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AHEAD
Strategic Plan
2024 /28



AHEAD Strategic Plan 2024 /28

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With Thanks

AHEAD would like to thank our major funders for their continued support and collaboration during the previous strategic plan period – SOLAS, the Higher Education Authority, and the Department of Social Protection. We look forward to continuing our support for the tertiary education and employment sectors in collaboration with them.

We would like to express our gratitude to all of the stakeholders who generously gave their time and energy to support the development of this strategy through a range of consultation methods.

Lastly, AHEAD would like to express our gratitude to the staff and board of AHEAD for their immense contribution to both the delivery of the last strategic plan, and the development of our new plan to 2028.

A Note on Language and Terminology in the Strategy

In this strategy the terms “persons with disabilities” and “disabled people” are used interchangeably.

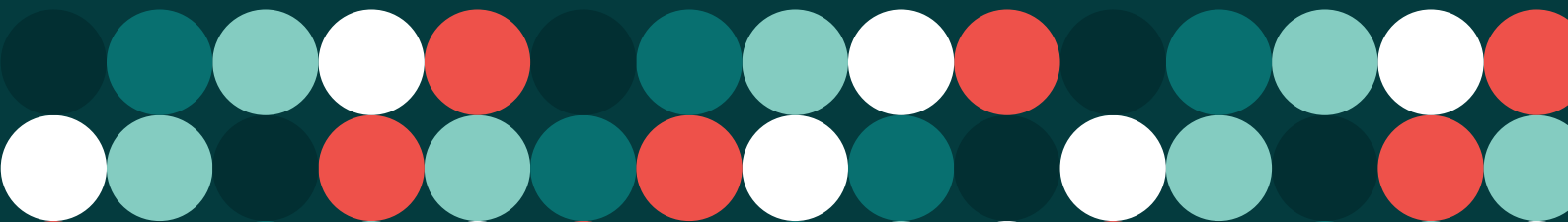
AHEAD recognises that different terminology is prevalent and culturally dominant in different domains and respects the right of individuals and communities to self-determine. The term ‘disabled people’ is recognised by many within the disability rights movement in Europe to align with the social and human rights model of disability, as it is considered to impute that people with an impairment are disabled by barriers in the environment and society. However, we also recognise that others prefer the term “persons with disabilities” to impute that they are first and foremost human beings entitled to human rights. This reflects the language used in the UNCRPD. Finally, we recognise that some people do not identify as being disabled. The interchanging language is intended to be inclusive and respectful of all.

It is also important to highlight that when the term ‘tertiary education’ is used in this strategy, it refers to all levels of further education and training (FET) and higher education (HE), and the institutions and agencies that deliver it.

Lastly, since the term ‘learners’ is more culturally prevalent in FET and ‘students’ more prominent in HE, these terms are used interchangeably throughout to be respectful and inclusive of all our stakeholders. When we use these terms, we refer to all enrolled in FET, undergraduate or postgraduate programmes.

Our History

AHEAD was formed in 1988 by university students with disabilities to connect with peers and advocate for change. Over time, the organisation became an independent NGO and expanded to work on the inclusion of disabled people across tertiary education and support the transition to employment.



Our Mission

AHEAD works with and for disabled people to shape inclusive and empowering environments in tertiary education and employment.

Our Vision

An equitable society where people with disabilities have the power and opportunity to flourish through education and employment.



AHEAD's Evolving Strategic Direction

Context

Huge progress has been made in increasing access to tertiary education in recent decades, evidenced by steadily rising numbers of disabled students enrolling. AHEAD, alongside stakeholders across the tertiary sector, has played a crucial role in facilitating that increase, and ensuring disabled students get greater access to the educational opportunities they deserve. However, it remains evident that more progress is needed to fully realise the rights of disabled people to equitably participate in all facets of the learning experience – both within and beyond the classroom.

While there is much evidence of growing employer engagement in the equality, diversity and inclusion agenda, the employment rates of disabled people in Ireland remain amongst the lowest in Europe. Employers often cite a willingness to make progress, but lack the organisational know-how to be more inclusive at a cultural and strategic level.

The fallout from Covid-19 and the remote/hybrid practices which emerged during it, and the arrival of generative AI, mean the environment within which this strategy is launched, is filled with both uncertainty and opportunity. From a policy perspective, the implementation and renewal of key policies in tertiary education and employment offers significant opportunities for AHEAD to further its mission, for example the opportunity to:

- Influence and contribute to the development of the next SOLAS FET Strategy, due for consultation in 2024 and launch in 2025, and opportunity to support the FET sector in its delivery, improving access and inclusion for FET learners with disabilities.

