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AHEAD
Annual Report 2023

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2023

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AHEAD

Foreword and Summary



Professor Michael Shevlin
Chairperson of the Board of AHEAD



Dara Ryder
Chief Executive Officer

2023 was a fantastic year for AHEAD, and the progress outlined in this report is a testament to the dedication of the small but committed AHEAD team.

We are forever grateful to them and to the Board of AHEAD for their hard work, resourcefulness, and imagination in continuing to grow the organisation and make progress on our mission. We have welcomed several new members of staff to the team this year, each bringing fresh perspectives. New staff have quickly become part of the AHEAD community and are already making significant contributions to our work.

The nomination of new members to the Board has also added fresh ideas and oversight to the organisation.

In 2023, AHEAD worked with numerous employers to provide paid and mentored WAM placements for graduates with disabilities, and these employers showed significant engagement in the WAM Programmes employer events. The team were also very proud to begin work on the development of a national Inclusive Employer Framework, a project which is expected to run until 2025.

The second hybrid Building the Future Careers Fair for graduates with disabilities, delivered by GetAHEAD, brought students and graduates together with employers who provided opportunities to network, apply for positions, and undertake a range of capacity building opportunities (e.g., mock interviews, CV clinics and job-skills seminars).

In another strong year of participation in the 10-week 'AHEAD/UCD Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Badge', 2023 saw 856 completions nationally, with a further 90 badges awarded to participants in a pilot roll-out of the new AHEAD/UCD Universal Design (UD) 'Beyond the Classroom' badge. Following the successful pilot, this new 10-week badge aimed at professionals in non-classroom-based roles, will be offered more widely in 2024. Our evaluations of these programmes evidence the very significant impact of the badge on the educators who participate and the inclusive practice it supports them to implement.

Building on our multi-year development of the Accessibility Resources and Know-how (ARK) short course platform, 2023 saw a staggering 160% year-on-year increase in digital badges awarded for completions through the platform, and a new awareness course titled 'Disability 101' developed and released. The response to this relatively new resource has been hugely positive, and engagement with the short courses available is expected to rise further in future years.

Our success in community building with students with disabilities, and the continued development of the Students with Disabilities Advisory Group as a key influencer in our output is a source of much pride. We focused significant energy in 2023 on how we are using the voice of this community to steer our growing input to the national policy debate. The Power of Disability conference, curated by the advisory group and attended by over 300 students with disabilities, was a highlight of the year and raised many issues for consideration.

We are also proud of the significant research and policy output delivered by AHEAD in 2023. This includes the development of 15 policy submissions, the implementation of scoping research on the provision of reasonable accommodations in FET, and the publication of new research on the experiences of disabled students as they returned to education in the aftermath of COVID-19 lockdowns. The team also influenced policy through significant contributions to a broad range of policy steering groups, on which AHEAD now sit, across tertiary education and employment.

Our concerted effort to influence and advocate for the inclusion of students with disabilities in all levels of education and the central importance of a universal design approach, was recognised in the newly published 'National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance', and AHEAD have since been invited to sit on an advisory group to oversee the implementation of the framework.

AHEAD has played an important role as a Lead Collaborator in a cross-sectoral project to develop **ALTITUDE** – the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education. Following its expected launch in March 2024, this Charter is set to have a significant impact, with participating institutions encouraged to take actions to embed a UD approach more firmly across all areas, including strategies, policies, and practices of the institution over time.

We have also continued to deliver extensive customised training for the National Forum for the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education and hosted a number of key events for the education and employment sector. These events were designed to equip employers and Further and Higher Education staff with the knowledge and tools they need to be inclusive and provide quality tailored supports for students and graduates with disabilities. All this is just the tip of the iceberg of the work delivered in 2023.

This work is enabled, strengthened, and enhanced by strong partnerships and informal collaborations with important stakeholders such as our employer networks, the Irish Universities Association, the Technological Higher Education Association, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, and Education and Training Boards Ireland.

We also developed a range of new policies for the organisation and reported full compliance with The Charities Code of Governance in 2023 – a Code of Practice for Good Governance in the Charities Sector.

This report provides evidence of the huge impact that AHEAD is having in education and employment, and the vast and varied body of work we achieved in education and employment in 2023. Both the Board and operational team of AHEAD are proud to showcase our expansive achievements in this report.

AHEAD'S YEAR IN NUMBERS 2023 ACROSS THE ORGANISATION

Below are a collection of key facts and figures relating to AHEAD's 2023 activities across both education and employment:



46

staff from Further and Higher Education participated in our 8-week AHEAD Start training programme on disability supports and needs assessments

73,929

video views on YouTube channel in 2023

2,954

participants across 18 in-person and online AHEAD events in education and employment with many more watching recorded video content later

70

new videos added to AHEAD's YouTube channel in 2023

1,882

individuals benefited from the 85 direct training sessions delivered by the AHEAD team

252

graduate interviews organised & supported for graduates through WAM

15

policy submissions developed and submitted by our Research and Policy Team on a range of inclusive education and employment issues

7

new AHEAD publications/ research reports published



53

new graduate placements supported through WAM, our paid, mentored work placement programme

1

new self-directed online short course on disability awareness launched through our ARK platform

946

digital badges awarded in total across the sector as part of national and local roll-outs of the UDL Badge and the new UD Beyond the Classroom Badge, of which 633 were awarded directly by AHEAD and UCD as part of the national roll-out

OUR MISSION*

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

*AHEAD Strategic Plan 2019-2023

OUR VISION*

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

*AHEAD Strategic Plan 2019-2023

CORE STRATEGIC THEMES*

In 2019-2023, AHEAD sought to achieve its vision by pursuing the following strategic themes:

Theme A To influence national policy to impact positively on the inclusion of learners and students with disabilities in all learning environments.

Theme B To sustain the organisation of AHEAD to promote inclusion in education and employment through the building of networks and collaboration with key strategic partners in all learning environments.

Theme C To promote the principles of universal design for learning (UDL) by creating an understanding of UDL in all learning environments.

*AHEAD Strategic Plan 2019-2023

Theme A – National Policy

**To influence national policy
to impact positively on the
inclusion of learners and
students with disabilities in
all learning environments.**

The following section outlines key strategic education activities undertaken during the year relating to Theme A of our Strategic Plan 2019-2023.

SUPPORTING DEVELOPMENT OF ALTITUDE - THE NATIONAL CHARTER FOR UNIVERSAL DESIGN IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

In 2024, AHEAD contributed significantly as a Lead Collaborator in a project aimed at developing ALTITUDE – the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education.



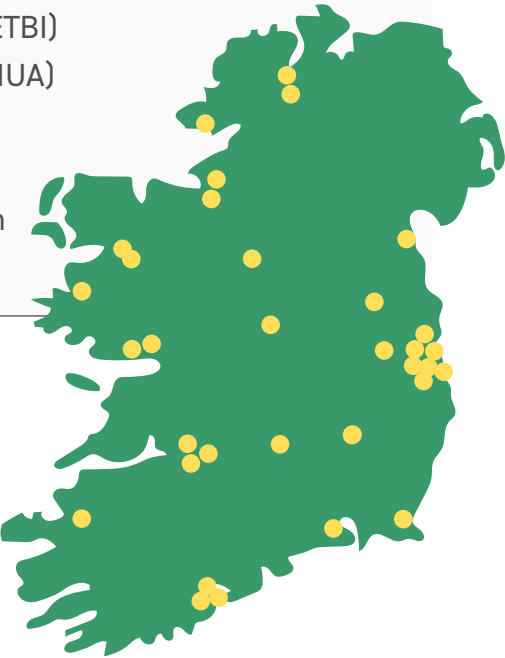
ALTITUDE

**THE NATIONAL CHARTER FOR UNIVERSAL
DESIGN IN TERTIARY EDUCATION**

The ALTITUDE Charter builds on significant existing work on universal design in tertiary education in the Irish landscape, providing a clear roadmap for tertiary institutions to make sustainable progress towards systemically embedding a universal design approach.

Funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) under PATH 4, the project brings together a broad range of national and institutional partners and collaborators from the tertiary education sector to advance this work. The project is led by Atlantic Technological University (ATU), with Munster Technological University (MTU), University College Dublin (UCD) and University of Galway (UoG) as official higher education (HE) partners. But powering the work of the project is an extraordinary 27-strong cross-sectoral partnership of national bodies, higher education institutions and education and training boards.

Who is involved?	Project Partners And Collaborators	
National Collaborators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – AHEAD (Lead Collab) – Education & Training Boards (ETBI) – Irish Universities Association (IUA) – National Tertiary Office – SOLAS – Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) 	
Regional Collaborators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li style="width: 50%;">– CETB <li style="width: 50%;">– MIC <li style="width: 50%;">– CDETB <li style="width: 50%;">– MSLETB <li style="width: 50%;">– DCU <li style="width: 50%;">– SETU <li style="width: 50%;">– Donegal ETB <li style="width: 50%;">– TCD <li style="width: 50%;">– Hibernia College <li style="width: 50%;">– Tipperary ETB <li style="width: 50%;">– IADT <li style="width: 50%;">– TUB <li style="width: 50%;">– LMETB <li style="width: 50%;">– TUS <li style="width: 50%;">– MU <li style="width: 50%;">– UCC <li style="width: 50%;">– UL 	
Official HE Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ATU (Lead) – MTU (Partner) – UCD (Partner) – UoG (Partner) 	



ALTITUDE project partners and collaborators

27



**cross-sectoral partnership
of national bodies, higher
education institutions and
education and training boards
powering the ALTITUDE project**

The ALTITUDE Charter was built upon both international literature concerning universal design in educational contexts and widespread consultation with staff and learners in Irish tertiary education.

