the inclusive path which Sligo IT has been on involved The Digital Badge on UDL for Teaching and Learning and The UCD Inclusive Audit Tool, which were also covered in week 2 and week 4 of the webinar series. Maureen explained how institutions can overcome UDL stagnation by having a UDL plan and taking teaching staff on a journey which is focussed on building an inclusive culture. Mary Quirke contextualised this need for conscious and consistent focus on inclusion by all staff wonderfully when she compared it to the need to wash your hands during the COVID-19 lockdown; "Inclusion and appreciating inclusion has to be everybody's business...it's a little bit like the COVID handwashing...it's not just good enough that one or two might do it, we all have to do it...we have to keep doing it with intent". These are just some of the key tools and techniques covered over during the conference can help make the utopian vision of change Frederic predicted for the disability service more of a reality.

Remote learning and ongoing stigma presents a host of challenges for students with disabilities

Every year AHEAD looks to engage students more meaningfully as part of the conference and this year was no different with a great range of student presenters, panellists and even artists helped to give a voice to some of the

key barriers and concerns for students with disabilities in third level at the moment.

The AHEAD Student Art Exhibition was a collection of both images and text by students with disabilities in third level in Ireland reflecting on their experiences of education. The exhibition provided great discussion at the AHEAD Evening Reception where the magnetic tour guides Vivian Rath (Trinity College Dublin) and Dr Marian McCarthy (an affiliate of University College Cork) brought us on an interesting narrative through the thought provoking submissions by students which covered identity, freedom and support. It also evoked important questions for the future of education as one submission put it **'I want to experience University that is designed from the ground up with people of all abilities and backgrounds in mind'**, highlighting the barriers still felt at this time and a shared goal to co-create an environment fit for all.



Figure 1 Image from The AHEAD Student Exhibition

One such barrier which was covered during the conference series was the impact of stigma on students with disabilities. On week 6 of the conference, Aoife McNichol (Dublin City University) explained how stigma was one of the main barriers identified in her research on the use of assistive technology by students with disabilities in higher

education in Ireland. Aoife also pointed out that students who were not using their recommended assistive technology appeared to be less engaged in their learning, which highlights the detrimental effect stigma can on students and raises questions about how we might be reinforcing stigma on campus.

Concern around disclosure also was raised within two international studies on student mobility being carried out at the moment, one by a European student group (ESN, week 3) and the other an inclusive policy organisation (SIHO, week 10). Both highlighted how a lack of information on disability supports as part of the study abroad programme appeared to be a contributing factor for the low representation of students with disabilities studying abroad to date. This is an example of how systemic policies and procedures in higher education which do not consider the needs of students with disabilities, inherently create barriers to their participation and learning.

The hardest part for me was actually entering into the disability office and saying...I actually have one, that was the hardest part...' (Christina Myles, Dublin City University)

The issue of stigma was raised again on week 8 of the conference during the student panel regarding invisible disabilities, as the students discussed their own experiences in disclosing their disability, the issues with working from home and how impactful student activism has been for them. We learnt about how the sudden change to remote learning meant that some students are having to advocate more to get access to the learning materials. For example, their home set up provided challenges that their teachers had not considered and assistive technology was not always available. Their input spotlighted the importance of inclusive design across campus and remotely as the panellists asked for understanding and training for faculty in order to ensure that no student is left behind.

The student inputs at the conference spoke to a larger theme; the need to invite and support students with disabilities to be part of the decision making process in relation to how we model our education system in a more authentic way and to build a more campus-wide inclusive culture, and remotely, where students may not need to disclose or if they do that their educators are open to their students' perspectives. As the most critical partner in the education system, students are a key part of unlocking the solution of a more inclusive system in future.

'...whether it's access or inclusion, it's about stigma...if you don't open that door nothing is going to change" (Vicky Matthews, Sligo IT)

Uncertainty is a learning gift, one which we can come together to resolve

During week 1 our second keynote, social theorist Dr Etienne Wenger-Trayner explored the importance of coming together during these uncertain times in a learning network or community of practice. Etienne highlighted how the main motivation to establish a network is that those involved '**care to make a difference**'. If there is any uncertainty about something or how to approach an issue then this is a 'learning gift' which you can offer to the group, where everyone can engage with it from their own knowledge to help build a shared knowledge of support going forward. Over the weeks, there were a range of exemplar learning networks that shared insights about their experiences from both further and higher education. During week 4 we heard about the local student networks in

the University of Kentucky and how these students' networks were helping to inform their teachers as partners in their learning process. In Week 9 Liz Moynihan from Kinsale College explained how their college created a remote network in light of the COVID-19 lockdown involving students, teachers and PAs to maximise student engagement and wellbeing.

While on a more regional level we learnt about the established Active Inclusion Network (AIN) in Cork and the Professional Learning Network (PLN) in Dublin during week 7 of the series. Carrie Archer (CDET B) from the PLN spoke about the significance of being part of a network has had on her development; **'being part of a network of other teachers has made us question everything we're doing'**. Then in week 6, Dr Marian McCarthy and Dr Brian Butler (University College Cork) spoke about the establishment of communities of practice at their university and the impact it has had for educators in promoting a positive inclusive culture.

Then at a global level, Dr Sean Bracken (University of Worcester) spoke about INCLUDE an international network of researchers and inclusion activists collaborating on universal design in Higher Education 'sharing insights in a diversity of settings both cultural, geographic and linguistic...thinking about its [UDL] application more widely in the world' (week 4).

In conclusion: coming together

All presenters spoke about finding strength and support through a commonality shared as educators and students that helped bind them as a community in their respective networks. Their work inspired great discussion and questions during the sessions from participants as we collectively discussed and shared remotely all our own challenges and concerns for how this might work in the future in the chatbox and on Twitter (our own conference network). If we could harness Etienne's advice by coming together in light of what is uncertain to us, we could share our knowledge and learn collectively to rebuild a stronger more robust education system for all students and staff involved. This may seem slightly overwhelming but as was said many times over the course of the conference, all it takes just one first step, to reflect on our practice to see if there is anything we can change either alone or, preferable, together, as our oracle Fovet mentioned at the start of the conference, **'change needs to be supported to happen'**.

If someone had told me four months ago that we would have to totally rethink the conference including producing a new schedule, present it through a different medium, with all the key features of the conference originally planned and still remain inclusive I would not have believed it - but we took that first step together as a team and now there's no going back from here as we progress to challenge the boundaries of possibility of what we can achieve.

'I knew who I was this morning, but I've changed a few times since then.' (Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass)

For further information, [videos from the conference session](#) are available.



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