- Continue to support implementation of the HEA National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education running also to 2028, ensuring the inclusion of disabled students and the application of universal design remains a strong focus in delivery.

- Influence and contribute to the development of the next Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities, due for consultation in 2024 and launch in 2025, and opportunity to support the state and employers in its delivery, improving employment opportunities and experiences for disabled graduates.

- Hold the state and other relevant stakeholders to account in the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD), in particular concerning articles 24 (Education) and 27 (Work and Employment). Support the state in working towards the achievement on the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Progress Over the Last Strategic Plan

In the last AHEAD strategic plan, we began to widen our focus in education from 'access' to 'experience'. This was articulated in the plan by a focus on how we can transform the teaching and learning practice of tertiary institutions to provide more equitable and meaningful engagement of disabled people through a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach to learning design. The plan also featured a strong focus on building networks of employers and educators and collaborating with stakeholders to develop inclusive employment and education practice.

A review of AHEAD's impact conducted both internally and with stakeholders in developing this strategy, highlights AHEAD's significant influence in embedding both universal design for learning (UDL) and the rights/inclusion of disabled people in national tertiary education and employment policy, and in facilitating inclusive practice on the ground during the period.

Key achievements among many during the last strategic plan period (2019–23) include:

RESEARCH AND POLICY

Developing almost 50 policy submissions, and significantly inputting to national policy groups, particularly in tertiary education – leading to key new policy developments. Delivering more than 10 national research projects.

GRADUATE OPPORTUNITIES

Placing more than 250 graduates with disabilities in paid, mentored 'WAM' work placements, with 80% of graduates securing employment post-placement as a direct result of their WAM experience.

PROMOTING UDL

Supporting 3,000+ FET and HE educators to upskill in UDL practice through a 10-week programme delivered in partnership with UCD and the National Forum. Developing national UDL for FET Practitioners Guidance.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Delivering more than 200 individual tailored training sessions to employers and educational institutions on topics in inclusive practice. Developing the ARK range of short courses and hosting numerous events annually.

PERMANENCY PATHWAY

Working with the Public Appointments Service and the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform, to develop a pathway to permanency for WAM graduates placed.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Establishing the Students with Disabilities Advisory Group, and developing the Power of Disability disabled student conference, curated by the group, in partnership with the Union of Students in Ireland.

Evolving Strategic Direction

Stakeholders consulted during the strategic planning process have recognised the value in our work and the strong foundations we have built in recent years.

Much of this good work will continue, but this strategic plan sets out an exciting evolution in our approach – one that places the voice and experience of disabled people at the heart of its delivery. It seeks to amplify that voice, and work to place it at the strategic heart of the decision-making of policy makers, employers, and tertiary education providers.

This will be achieved through the development of structures and projects that see us bringing disabled students and graduates together, learning from their experiences, and engaging/partnering with them to inform our work and the work of other stakeholders. An increased focus on direct engagement with Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) will be evident.

We will seek to build on the very strong policy influence developed in the higher education sector, expanding our reach to engage to a greater extent with advocacy in national FET and employment policy.

We will seek to engage more with organisational leaders to make inclusive practice 'everyone's business' and put support for it on a more sustainable and strategic footing within organisations.

This will be achieved by developing important charters and frameworks in partnership with disabled people and key national stakeholders in tertiary education and employment, underpinned by literature on inclusion and the lived experience of disability. Supporting education providers and employers to adopt and implement these frameworks will be a major focus of AHEAD's resources, and specific efforts will be made to recognise and support leaders in their roles as key decision-makers in the inclusion agenda.

Widening the lens from a focus on UDL (teaching and learning) in the previous strategic plan, we will now place greater focus on raising awareness of the broader application of universal design in organisations, looking at how it can help to shape inclusive physical and digital environments, and how student and employee support services are offered. This will support the more holistic development of educational experiences and workplaces where disabled people can flourish.

We will continue to deliver on our strong track record of capacity building in inclusive practice, with a focus on further developing the ARK short course ecosystem to support role-based training in inclusive education and employment practice.

Underpinning these shifts, is a strong emphasis on facilitating collaboration with and between stakeholders to forward our mission, and to underpin our operations with a good governance approach.