Key elements of the consultation process included:

- **Phase One:** Internal consultation with the 50+ member National UD Charter group with practitioners and UD experts from FET and higher education (January 2023). This consultation informed the structure and key aims of Phase two.
- **Phase Two:** A 2-day national consultation event built into the AHEAD Conference featuring 199 students and professionals from FET and HE, utilising a Dialogues methodology to collectively identify challenges and solutions to UD implementation under the four pillars.¹ Following phase 1 and 2, an early draft of the Charter was developed to inform the next phase of consultation.
- **Phase Three:** 18 focus group staff consultations facilitated locally in ETBs and HEIs around the country by project team members, providing direct feedback on the draft Charter by a further 191 staff members in roles spanning the four pillars (May-July 2023).
- **Phase Four:** 11 learner focus groups and 1,219 learner survey responses providing direct input from FET and HE students on what would make their experience more inclusive and accessible under each pillar (October 2023-January 2024). A backwards design process was used to update the actions in the Charter and underpinning toolkit, ensuring learner priorities were addressed. This led to the final draft of the ALTITUDE Charter.
- **Phase Five:** Dialogue with key national stakeholders to disseminate the Charter project, get feedback on its development, and build buy-in for its implementation (October 2023-March 2024).

1 Ryder & Duffy, 2022. <https://www.ahead.ie/journal/Universal-Design-All-Things-to-All-People-Creating-Collective-Agency-through-Stakeholder-Dialogue>

At each phase, the project team analysed the data returning from consultation exercises and incorporated key themes emerging in the development of the next draft of the Charter and associated toolkit.

Drawing from the literature, the Charter recommends key strategic foundations and scaffolding which institutions should put in place to support sustainable implementation of UD across the learner experience and proposes collaborative action under 4 key pillars.



The Charter will be launched at the AHEAD Conference in March 2024, and will aim to initiate national and institutional conversations about how to utilise it to further embed a UD approach in Irish tertiary education institutions.

How this Charter Can help Institutions

Adopting the Charter will:

- **Provide a vehicle for your institution to declare its intent** to make incremental and sustainable progress towards embedding a universal design approach, in line with its resources, culture and strategy.
- **Promote the development and sharing of policies, structures, and strategies** in your institution which support the sustainable implementation of a universal design approach.
- **Support a culture of shared responsibility for universal design, access and inclusion** in your institution, by promoting development of organisational structures which foster an ‘everyone’s business’ approach to inclusion.

- **Develop a more unified language of, and commitment to a universal design approach** in your institution and across the tertiary sector, fostering greater opportunities for partnership, collaboration, and shared learning.
- **Support your institution to comply with Irish law and work towards goals in a range of key national and international strategies** concerning universal design, accessibility, student success, sustainability, and inclusion.

What Will it mean for Institutions to Adopt the Charter?

Adopting the Charter will be a declaration of positive intent to make incremental and sustainable progress towards embedding a UD approach in the systems and practices of the institution.

The Charter recognises that different institutions are at different stages of UD adoption, and have differing levels of available resources. It encourages institutions to make steady progress in line with their strategy, culture, and values.

It will commit institutions to developing or adapting an implementation structure which plans and oversees incremental and sustainable progress in systemic implementation of UD across the 4 pillars, in line with the actions contained in the Charter.

A toolkit is currently being developed to support the practical implementation of the Charter. This toolkit will build on the existing Toolkit for Inclusive Higher Education Institutions,² with updates made to broaden its focus to include all levels of tertiary education. The toolkit will provide practical guidance and tools for self-assessment, aligned with relevant, evidence-based frameworks, standards, and resources.

Learn more about the [Charter Project](#)

Read a [journal article](#) on the outcomes of the large-scale Phase 2 consultation exploring barriers and enablers to universal design implementation.

2 Kelly & Padden, 2018. https://www.ucd.ie/all/t4media/0274_UCD_TOOLKIT_1118_ONLINE_LR.pdf

NUMBERS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES STUDYING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND 2021/22 (PUBLISHED 2023)

AHEAD's annual Participation Rate Research Reports are the only medically verified numbers of disabled students engaged with higher education in Ireland. Unlike the HEA's statistics on disability in HE, the data we gather is collected directly from Disability Support Staff (DSS). The Participation Rate Reports are arguably the foundation of much of our annual research output, as the findings frequently inform much of our other work. These reports record findings (primarily quantitative) that are used in academic literature and reports from other stakeholders in the sector, ultimately demonstrating the esteem in which our research is held.

The Participation Rate Research Reports record the number of students engaged with DSS every year. This enables us to make inferences about the sustainability of exam accommodations and to estimate the under- and over-representation of disabled students in various fields of study. Continuous (annual) research facilitates data comparison, including the increases and decreases elicited from repeated questions. This helps advance a credible and reliable evidence base which enables us to competently inform policy at a national and institutional level with our findings and recommendations.

The current iteration of the Participation Rate Research Report for the academic year 2021/22 was published in December 2023 by AHEAD's research and policy team. This report is informed by a more accurate methodology that includes the collation of disability data which encapsulates additional disabilities. Previous reports employed 'Primary Disability' as the sole identifier of students registered with support services, thus losing or overlooking crucial data. The research methodology was reassessed following nuanced discussion with participating DSS in order to achieve a more accurate disability breakdown of students registered with support services in their institution. Other changes to the research strategy included:

- Analysing the number and percentage of students who are not financially supported by the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).
- Apprentices registered for support services are now analysed.
- Individual exam accommodations have been updated to include a range of extra (and often new) accommodations that enable a broader examination of the process.
- The merger of Institutes of Technology to Technological Universities is now included in almost all cases. However, due to the complexities of merging data, some HEI's chose to provide separate data for different campuses.

See the full [Participation Rate Research Report](#).

Summary of Key Findings 2021 /22

A synopsis of the key findings and observations elicited from the data collected for the Participation Rate Research Report include:

- There are now 18,097 students with disabilities registered for disability support services in higher education in Ireland, representing almost 6.9% of the total student population.
- There has been a 273% rise in the number of students with disabilities registering for support in the last 13 years.
- The postgraduate participation rate is rising steadily (from 2.8% to 3%), but students with disabilities remain significantly underrepresented in postgraduate study.
- The report illustrated a significant increase in part-time study for disabled students.
- The number of students with sensory disabilities are growing at significantly slower rate than all other disability categories. This is a recurring finding of these reports.
- The participation rate of students with disabilities registered for disability support while engaging with an apprenticeship is notably lower than at undergraduate level.

- More than 1 in 10 students registered with services were not eligible for the FSD.
- The vast majority of students with disabilities (approximately 9 in every 10 students) were recommended exam accommodations as part of their needs assessment.

- The ratios of students to support staff remain stable year on year, following a long-term rising trend in ratios recording in earlier reports.

- Two thirds of institutions do not have a structured approach to evaluate the work/ impact of the disability support services, while over half do not monitor the implementation of supports approved/recommended in needs assessments and LENS Reports.

273%



**rise in the number of
students with disabilities
registering for support in
the last 13 years.**

AHEAD ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2023 – UNITY



The 'Unity: How Staff and Learner Communities Drive Inclusion in Tertiary Education' conference explored individual, institutional, national and international views on how individuals can leverage the power of community to drive equity and inclusion in the tertiary education system. The conference took place over the course of two days on March 22nd and March 23rd 2023.

The 2023 AHEAD Conference was special because it marked the return to in-person events after three fully online conferences due to the pandemic. For the first time, the conference was held hybrid meaning that the majority of sessions could be attended either online or in-person.

The conference was opened by Dr Fiona Maloney who was recently appointed director of the new National Tertiary Office, helping AHEAD to start building a relationship and also modelling the importance of tertiary collaboration for the audience.

Highlights

- 54 speakers presented at the AHEAD Conference in 2023.
- Contributions to the conference were made by individuals from 8 countries across 4 continents.

Conference Themes

- **Inclusion is Everyone's Business** – Exploring whole college/centre approaches to Universal Design and UDL .
- **Collaborative Action on Accessibility and Inclusion** – Showcasing successful collaborations or communities of practice formed between departments, institutions and services supporting inclusion (e.g., faculties and libraries, teaching and disability support, or regional HEI institutions and ETBs etc.).
- **Inclusion in Student Engagement** – removing barriers to learners with disabilities being included in student representation and student engagement activities.
- **Crossing the digital divide together** – exploring the pros and cons of hybrid learning for inclusion and models of good practice within it.
- **'Working' together** – addressing barriers to employment for students and graduates with disabilities through partnerships with business.
- **Widening the Community** – showcasing good practice in the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in tertiary education.
- **Community Exchange** – share your individual practice tips on UDL implementation, inclusive assessment, disability support, hybrid learning and more to support others in the community.

Session Formats

- Disabled Learner panels.
- Workshop sessions.
- Lightning sessions (Each presentation during the Lightning Session was six minutes, using a maximum of six slides. These rapid-fire presentations served as a great introduction to projects, resources and approaches to inclusive education design across the sector).
- Keynote sessions.
- Whole Conference Conversation sessions (further details outlined below).
- Interactive Poster Session.

View the recorded sessions [here](#).