An overarching strategic focus of this plan is an increased commitment to measure the impact of our work, to monitor and review the effectiveness of our implementation plan, and to ensure we achieve our objectives and serve our stakeholders, while making the most effective use of our resources.

We look forward to working with all our stakeholders to advance our mission over the coming 5 years.

Our Values

Equity & Rights



We are committed to a rights-based approach to our work, underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). We believe that disabled people should have equity of opportunity to flourish through education and employment, and we seek to better understand the impact of intersectionality on the realisation of their rights.

People & Community



We are committed to bringing the stakeholders we serve together to form more collective and strategic responses to the challenges they face. We hold a strong belief in the power of community and the sharing of ideas and recognise that part of our role is to facilitate this.

Collaboration & Trust



We are committed to building strong relationships with our stakeholders and collaborating with them as appropriate to advance our mission. We seek to build trust with them by being reliable, supportive, and constructive partners.

Creativity & Innovation



We pride ourselves on being creative and developing new models and new approaches to advance our objectives and increase our impact. This means that we also accept that not every new approach we try will work out and see occasional failure as a natural part of getting better at what we do.

Adaptability & Responsiveness



We are committed to responding nimbly to the evolving needs of disabled students and graduates in a dynamic and ever-changing world, and supporting stakeholders with the emerging challenges they face. That means we are prepared to change our plans and shift our resources to adapt to changing circumstances in line with our strategic objectives.

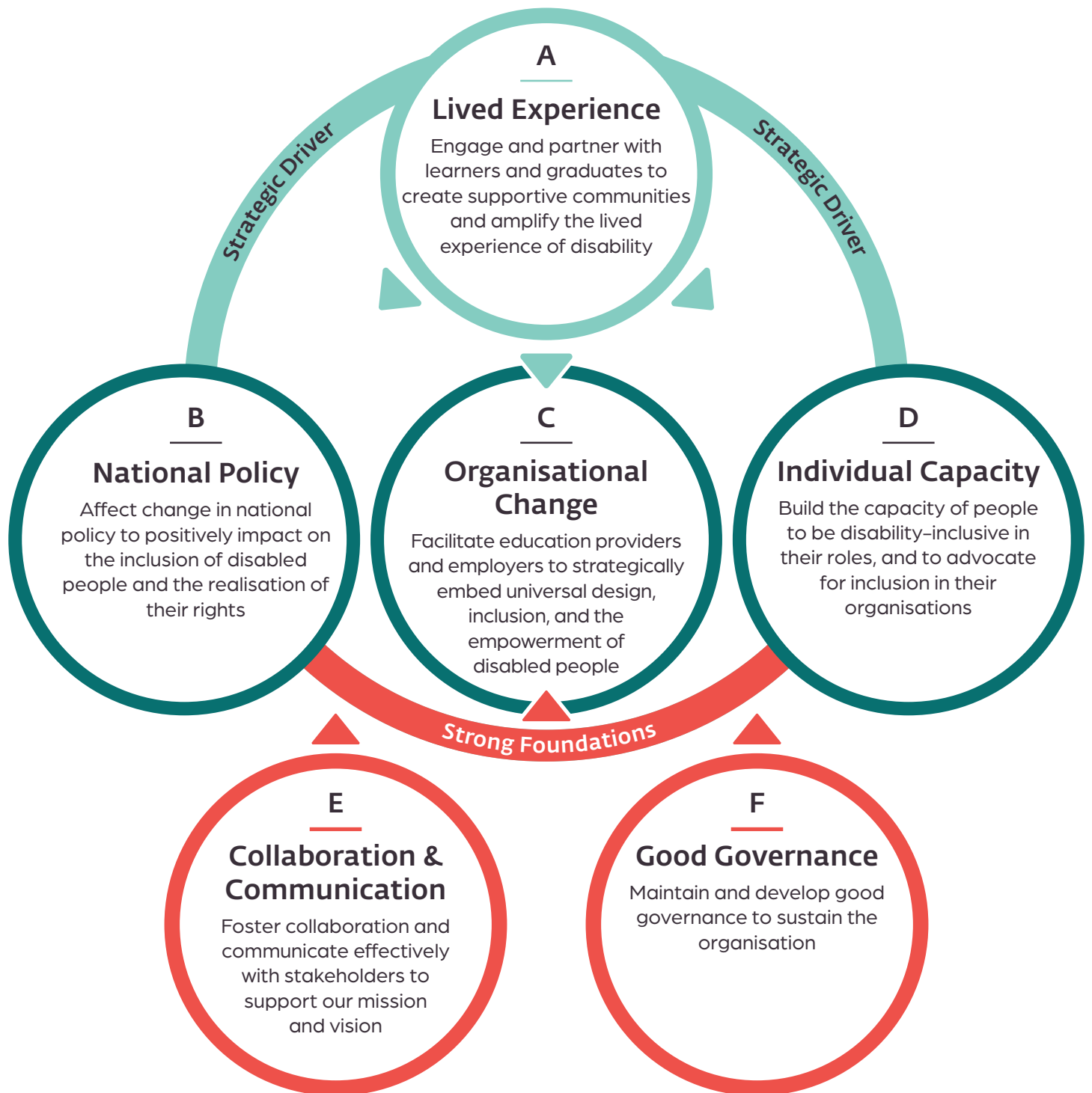
Accountability & Integrity



We are committed to transparency in the work that we do, and to upholding high ethical standards across the organisation. We seek to develop strong governance to ensure our resources are used effectively and responsibly to advance our mission.

Strategic Objectives

In further education and training, higher education, and employment, AHEAD aims to....



The lived experience objective (A) is the strategic driver of how we influence national policy change (B), organisational change (C), and support individual capacity building (D). Our effective collaboration and communication with stakeholders (E), and our commitment to good governance (F), provide strong foundations for success.



Engage and partner with learners and graduates to create supportive communities and amplify the lived experience of disability

Strategic Actions

In further education and training, higher education, and employment, AHEAD will undertake the following Strategic Actions 2024–28 under Objective A:

1. Work in partnership with students and graduates to advocate for AHEAD's mission and promote the work of AHEAD.
2. Develop the capability of the Students with Disabilities Advisory Group to capture the lived experience of disability and embed it more concretely in AHEAD's work.
3. Establish a Disabled Graduates Advisory Group to support peer to peer mentoring and embed the lived experience of disabled graduates in AHEAD's work.
4. Seek to partner with the National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee to understand issues pertaining to under-representation and collectively advocate for change.
5. Maintain the AHEAD information line to empower disabled people with information and advice, supporting them to navigate systems and advocate for themselves.
6. Continue to build on the success of events such as the Power of Disability conference to foster community and promote belonging among students and graduates.

Indicators of success by 2028

- Lived experience of disability embedded in all levels of AHEAD and all facets of our work.
- Supportive communities developed to promote a sense of belonging in college and work among disabled learners, graduates, and postgraduates.
- Structures and mechanisms developed to support disabled people to advocate for positive change in tertiary education and employment.



Affect change in national policy to positively impact on the inclusion of disabled people and the realisation of their rights

Strategic Actions

In further education and training, higher education, and employment, AHEAD will undertake the following Strategic Actions 2024–28 under Objective B:

1. Expand AHEAD input to national policy groups, with a focus on increasing AHEAD representation on FET and employment focused groups.
2. Identify key policy developments required to shape inclusive and empowering environments in tertiary education and employment, and proactively engage with key stakeholders to advocate for change.
3. Develop policy submissions to state agencies, with a focus on increased policy activity in FET and employment.
4. Conduct and disseminate targeted research with disabled people, tertiary education staff and employers to better understand barriers and enablers in education and employment.
5. Evaluate and communicate the impact of our research and policy work in tertiary education and employment.

Indicators of success by 2028

- AHEAD has contributed to positive changes in national policy benefiting students, graduates, and postgraduates with disabilities through advocacy and research.
- AHEAD is well represented on national policy groups across tertiary education and employment.



Facilitate education providers and employers to strategically embed universal design, inclusion, and the empowerment of disabled people

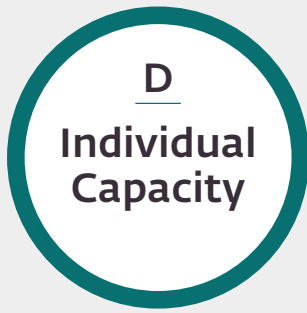
Strategic Actions

In further education and training, higher education, and employment, AHEAD will undertake the following Strategic Actions 2024–28 under Objective C:

1. Develop and disseminate an Inclusive Employer Framework to support employers to strategically embed inclusive practice in their organisations.
2. Facilitate clear pathways for WAM employers to become more self-sufficient through engagement with the Inclusive Employer Framework.
3. Develop and promote tools and guidance to support organisations to systematically embed inclusive practice.
4. Maintain existing levels of WAM placement provision with a focus on widening the geographic spread of available placements.
5. Support development of a National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education.
6. Advocate for and support ETBs and HEIs to adopt and implement the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education.