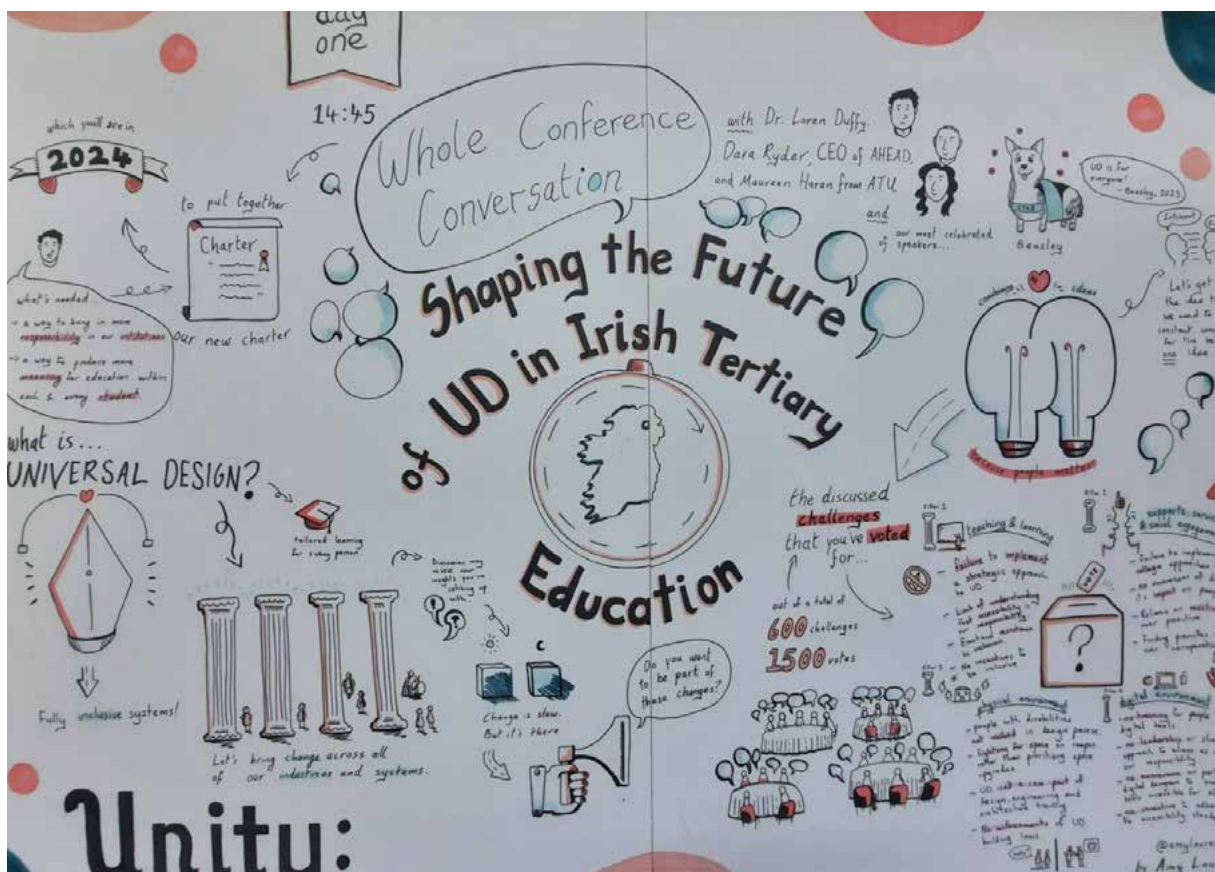
Student Voice Panels

The student panels were particularly well received by attendees as they were on such timely topics; barriers and enablers for postgraduate study and the experience of studying in tertiary education with an intellectual disability. According to our [Participation Rates research for 2020/21](#), Postgraduate students with disabilities continued to have a significantly lower participation rate across all participating institutions – just 2.8% ($n = 1,726$ students) of the total postgraduate student population was registered with the DSS. As the sector prepares to implement Path 4 projects and in particular as phase 2 will focus on programmes for students with intellectual disabilities, it was important to bring the voices of students with intellectual disabilities into the conference as they can often be overlooked in student voice discussions. Starting each day of the programme with these sessions, which had almost an exact 50/50 split between in-person and online presenters interacting with each other, embodied the truly hybrid spirit of the conference.

Whole Conference Conversation Sessions – Consultations for the National UD Charter Project

The Whole Conference Conversations were two 90-minute sessions designed in partnership with psychologist/consultant Dr Loren Duffy which brought together the in-person and online audiences to help shape the future of UD in Irish Further and Higher Education. The aim of the Whole Conference Conversations was 1) to create an interactive space for staff working within Further and Higher education to come together and explore the challenges and barriers to embedding UD in the tertiary education sector, and 2) to actively input into the development of a national charter for UD which can then best serve the sector.

Read more about the [development of these sessions and the outcomes](#) arising in the AHEAD Journal.



Reception

Registered: 200 – 129 in-person, 71 online.

Feedback

- 96% of attendees rated the overall quality of the conference excellent or good.
- 87% of attendees rated the conference sessions very useful or useful to their professional practice.

Sample comment

→ 'I thought it was brilliant. You always approach it with such innovation and yet do not just fall back to what's worked well previously, instead trying new things. I loved the variety of formats. It was such a good mix. So well thought through and well balanced. It always leads to such a good atmosphere and chances for conversation with new people etc. as well as the actual workshops and talks. Loved the way the Whole Conversation worked. The whole conference, but particularly the whole conversation, were a great lesson in UDL. It goes beyond practising what you preach and shows how to just truly embed UDL.'



SAMPLE COMMENTS



'I found the tools you used to facilitate the whole conference conversation really engaging. As an introvert it was nice feeling like my voice was being heard too!'

'The food was amazing and plentiful. The AHEAD staff were courteous and managed to be everywhere! I really felt like everyone and everything had been considered. The speakers were fantastic, the topics were really diverse (so appropriate) and I have never been at an event with a more engaged in-person and online audience. Congrats to all involved!'

AHEAD ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2024 – PANORAMA (PLANNING)



Plans for AHEAD's 2024 Conference 'Panorama: Widening the Lens for Systemic Inclusion in Tertiary Education' are well under way. The 2-day conference aims to provide a panoramic view of UD and to explore how intersectional identities inform and impact individuals' experiences of tertiary education. As UD for learning is becoming embedded in the Irish education system with many new UDL conferences popping up across the country, it is an appropriate time for the AHEAD Conference to zoom out and explore universal design as it relates to systemic change. The AHEAD Conference 2024 aims to build on our strong history of showcasing best practice in the UD and inclusion sphere.

Similarly, the AHEAD Conference plans to strengthen its reputation as a space which unifies FET and HE audiences by serving as a launching pad for the new National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education (ALTITUDE). ALTITUDE project partners have identified the AHEAD Conference 2024 as a great platform for showcasing and launching the new charter.

Altogether 28 submissions for the AHEAD 2024 conference were received. The review process has taken place, and the programme is currently being finalised.

Programme highlights

- Starting a National Conversation on Embedding Universal Design in Tertiary Education (ALTITUDE Charter)
- Exploring Generative AI Together: How can Artificial Intelligence Contribute to Student Support?
- Institutional Journeys to Embedding UD: Case Studies (UCC, MTU, Kerry ETB or WWETB)
- Beyond the Classroom: Social Engagement, Transition to Work and More (UCC, Astrum College, De Montfort)

The conference will take place in a hybrid format, both online and in-person, at the Croke Park Conference Centre in Dublin, Ireland on March 20th and 21st 2024.

REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS IN FET

AHEAD, in discussion with ETBI and SOLAS, has identified the need to conduct a programme of work to address quality and consistency of policy and practice concerning the delivery of individual reasonable accommodations in FET.

Scoping work on this project began in 2023, with conversations held in meetings of the formal ETBI/ETB/AHEAD Liaison Group, and discussions on the need for greater consistency held within the SOLAS Fostering Inclusion Advisory Group.

In Spring 2023, AHEAD and ETBI collaborated on the development and dissemination of a survey of ETB staff and college/centre leaders in FET. The aim was to determine what practices and processes are currently prevalent in the sector, and what needs to be addressed within the provision of national guidance and resources during the work planned for 2023/24. The results will provide us with a better understanding of the current practices across the sector, as well as the experience of learners with disabilities who are seeking accommodations. Additionally, it will highlight the current challenges for ETBs in delivering reasonable accommodations. The survey received 97 responses from individual colleges/centres/ETBs and AHEAD. Having completed data analysis, the team have now almost completed the writing phase.

The findings highlight that most respondents had a reasonable accommodations policy in place, with some existing pockets of good practice in the provision of reasonable accommodations, and identified a general supportive culture within FET. However, they also highlight significant areas of improvement that are required to meet the FET Strategy goal of consistent learner support in the areas of:

- Staffing and outsourced professional supports
- Training and capacity building
- Coverage of reasonable accommodation policies/procedures
- Funding of supports
- Medical evidence requirement
- Communication/visibility of available supports

AHEAD has disseminated the report to relevant agencies, and a meeting is planned between SOLAS, ETBI and AHEAD to discuss the findings that highlight system-level gaps. AHEAD with support from ETBI, has begun the process of using the outcomes of this survey, and the internal scoping report arising from it, to inform the development of outputs to support ETBs, colleges, and centres in implementing good practice in providing reasonable accommodations.

Following the completion of the report, AHEAD undertook a review of website content related to disability supports of more than 30 ETBs/colleges/centres, to identify areas of good practice in the communication of available supports. AHEAD has also reviewed the published reports of QQI ETB evaluations across Ireland to identify what issues arose in the evaluations concerning reasonable accommodations provision. The scoping report coupled with the learnings from the reviews of websites and ETB evaluation reports will inform the next phase of development, including a self-directed short course on reasonable accommodations and needs assessment, and a comprehensive set of policy and communications self-assessment tools for education and training boards.

We expect the development of these outputs to be completed by the end of 2024 and launched in Q1 of 2025.

Read more about the [Reasonable accommodations in FET](#) project.

AISHE JOURNAL PARTNERSHIP



AHEAD has partnered up with the [‘All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education’ \(AISHE-J\)](#) to create a Special Issue of the Journal on ‘Universal Design in Tertiary Education’. The call for contributions was developed and disseminated in 2023, with the final issue due to be published in June 2024.

This special issue will provide an opportunity for staff and students to share research and foster dialogue on UD and UDL in Irish tertiary education.

The journal welcomes literature reviews, empirical papers and theoretical papers in addition to case studies, reflections on practice and opinion pieces on these topics.

Further information on the [AISHE/AHEAD partnership](#) and how to submit papers.

AHEAD/USI STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES ADVISORY GROUP

Having first established the Students with Disabilities Advisory Group in September 2020, AHEAD and USI continue to develop and form annual advisory groups each year. The Students with Disabilities Advisory Group serves as a tool for informing strategy and advocacy around inclusion of students and learners with disabilities in FET and HE for both AHEAD and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI). Besides informing strategy, the group also serves as a community for students with disabilities, allowing them to connect with a wider student body to influence positive change in legislation and society.

By feeding into the work of AHEAD and USI and inputting directly into key strategic projects and policy submissions, the group brings a strong disabled student voice into FET/HE policy discussions. For AHEAD, the group further ensures projects are centred on student needs and helps keep projects in line with practical issues that are being faced by disabled students. Generally, the group achieves these means by:

- Raising issues experienced by students with disabilities for discussion which may need to be addressed through the work of AHEAD and USI.
- Highlighting areas of good work in inclusive practice by student bodies or institutions for spotlighting and sharing.
- Providing feedback, comments and advice as requested on the work of AHEAD and USI and direction on shared pieces of work (e.g., the Power of Disability student conference, selected policy submissions).
- Sharing related AHEAD/USI work through their own local networks.

The chairs of the group are nominated by AHEAD and USI, with one nomination from the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), but the majority of group members come from an open application process available to all current students studying in HE or FET.

Nominations for the 2023/24 iteration of the Students with Disabilities Advisory Group opened in late September 2023 and the group was chosen and notified in October. There are 15 members of the 2023/24 Students with Disabilities Advisory Group, including 5 FET students, 5 Higher Education undergraduate students, and 5 postgraduate students making the group the most educationally diverse it has ever been. Similarly, group members come from a wide range of institutions throughout Ireland, each with their own unique disabilities. This diversity of perspectives allows for a broader range of viewpoints to be shared during meetings.

Two meetings of the 2023/24 group took place in 2023, with a focus on curation of the schedule for the Power of Disability conference 2024 (further details below). This two-day event included discussions, presentations and feedback sessions encouraging students with disabilities to be leaders on their own campuses and built practical skills on self-advocacy and constructive advocacy.

AHEAD/USI 'POWER OF DISABILITY' CONFERENCE



Power of Disability, the annual student conference jointly organised by AHEAD and USI, took place virtually on January 25th and 26th 2023. Each year, the conference is aimed at and led by students who have disabilities and are eager to share their voice. The schedule, format and speakers for Power of Disability were all designed, curated, and agreed on by the Students with Disabilities Advisory Group.

Find more about the Students with Disabilities Advisory Group [here](#).

Power of Disability is a two-day online conference focused on empowering, educating, and building constructive advocacy skills for students with disabilities. Day 1 of the 2023 conference focused on education with sessions on sharing what it is like to be disabled, language and disability, learning your rights as a disabled student, and using assistive technology (AT). The schedule for Day 2 was made up entirely of student presenters and focused on constructive self-advocacy.

You can view the full programme and schedule of the conference on the AHEAD website [here](#).

One of the most powerful sessions of the conference was a 40-minute feedback session where attendees shared their personal and individual experiences living as students with disabilities. This session provided valuable insights not only into students' reactions to the conference but also their experiences and preferences for learning in a post-lockdown environment.

The 2023 conference had 312 registered attendees, 238 of whom attended live across the two days, with others preferring to engage with recorded presentations after the event.

Power of Disability is increasingly important in AHEAD's calendar in building a platform for constructive student advocacy. The Power of Disability conference helps in strengthening AHEAD's direct relationships with students by highlighting issues on the ground to bring into our national advocacy work.

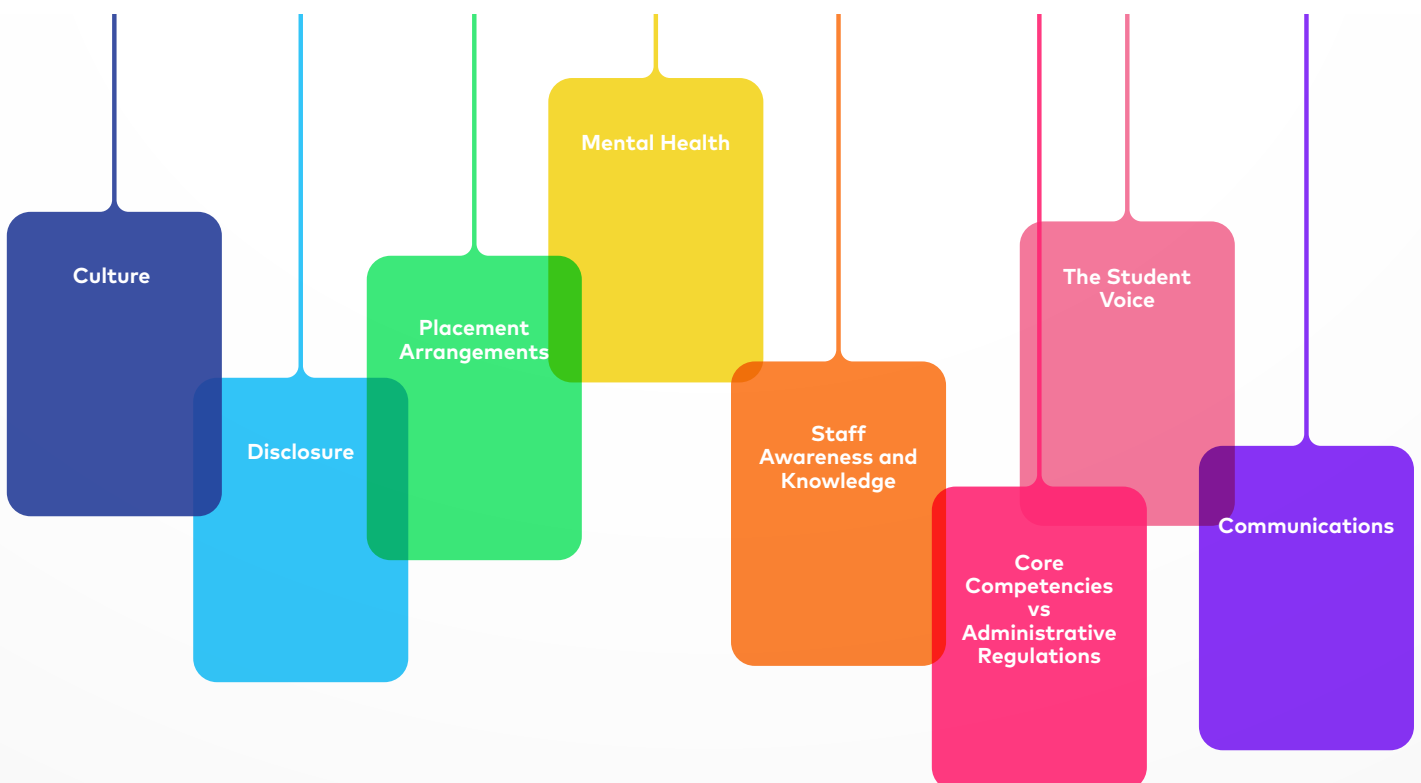
Read more about [The Power of Disability](#) conference.

THE REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL PLACEMENTS PROJECT (RAPP)



In December 2022, AHEAD and the Disability Advisors Working Network released 'Students with Disabilities on Placement: Guidance on the Provision of Reasonable Accommodations on Practice-based Placements in Professionally Accredited Programmes'.

This HEA-funded guidance is intended to support a range of professionals including managers with responsibility for diversity and inclusion, quality improvement or course development and delivery; deans of schools/faculties; course leaders; preceptors; placement coordinators in both HEIs and placement locations; disability service staff; and student union officers.



Execution of a communication and dissemination plan for the Students with Disabilities on Placement Report and Guidance and its outcomes took place across 2023. Key activities during 2023 include:

- Printed 500 copies of the 'Students with Disabilities on Placement Report and Guidance' which were distributed through a board range of channels including through our steering group, professional bodies, and via the Disability Advisors Working Network (DAWN).
- Engaged in several meetings with professional bodies, unions and representative bodies to disseminate the outcomes. These meetings included the Teaching Council, the Irish Nursing and Midwives Organisation, the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland (NMBI) and Education and Training Boards Ireland.
- Hosted several institutional workshops on RAPP findings across 2023.
- Hosted two open online workshops for professionals in HEIs, placement locations and professional bodies on June 7th and June 21st. A total of 301 participants registered across the two events.
- Conducted a half-day workshop with the entire Teaching Council team at one of their quarterly 'scrum' meetings on June 28th to explore how they can progress the recommendations and look more broadly at their EDI policy.

Read the Students with Disabilities on Placement Report and Guidance [here](#).

QQI 'INCLUSIVE ASSESSMENT AND STANDARDS' PARTNERSHIP WITH AHEAD AND DAWN

In autumn 2023, AHEAD entered into a partnership with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and DAWN to explore the topic of Inclusive Assessment and Standards.

Students come to Further and Higher Education from all walks of life. They have different cultural backgrounds, different life and caring demands, different identities, and ability/disability profiles. But do current assessment practices reflect this diversity?

Research shows that some diverse student cohorts are disadvantaged by common assessment methods such as timed exams,³ and that diverse learners often feel certain assessment formats are not authentic or relevant to what they had learned, or how performance is measured in the world outside.⁴ Other students report being over-assessed, with 'bunching' of assessment deadlines frequently resulting in unsustainable workloads.⁵ So, we are exploring what assessment practice that is inclusive of everyone looks like, ensuring all learners get a fair chance to demonstrate their ability.