Indicators of success by 2028

- Inclusive Employer Framework developed, and a range of large employers actively engaged with its implementation.
- National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education developed and adopted by the majority of ETBs and HEIs.
- Greater numbers of WAM placements advertised outside of the Dublin area.
- Organisations supported by AHEAD to develop systems, policies and practices that promote the inclusion of disabled people.



Build the capacity of people to be disability-inclusive in their roles, and to advocate for inclusion in their organisations

Strategic Actions

In further education and training, higher education, and employment, AHEAD will undertake the following Strategic Actions 2024–28 under Objective D:

1. Promote and further develop the ARK short course offerings, expanding the range of offerings to support inclusive practice and leadership in tertiary education and employment.
2. Further develop and promote resources to empower individuals to be disability-inclusive and advocate for inclusion, with a focus on increasing engagement with senior leaders.
3. Promote and create resources for students, graduates, and student organisations to support inclusion and self-advocacy.
4. Further develop processes to ensure good practice and leadership in inclusion is recognised and valued.
5. Continue to deliver successful national training programmes and evaluate their impact.
6. Establish an Employer Network to share good practice on disability inclusion.

Indicators of success by 2028

- Processes for recognising good practice and leadership in inclusion established and valued.
- Range of training opportunities in inclusive practice expanded, and existing provision enhanced.
- Guidance to support individual practice further developed and promoted.



Foster collaboration and communicate effectively with stakeholders to support our mission and vision

Strategic Actions

Strategic Actions 2024–28 under Objective E:

1. Redevelop AHEAD’s Web presence to enhance ease of navigation and use for our stakeholders.
2. Develop and implement a new Communications Strategy to increase awareness of the functions and value of AHEAD and communicate our successes.
3. Strengthen communications links with our stakeholders to promote widespread dissemination of AHEAD resources/projects inside their organisation.
4. Foster collaborations with and between AHEAD’s current and future stakeholders to support our mission and vision.
5. Review and update the membership model of AHEAD.

Indicators of success by 2028

- AHEAD more widely known by students, graduates, and postgraduates and highly valued by our stakeholders.
- Enhanced engagement with AHEAD’s information and resources.
- AHEAD has fostered strong collaboration with and between stakeholders.



Maintain and develop good governance to sustain the organisation

Strategic Actions

Strategic Actions 2024–28 under Objective F:

1. Actively engage AHEAD staff in the maintenance of good governance.
2. Develop governance structures to promote greater representation of disabled people on the Board of AHEAD.
3. Further develop AHEAD's IT infrastructure to improve data management, stakeholder engagement and retention of organisational knowledge.
4. Maintain strong financial management and sustainability measures and ensure accountability to donor organisations.
5. Commission an independent governance audit and implement the recommendations as appropriate.
6. Explore ways to support career progression and staff retention within the organisation.

Indicators of success by 2028

- Organisational knowledge and data management capability developed and improved.
- Good governance systems and practices maintained and further developed.
- Increased engagement of disabled people on and with the AHEAD board.

How this Strategy was Developed



Strategic Oversight

Scoping exercise conducted with the AHEAD board in Oct 2022 to develop a tender. Strategy Working Group featuring senior staff and board members established to oversee a year-long development process.



Strong Foundations

Desk-based review of literature and documents conducted to better understand the impact of AHEAD, existing research in the field of education and employment, and environmental/policy factors.



Deep Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder discussion paper developed and circulated. 7 written submissions considered, and 14 workshops held with a range of disabled students and graduates, employers, FET, and HE staff, AHEAD donors and national agencies to consult on key strategic questions.



Iterative Design with Staff and Board

In-depth interviews conducted with senior staff and board members. Regular board input on strategy language and direction throughout the process, complimented by 5 design workshops with staff to facilitate meaningful input to the strategic vision they are responsible for implementing.

Implementation Process

The proposed implementation process can be summarised as follows:



Thank you

AHEAD
East Hall UCD
Carysfort Avenue
Blackrock, Co. Dublin

Tel. +353 1 592 3667
Web. www.ahead.ie

@AHEADireland

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