3 Smith, C. (2011). Examinations and the ESL student – more evidence of particular disadvantages. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*.

4 Tai, J. H.-M., Dollinger, M., Ajjawi, R., Jorre de St Jorre, T., Krattli, S., McCarthy, D., & Prezioso, D., 2022. Designing assessment for inclusion: an exploration of diverse students' assessment experiences. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1–15. doi:10.1080/02602938.2022.2082373

5 QQI, 2021. NEXT STEPS for Teaching and Learning: Moving Forward Together: QQI Insight on Assessment 2021. QQI. <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/qqi-insight-on-assessment.pdf>

Two core outputs are envisaged from the partnership:

1. A national conference on [Inclusive Assessment and Standards in a Dynamic and Changing World](#) hosted by QQI in partnership with AHEAD and DAWN – scheduled for April, 17th 2024. It is anticipated that arising from this event and the literature and dialogue presented at it, a set of national principles for inclusive assessment endorsed by QQI will be developed.
2. A research stream exploring student experiences of assessment in the context of inclusion, provisionally scheduled to be developed and delivered between 2024 and 2025.

CHANGING LANDSCAPES STUDY

In October 2023, AHEAD released [Changing Landscapes: Examining the experiences of tertiary education students with disabilities returning to post-lockdown learning](#).

Put succinctly, Changing Landscapes is a follow-up project to our Learning from Home 2020 research projects,⁶ which were underpinned by the experiences and narratives of disabled students as they engaged with higher and further education during the Covid-19 Lockdown. The final edition in the research series explored the narratives of these students as they returned to their courses and programmes following lockdown, a period in time in which uncertainty played a major part in the everyday experience for students with disabilities. It also addressed structural challenges that arose in the earlier projects, in particular the fact that many of the previous research cohorts had little or no experience of on campus learning and therefore could not compare or evaluate the differences, both positive and negative, vis-à-vis their experiences of lockdown learning.

Key questions asked of students in the research were:

- What did your post-lockdown learning experience look like?
- How did you cope with post-lockdown learning?
- What are the biggest challenges you faced with your learning?
- Are you satisfied with how your college/centre has supported you?
- What makes for a good and accessible learning experience for you (mode and delivery), and what do you want for the future?

From a methodological perspective, the data was informed by a mixed method approach, including a quantitative survey ($n = 169$) and semi-structured interviews ($n = 7$) with students with disabilities. Some of the key findings of this report included:

- A rapid shift towards preferences for blended learning (56%) was recorded, but most courses returned to strictly on campus delivery of classes/lectures (53%).

⁶ AHEAD, 2021. Learning from Home During Covid-19 2020/21: A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities. AHEAD Educational Press.

- Students were now coping better when compared with the preceding Learning from Home Reports, with some students alluding to having built valuable self-regulation skills during the lockdown period.
- Blended learning is now considered the most accessible mode of study (51%), and the majority (56%) of participants indicated that they now prefer 'to engage in courses/ programmes delivered through a mix of in-person and online learning activities'.
- Our data indicates that students with disabilities are less likely than the general student population to report having high quality interactions with their peers (benchmarked against the [Irish Survey of Student Engagement National Report 2022](#)).
- The majority of students had positive experiences of support services, but 25% reported that their recommended supports were not fully implemented.
- Recorded lectures and increased choice in assessment are now strongly desired by students; however this has not translated into meaningful, tangible change for the student experience.
- While the use of AT continues to rise, only 37% of participants alluded to receiving training in the use of AT, while a significant minority of 33%, (one in three students), stipulated to having issues with their use. As such, this report suggested that the provision of AT often requires training in its use, if maximum benefit is to be realised.
- There are signs that the increased application of UDL during lockdown is possibly losing momentum. Students frequently discussed a lack of choice in their interactions with educators that would arguably be consistent with the principals of UDL.
- Overall, there are indications that tertiary education is slowly creeping back to pre-covid norms which do not necessarily benefit students with disabilities.

AHEAD is planning a dissemination campaign on the findings in 2024, beginning with an [AHEAD research webinar](#) planned for February 12th, 2024.

The full report and our policy implications and recommendations can be found [here](#)

EXPLORING PARTNERSHIP WITH THE NATIONAL DISABLED POSTGRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE (NDPAC)

With support from the HEA, NDPAC and AHEAD embarked upon on a series of independently facilitated sessions in 2023 to explore the feasibility of a formal partnership.

Huge progress has been made in understanding the issues each organisation would like to tackle, the shared goals of each organisation and the structures which would need to be developed to support reaching those goals in partnership.

The facilitated process and ensuing collaboration has supported the partnership to:

- Develop a draft MOU between the organisations to govern a partnership dependent on future funding.
- Develop a three-year project proposal to support the partnership, which has been submitted alongside the MOU, to the HEA for consideration.

The three-year proposal submitted to the partnership covers:

- **Year 1 – Fostering a Sense of Belonging by Establishing the NDPAC/AHEAD Partnership and Community** – Proposal includes hosting of community-building events, creating a web presence and developing NDPAC structures.
- **Year 2 – Influencing Policy Development by Amplifying the Lived Experience of the Diverse Voices in the Community** – Proposal includes training to build the capacity of community members to be advocates and leaders, developing a shared advocacy platform and range of policy-related activities and initiation of a policy mapping exercise.

- **Year 3 – Sustaining the Community to Make a Lasting Impact Through Engagement in HE Decision-Making** – Proposal includes completing a policy mapping exercise, engaging with key stakeholders to raise awareness of the issues and promote change, and a body of work on the sustainability of the NDPAC/AHEAD partnership.

The model of direct formal collaboration of an NGO like AHEAD with a DPO such as NDPAC to support and amplify their voice is an innovative approach which to our knowledge has not been implemented before in Ireland. As well as the work conducted to scope a partnership and project proposal, AHEAD delivered the following:

- Hosted a keynote panel session at the AHEAD Conference 2023 with NDPAC members on the experiences of postgraduate students, with approximately 200 in attendance.
- Developed [a tips and information webpage about postgraduate study](#) as a disabled student.
- Met a range of national stakeholders, such as Science Foundation Ireland, to raise policy issues explored in the facilitated sessions between AHEAD and NDPAC.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO EDUCATION MATTERS YEARBOOK

AHEAD's research and policy team were approached in June 2023 to submit research to the Education Matters Yearbook, an influential magazine aimed at policymakers and senior leaders in the education space. Two articles were accepted in November 2023. One article discusses AHEAD's work with the NDPAC Committee, while the second article was informed by AHEAD's research predicated on the post-lockdown landscape for disabled students in tertiary education. The Yearbook was launched by Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris on January 31st, 2024, and AHEAD was invited to attend the launch in the National University of Ireland.

KEY COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT ON POLICY

AHEAD engages in a range of activities to advance our policy objectives and promote policy changes to facilitate changes and enable meaningful positive differences in the lives of disabled students and graduates. They include making policy submissions to departments and national agencies, contributing to a range of national policy advisory groups and building strong strategic relationships which provide more direct access to key national stakeholders.

Policy Submissions by AHEAD

Altogether 15 policy/strategy submissions were made by AHEAD in 2023. These consisted of 12 written contributions, 1 survey format submission and 2 one-to-one interview style submissions. The key submissions made are outlined below.

- **Workplace Relations Commission (WRC): Code of Practice on the Right to Request Remote Work** – AHEAD was invited to make a submission to the consultation on the development of the Code of Practice for Employers who are developing new policies and procedures on the right to request remote work – a new legal entitlement. AHEAD's submission focused on ensuring the code reflects the huge positive impact of remote work options on access to employment for disabled people and highlights the need for disability to be considered a valid reason for requesting remote work.
- **Department of Education: Review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act** – AHEAD made a submission to the public consultation reviewing this important Act. Our submission focused on the promotion of UDL within the revised Act, and the full implementation of parts of the original act which were unrealised, such as the sections on provision of needs assessment, the introduction of the Individual Education Plan (IEP), and a robust system of appeals. It also highlighted the need for the language of the Act to be updated and aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD).

- **Department of Social Protection: Statement of Strategy** – AHEAD submitted a response to the public consultation call regarding the development of the Department's current strategic statement/plan. Our submission focused on the introduction of measures to address the well-evidenced added cost of living with a disability, the low threshold for loss of secondary benefits for disabled people accessing the workplace, the comparatively low spending on social protection and disability support in Ireland, and the expansion of the public sector targets on the employment of people with disabilities.
- **Department of Education: Development of the Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance** – AHEAD made a submission to the department on several important issues that should be considered in the development of the framework, including sufficient funding for adult guidance services, the embedding of a UD approach to the provision of guidance, cross sectoral collaboration to reduce barriers for learners in transition and professional development regarding guidance and disability. Following the strength of this submission, AHEAD was contacted directly by the department to provide commentary on a detailed draft of the guidance and have now been invited to assist in the implementation of the new framework. This framework is further discussed below.
- **QQI: Review of Access, Transfer and Progression (ATP)** – AHEAD was invited to make a submission to QQI to their review of ATP policy. Our submission focused on the increased importance of quality ATP practice in relation to access for disabled learners, and the need to recognise that despite the progress in increasing access significant gaps in participation remain, in particular for individuals in the intersection of poverty and disability. AHEAD research was cited several times within the published review.
- **Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS): Statement of Strategy** – This submission focused on a range of issues including making UD and flexible learning central pillars in the strategy. Furthermore, the need for cross-departmental collaboration to reduce systemic barriers to success for students with disabilities was highlighted.

- **Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS): National Review of State Supports for PhD Researchers** – AHEAD made a submission on request to DFHERIS to their review of state supports for PhD researchers. Our submission focused on a range of issues including addressing of the well-evidenced added cost of living with a disability through PhD funding mechanisms, the introduction of targeted scholarships for disabled researchers and ensuring the voice of disabled students/researchers was heard at the decision-making table on policy in this area.

- **Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS)** – AHEAD made two submissions to the public consultation of the Department of Social Protection's Wage Subsidy Scheme. The first submission was from AHEAD's standpoint as an employer on their view of the WSS while the second was a written submission as a disability representative organisation. AHEAD's written submission was focused on overhauling the medicalised and deficit model approach to disability baked into the scheme and promoting a more inclusive and human rights model of disability. It also made recommendations to streamline the application process by offering an online process with trackable status and a call for the WSS employer eligibility criteria to include the community/voluntary sector and the removal of the 12-month time limit on applying for the WSS.

- **Pre-Budget Submission to DFHEIRS** – Primarily due to the high number of consultation calls and an increase in direct invitations from stakeholders to write submissions, the research and policy team originally decided to not contribute to this consultation call. This decision was due to the lack of impact from prior submissions to pre-budget consultation calls, and the amount of time that this annual submission takes. However, following a number of groups inquiring about our submission details and recommendations, it was decided to write a concise and succinct piece that highlighted the need for consistent sustainable funding for the forthcoming UD charter, the need to address under-resourced support services in HE and FET, and the expansion of the FSD with Disabilities to all areas of FET.

- **HEA Corporate Strategic Plan 2023-2026** – This submission differed from the normative consultation format. AHEAD was invited to contribute to the development of the HEA's Corporate Strategic Plan 2023-2026 through written observation and recommendations in response to the invitation to submit from Dr Alan Wall, dated September 25th 2023. As such, our input included a number of suggested additions or possible amendments to the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) and actions. Our submission discussed international mobility for disabled students as part of Erasmus programmes, cogent cross-departmental collaboration, a charter for UD in tertiary education, and the addressing of the persistently evidenced underfunding of disability support services in HE to support quality delivery of disability supports.
- **High-level Mid-Term Review of Future FET: Transforming Learning, The National Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024** – This submission was underpinned by a survey which was distributed to stakeholders from the sector (including AHEAD) that enabled an assessment of the performance of SOLAS and their progress in implementing the current FET Strategy. AHEAD discussed the establishment of the NTO, accessible pathways between FET and HE, the potential of FET in enabling disabled learners to develop meaningful, in-demand skillsets and the continued use of UDL in FE.
- **SFI (Science Foundation Ireland) Consultation Invite on the Development of their EDI Policy** – AHEAD was invited to consult with SFI on how they, as a leading STEM research funder, might best serve underrepresented communities in their policymaking process. The purpose of this consultation, which was informed by an interview with two members of AHEAD's Research and Policy team, was to assist SFI in fostering a more inclusive scholarship programme.
- **SOLAS Stakeholder Consultation on the Development of the SOLAS Corporate Strategic Plan** – AHEAD was invited to a roundtable meeting of senior stakeholders to discuss the development of the plan. AHEAD inputted on the need to consider systemic funding gaps around the staffing provisions for disability supports within the plan, and the importance of providing systemic support for ETBs to implement the ALTITUDE Charter.

Contributions to National Policy and National Project Advisory Groups

AHEAD contributes evidence-informed input to several national advisory groups in furtherance of our strategic aim to influence policy and promote tangible and real change in the lives of disabled students and graduates.

- **Higher Education Authority National Access Plan Advisory Group** – As a member of this advisory group, AHEAD directly impacts on the planning and delivery of national access measures by bringing research and evidence to its members, raising issues that AHEAD is bearing witness to on the ground and giving feeding back on proposals by the department. Our role is to represent the voice of students with disabilities on the committee and ensure that the delivery of the current National Access Plan and the development of further plans is well informed and includes positive measures for students with disabilities.
- **SOLAS Fostering Inclusion Advisory Group** – SOLAS operates this important advisory group to inform and advise on the implementation of the Fostering Inclusion strand of the FET Strategy. As a member of this advisory group, AHEAD directly impacts on the planning and delivery of inclusion measures in FET by bringing research and evidence to the group's members and providing informed advocacy on the inclusion of students with disabilities in further education and training and the implementation of UDL practice.
- **Irish University Association Access Steering Group** – As a member of this steering group, AHEAD contributes to the development of access policy across the university and IoT sector affecting admissions (e.g., Disability Access Route to Education policy) and student experience measures. Our seat on this group enables us to contribute directly to institution policy and practice across the sector.

- **Education and Training Boards Ireland** – FET Directors Forum and the ETBI/ETB/AHEAD liaison group – AHEAD and ETBI have developed a very strong working relationship and are engaged in regular collaborations across a number of projects. The ETBI/ETB/AHEAD liaison group was formally established under ETBI and AHEAD structures to support collaboration among ETBs, ETBI and AHEAD, to continually improve practice and, inform draft proposals, policies, procedures, information, and resources to support inclusion in all areas of FET. This group enables AHEAD to have direct contact and collaboration on an annual basis with three FET directors whose role it is to bring the learning from our meetings to the wider Directors Forum. One meeting of this group took place in 2023. AHEAD also regularly meets with ETBI staff. Furthermore, AHEAD occasionally presents to the FET Directors Inclusion Strategy Group and/or the full Directors Forum (e.g., the presentation of the **ALTITUDE** Charter project to the Inclusion Strategy Group in March 2023).
- **National Apprenticeship Alliance (NAA) Equity of Access Subcommittee** – In January 2023, AHEAD was invited to join this new committee formed to support the NAA to advance access and inclusion in national apprenticeship programmes. The objective of these meetings was primarily to assist in the realisation of the actions stated in the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025. Among these objectives was an increase in the percentage of disabled apprentices (from 2.7%) and the development of an award for employers overseen by the Irish Centre for Diversity. The research and policy team suggested the possibility of using the Employer Tip Sheet, developed by AHEAD in conjunction with FIT (discussed below), across all apprenticeships. An agreement was reached with the NAA and the Tip Sheet was presented to the subcommittee in December 2023. AHEAD will continue as a member of the subcommittee in 2024.

- **Department of Education: Advisory Group on the Development of the Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance:** AHEAD contributed a submission to the Department of Education in February 2023, predicated on a range of issues for consideration in the redevelopment of the framework, including sufficient funding for adult guidance services, a UD approach to the provision of guidance, cross sectoral collaboration to reduce barriers for learners in transition and professional development regarding guidance and disability. Following the strength of this submission, AHEAD was contacted directly by the department to provide commentary on a detailed draft of the guidance. This has developed into regular engagement with the department and the latest draft now has embedded a UD approach as a clear goal. Subsequently, AHEAD have also been invited to help with the implementation of the new National Framework for Lifelong Guidance in the new year.
- FIT – the ICT talent helpline – Choose Tech Steering Group – **FIT (Fastrack to Information Technology)** is a representative organisation of the technology sector committed to growing Ireland's technology talent pipeline. AHEAD is a member of FIT's steering group for their [Choose Tech initiative](#), which aims to address the structural underrepresentation of disadvantaged young people and increase diversity in the newly launched pre-tech and tech apprenticeships and the tech sector.
- **TUD PATH 3 Research Advisory Group** – AHEAD was invited to participate in a one-off research group examining the efficacy of the PATH 3 funding stream. AHEAD represented the disability cohort and all other priority groups alluded to in the current NAP were also represented. We contributed to this project by attending 4 meetings in 2023 and supplying the Principal Investigator Aisling McElearney and her colleagues from TU Dublin with our experience, expertise and data from our published reports.
- **Public Appointment Service Advisory Group** – AHEAD was invited to participate in an Advisory Group for a project to develop a 'Co-Designed Reasonable Accommodation Process (Assignment & Onboarding)'. AHEAD provided guidance and feedback throughout the various stages of the project.
- **Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Working Group** – AHEAD was invited to a working group to review and provide input into new practical guidance for employees and employers on reasonable accommodation which will complement the Code of Practice on Reasonable Accommodation.

Other Important Strategic Relationships and Engagements Supporting our Policy Objective

AHEAD place considerable importance on building and maintaining strong relationships with key stakeholders which allow us to act in a trusted, 'critical friend' capacity, and advise on their work.

- **Higher Education Authority** – The HEA occasionally calls on AHEAD to consult and provide data/contextual information in order to ensure their policy decisions are well informed and supporting best practice.
- **SOLAS** – SOLAS occasionally calls on AHEAD to consult and provide advice in order to ensure their policy decisions are well informed and supporting best practice in inclusion and UD (e.g., in the development of the Community Education Framework).
- **AHEAD Membership Forum** – AHEAD has a membership with institutions/training boards represented across Further and Higher Education. This gives us a direct link to member institutions to support them in developing inclusive policy and practice. Our information line regularly takes calls from institution staff enquiring about best practice or policy in a variety of areas relating to the inclusion of students with disabilities.
- **WAM Employer Network** – Through the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) programme, we work with a host of major national employers. The strong relationships we build with these employers enable us to impact on their diversity, recruitment and the progression of policies and practices.
- **Union of Students in Ireland** – AHEAD engages frequently with USI to ensure they have the knowledge and understanding to support and engage with students with disabilities through their work. AHEAD and USI jointly host the Students with Disabilities Advisory Group which informs the practice and policy of both organisations and partner on an annual student-led conference in January, 'Power of Disability'.

- **Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)** – AHEAD's strengthening relationship with QQI enables us to directly influence the quality agenda and the systems and processes underpinning quality assurance in FET and HE. A good example is the planned body of work between AHEAD, DAWN and QQI to look more closely at the exam as a locus of disadvantage in assessment and present it in the context of rising numbers of students with disabilities and the ineffectiveness of exam accommodations. The outcomes from this work will include a joint event on Inclusive Assessment and Standards in April 2024, and a research work stream to follow.

- **National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning** – AHEAD will continue to roll out the digital badge for universal design for learning in tandem with UCD and the National Forum and will seek to encourage institutions to implement UDL to support student success.

- **Link Network** – LINK is a learning network made up of partners from seven European countries that aims to work together to share information and best practice concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in third level education. Countries represented include Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Belgium, the UK and Slovenia. The topic in 2023 was 'Employability,' and the agreed output will be a set of 'Principles for Inclusive Career Guidance Councillors' regarding engagement with students with disabilities to be released in Q1 2024. The LINK Network meet four times annually, with one of these taking place in-person if possible. In 2023, AHEAD staff travelled to Slovenia for the year's iteration of the in-person meeting. The LINK Network's work for 2023 is further discussed in this report.

- **Disability Federation of Ireland's Research and Policy Forum:** AHEAD is part of this important network of Disability NGO research and policy teams, enabling us to share and gather data, and collaborate on the development of submissions nationally. This network has proven to be very beneficial to our research as it enables the team to meet with other members to discuss submissions and research. In 2023, we met with this group four times, and our first meeting of 2024 took place in January.

- **Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and Public Appointment Service**
 - A pilot pathway for participants from the WAM Programme who complete their placement with the Civil Service, to apply for permanent employment, where roles are available, via closed competitions concluded in 2023 and regular meetings took place across 2023 to implement and roll out the pathway beyond its pilot phase.

- **Add the Tenth Alliance** – AHEAD is a member of the Add the Tenth Alliance, a group whose objective is to promote the addition of a tenth ground for discrimination based on socio-economic status, with AHEAD's focus being on the well-evidenced links between disability and poverty. Following recent advocacy work on the matter from IHREC, the Alliance have also submitted a letter to Minister Roderic O'Gorman (August 2023). Unfortunately, socio-economic status as a ground for discrimination did not receive backing from the Oireachtas. However, the minister has explicitly stated that this will be re-evaluated when the review of Equality Legislation, to which AHEAD submitted a detailed submission, is published in 2024. To this end, the Alliance are currently in discussion regarding further advocacy and early new year meetings.
- **Disability Advisors Working Network (DAWN)** – **DAWN remains a key partner of AHEAD, giving us direct access to and collaboration with higher education disability and access officers.** In 2023, AHEAD staff met several times with DAWN leadership and collaborated with them on several projects including the dissemination of the RAPP project and a project on inclusive assessment in partnership with QQI. AHEAD attended two DAWN meetings in 2023.

Theme B – Promoting Inclusion, Networks & Collaboration

**To sustain the organisation of
AHEAD to promote inclusion in
education and employment through
the building of networks and
collaboration with key strategic
partners in all learning environments**

The following section outlines key strategic education activities undertaken during the year relating to Theme B of our Strategic Plan 2019-2023.

INTO AND OUT OF EDUCATION LEARNERS/STUDENT/GRADUATE/ EMPLOYER CONNECT

AHEAD seeks to promote the employment opportunities of graduates with disabilities by focusing on the transition of students with disabilities to, within and from higher education to employment through the following initiatives:

WILLING ABLE MENTORING (WAM) – A WORK PLACEMENT INITIATIVE

WAM is a work placement programme which aims to promote access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities and to build the capacity of employers to integrate disability into the mainstream workplace. Participating employers (WAM Leaders) collaborate with WAM to offer mentored, paid, work placements for graduates with disabilities. This partnership brings graduates with disabilities and employers together so that both can benefit from each other, ensuring genuine learning opportunities for all.

WAM is unique in that it seeks to engage and support employers to develop their potential to be inclusive, while simultaneously offering graduates with disabilities fantastic career opportunities in a supportive environment.

Since 2005, the WAM Programme has provided **672 placements for graduates with disabilities.**

WAM Placement Recruitment

In 2023, WAM advertised 118 positions with 11 private sector companies, 15 Departments within the Civil Service, 5 Local Authorities and 1 educational institution. All placements advertised were exclusively ring-fenced for graduates with disabilities and varied in duration from six-months to one-year with many of the graduate programmes also offering up to two-year contracts. A total of 53 new placements were facilitated, with a total of 99 placements supported across the year (including those which began in 2022 and continued to receive support into 2023).

A total of 529 applications was received in 2023, with 252 interviews organised and supported by employers. Some 89 staff from within participating employers received Disability Awareness Training from the WAM team in advance of carrying out interviews with graduates. Additionally, 126 WAM Leader staff underwent WAM pre-placement training.

WAM IN NUMBERS

118

Placements
Advertised

215

Employer
Staff Trained

529

Applications
Received

99

Placements
Supported

252

Interviews
Organised
and Supported



Needs Assessments and WAM Mentoring Model

All WAM placements have the WAM Needs Assessment and Mentoring Model implemented with the participating manager, graduate, assigned mentor and, on occasion, other related staff. Most companies now operate a hybrid working model, with a minority requiring staff to work fully on-site due to the specific nature of the role. In 2023, WAM continued to conduct both online and on-site training and needs assessments with graduates and relevant staff.

Civil Service Pathway for WAM Graduates

The launch of the Civil Service pilot pathway to permanency in 2022 was a huge success with 89% of WAM Civil Service graduates securing an Executive Officer (EO) position within the Civil Service after successfully completing their WAM placement in January 2023. These WAM graduates commenced their permanent positions in February 2023.

WAM continued to progress this pathway in conjunction with PAS and DPENDR in 2023 with the second iteration of graduates commencing their placement in September 2023. These WAM Civil Service placements are now 10 months in duration, and it is expected that graduates will apply for permanency in the Civil Service through a confined competition which will run in 2024.

WAM EMPLOYER TRAINING EVENTS

This year, WAM delivered both online and in-person training and networking events for employers. Over the last three years the employer webinars known as WAMinars have been very successful and grew in popularity with a record number of people registering in 2023. The WAMinars are also regularly watched back on AHEAD's YouTube channel.

Over **1,120** people attended WAM Employer Events in 2023.

WAMinar: Understanding Dyspraxia (Developmental Coordination Disorder)

This WAMinar, [Understanding Dyspraxia \(Developmental Coordination Disorder\)](#) took place on June 28th and explored Dyspraxia (DCD) and the workplace. Sharon Lane the CEO of Dyspraxia/DCD Ireland provided an understanding of Dyspraxia (DCD) and the interchangeable terminology used when referring to this disability. The presentation also discussed how Dyspraxia can present for people on a day-to-day basis with an emphasis on the potential impact on work and what supports are available to employees and employers.

KEY IMPACT/STATISTICS

1,120+

people attended WAM Employer
Events in 2023

100%

percentage of respondents said they
benefited from attending the webinar

94%

of attendees said the webinar
overall was excellent

28

leader companies were awarded a
WAM Leader Award



WAMinar: Understanding ADHD in the Workplace

This WAMinar, [Understanding ADHD in the Workplace](#) took place on September 26th and included a presentation from Ken Kilbride, CEO of ADHD Ireland, and a personal account of living with ADHD from Lauren McBride, Host of the ADHD Ireland Podcast. The guest presenters gave an understanding of ADHD, highlighted the talents and employability skills of people with ADHD and what supports are currently available for employees and employers supporting or managing colleagues with ADHD at work.

Key Impact & Statistics

- 98% of respondents said they benefited from attending the event.
- 86% of respondents found the webinar overall was excellent.

SAMPLE COMMENTS

'Excellent webinar. Many thanks for invitation. I appreciated the very useful practical relevant, practical information. Thanks too to Ken and to Lauren for the sharing of both professional and personal information. Thanks to the team in AHEAD for all the work in delivering these webinars.'

'I am grateful for the knowledge and expertise of the speakers. Fantastic webinar. I learned a lot of new things. Thank you all for doing this it makes a huge difference to so many in so many ways.'



WAM Leaders' Awards 2023

The WAM Leaders Awards are one of the highlights of the WAM Programme's calendar year where AHEAD recognise the employers who have worked with WAM to promote the employment of graduates with disabilities. The event took place on August 16th 2023 in the Museum of Literature Ireland, Stephens Green. The guests on the day were representatives from WAM Employers who received a WAM Leader Award.

AHEAD CEO Dara Ryder opened the event welcoming guests and introduced a WAM graduate who then spoke about their experience of their WAM placement including their success in securing a permanent Executive Officer position with the Civil Service through the pilot permanency pathway launched in 2022/2023.

Attending employers were invited to speak on their experience of the WAM Programme when collecting their awards and the evening finished with an opportunity for employers to network while enjoying canapés and refreshments.

A full list of [WAM Leader companies](#) is available on the AHEAD website

Key Impact

Altogether 15 private and semi-state companies and 13 Civil Service employers were awarded a WAM Leader Award for their work in recruiting graduates with disabilities in April 2022-March 2023 (WAM funding year). Below is a list of the WAM Leaders who received an award:

Civil Service Employers	Private & Semi-State
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Agriculture, Food, and the Marine – Enterprise, Trade and Employment – Social Protection – Justice and Equality – National Shared Services Office – Houses of the Oireachtas – Public Appointments Service – Office of the Revenue Commissioners – Taoiseach – Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, and Media – Public Expenditure and Reform – Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission – Office of the Ombudsman 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – AbbVie – Allianz – Bank of Ireland – ESB – Bord Na Móna – NTMA – Pfizer – Optum – VMWare – LGMA – Kerry County Council – Cavan County Council – Leitrim County Council – Waterford County Council – Donegal County Council



Dashing Through Digital Accessibility – December 6th, 2023

The WAM Christmas event, [Dashing Through Digital Accessibility](#) was kindly sponsored and hosted by ESB at their newly refurbished Head Office on Fitzwilliam Street, Dublin 2.

The event focused on digital accessibility in the workplace and encouraged employers to consider their internal company practice and current level of digital accessibility. Specifically, the event explored assistive technology and how employers might utilise resources already present within their own organisations to create a more inclusive digital ecosystem.

There were various presentations and contributions on the day, including:

- **Hector Minto, Lead Technology Evangelist at Microsoft.** Hector presented on Microsoft Accessibility Features demonstrating inclusive design, product accessibility and accessibility innovation throughout his session.
- **Juliann Bergin, Clinical AT Specialist at Enable Ireland** spoke about creating a sustainable AT Ecosystem in the workplace and shared information on the AT Passport and Workplace Assessment Service provided by Enable Ireland.
- **Dermot McDonagh, UX Designer with ESB** spoke about ESB's Design team in Enterprise Services and ensuring that ESB designs are inclusive and user friendly for all.
- **Danielle O'Rourke, Digital Media & e-Learning Officer at AHEAD** showcased AHEAD's newest ARK course Disability 101: Awareness Inclusion and Equity and the AT Hive.
- **AHEAD CEO Dara Ryder and Employment Manager Caroline McGrotty** hosted an introduction to and discussion on AHEAD's new Inclusive Employer Framework which is currently in development.

Attendees enjoyed the opportunity to network over lunch and ESB organised a tour of their building which was awarded 'Best Workplace' at the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland awards in 2023.

Key Impact & Statistics

- 100% of respondents said they benefited from attending the event.
- 78% of respondents found the relevance of the event to be excellent.
- 89% of respondents reported the speakers to be excellent.



WAM NETWORKING, TRAINING AND DISSEMINATION

WAM continues to develop and expand its reach across employers and to foster collaboration with state agencies and other NGOs. Relationship building is a key component to winning employer support for the WAM Programme and talks, meetings and presentations take place on an ongoing basis both nationally and internationally.

In 2023, WAM reached over **680 people by presenting at various** external events and trainings, and by participating in panel discussions. Here are some of the trainings delivered and events attended:

- **Local Authorities – Recruitment Marketing Webinar** – Delivered Accessible Communications training to recruitment and communication staff located in local authorities across Ireland.
- **Local Authorities – Reasonable Accommodations and Needs Assessments** – Invited by the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) to deliver tailored training on reasonable accommodations and needs assessments for management and HR staff across 31 local authorities.
- **Department of Housing – Disclosure Disconnect** – Presented at an online ‘Lunch ‘n Learn’ information session on the topic of disability disclosure and the barriers faced by those who wish to disclose in the workplace.
- **TG4 – Disability Awareness in Recruitment** – Provided bespoke online training to TG4 employees involved in the recruitment of staff.
- **Civil Service Employee Assistance Service – Neurodiversity Awareness** – Provided in-person neurodiversity training to Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) officers in the Civil Service. The EAP is designed to assist employees to manage/resolve work-related and personal difficulties.
- **Dyspraxia/DCD Ireland Conference** – Contributed to the conference as part of their dedicated panel discussion ‘After school – what next?’ with DARE, the NLN, ETBs and Youth Reach.

EMPLOYER RESOURCES

Tips for Employers on Being Disability Inclusive in Apprenticeships



In March 2021, AHEAD's Education and Employment teams embarked on a shared learning initiative with Fastrack to Information Technology (FIT). Alongside AHEAD, the aim was to build on previous in-house activities and explore ways to increase access and inclusion to the workplace by enabling people with disabilities to gain a foothold in employment via a tech apprenticeship programmes pathway coordinated by FIT.

The key goal was for:

- FIT to support AHEAD to better understand the apprenticeship model and explore where barriers may exist for people with disabilities to participate.
- AHEAD to support FIT to identify and reduce barriers in the application of onboarding processes into the abovementioned tech apprenticeship programmes, as well as to explore opportunities for embedding inclusive practices.

This publication was built on learning from the engagement, knowledge and experience of the WAM Programme throughout the years, and from the experience of AHEAD staff working within inclusive employment and education.

The purpose of this publication is to support employers in their apprenticeship onboarding activities and to help them better understand how they can support apprentices with disabilities, and disabled employees more generally.

Download the Tips for Employers on Being Disability Inclusive in Apprenticeships [here](#).

INCLUSIVE EMPLOYER FRAMEWORK

In July 2023, the development of an evidence-based national framework on inclusive employment began. The aim of this framework is to support Irish employers to make their recruitment practices, company policies and workplaces more inclusive for people with disabilities while also assisting them in meeting their legislative responsibilities under equality law.

The project is funded by the Department of Social Protection over a period of two years, and the final outputs of the framework will be launched in Quarter three of 2025.

By helping employers to be more inclusive, the framework will support Ireland as a nation to address the previously employment gap, work towards its UN Sustainable Development Goals and its responsibilities under the UNCRPD, support the implementation of equality legislation affecting people with disabilities, and fulfil the objectives of national policies relating to employment (e.g., National Disability Inclusion Strategy and the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities).

The framework will be informed by existing research on best practice in the employment of people with disabilities, learning garnered from successful existing work placement programmes, and extensive consultation and engagement with key stakeholders including Irish employers and representative bodies, people with disabilities, and relevant NGOs and state bodies.

AHEAD agreed a stakeholder collaboration with Employers for Change, a project of Open Doors Initiative, where the final outputs of the project will be housed on Employers for Change's website, and they will sit as Co-Chairs of the Core Advisory Group alongside AHEAD.

Core Advisory Group

The Core Advisory Group, who met for the first time in November 2023, is made up of key sectoral stakeholders from government departments, business representative organisations and disabled people's organisations. The group will provide support and guidance on the consultation process and advise on the project plan development to ensure it adequately encompasses the vast scope of this project.

The members of the Core Advisory Group are as follows:

- AsIAM
- Chambers Ireland
- Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
- Department of Social Protection
- Disability Federation of Ireland
- Economic and Social Research Institute
- Employers for Change
- Higher Education Authority
- IBEC
- Independent Living Movement Ireland
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
- ISME – Irish Small Medium Enterprises Association
- National Apprenticeship Office
- Pobal
- Public Appointments Service
- SOLAS

GETAHEAD – STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND THE TRANSITION TO WORK

GetAHEAD is an AHEAD project which engages and supports students and graduates with disabilities in their transition to the workplace. Its aim is to support them throughout the job search process. GetAHEAD runs frequent upskilling employability events and training sessions for students and graduates with disabilities. Additionally, GetAHEAD engages with student bodies (e.g., USI and local students' unions) to provide training that aims to improve the experience of students with disabilities in FET and HE who wish to engage in extracurricular activities such as clubs and societies.

Get AHEAD also runs several larger key events as outlined below.

Building the Future

Building the Future is GetAHEAD's annual careers event for students and graduates with disabilities and is the largest event of the year for the programme. In 2023, this event took place on May 31st. The event was held in a hybrid format whereby workshops, mock interviews and CV clinics were available remotely, running in parallel with the in-person event which was held at the Citi offices in Dublin. Citi kindly hosted and sponsored this event.

BUILDING THE FUTURE IN NUMBERS

Below are a collection of key facts and figures relating to Building the Future 2023.

20

companies participated in Building the Future 2023

17

employer volunteers carried out mock interviews and CV clinics for students and graduates with disabilities

70

volunteers from 20 companies took part

15

companies met directly with students and graduates with disabilities to inform them of job opportunities by hosting employer stands on the day.

30

attendees had their CV reviewed by an employer

122

students and graduates with disabilities registered to attend Building the Future

36

attendees availed of a mock interview with an employer

Disability Awareness Training

Prior to the event, GetAHEAD provided two online disability awareness workshops for employers and Citi volunteers who gave their time at the event. This training covered some basic disability awareness (e.g., meeting and greeting etiquette) and a detailed run through of distinct roles on the day. Recordings of this training were made available to all volunteers taking part in Building the Future.

Altogether, 70 attendees from both employers and Citi volunteers received training.



Opening Panel Discussion

To kick off the event, we had a panel discussion with employers from The WAM Programme. At this panel discussion, employer panellists discussed reasonable accommodation in the recruitment process. They shared the policies and practices within their company and how they implement reasonable accommodations for applicants with disabilities. The panel comprised the following employers:

- Julie McCafferty – Public Appointment Service
- Edel Condron – Bank of Ireland
- Dara Ryder – CEO of AHEAD



Exhibition Space

The Exhibition Space was open from 11am to 1pm and had many distinct elements for attendees to interact and engage with. This included 'Employer Networking Bingo', opportunities to take a professional headshot for their social networking pages or CVs and a dedicated Quiet Room for those who needed some respite during the event.



Employer Stands

Altogether **14 company representatives** from employers working with WAM hosted stands in the main exhibition space. Attendees were able to talk to employers about current opportunities within their companies, their recruitment processes, what type of accessibility supports the company could offer, as well as general information about their company. Companies who hosted stands included:

- AbbVie
- Bank of America
- Bank of Ireland
- Central Bank of Ireland
- Deutsche Bank
- Enterprise-Rent-a-Car
- ESB
- Green Party
- Irish Rail
- National Apprenticeship Office
- NTMA
- Pfizer
- Public Appointment Service
- SCOR Reinsurance



Jobs and Worries Wall

In the exhibition space, we featured a jobs wall with current WAM opportunities open for applications alongside a 'Worries Wall'. This 'Worries Wall' provided a space where attendees could share their worries about employment and entering the workplace as a person with a disability. Some worries included:

- *'Worried about retaining disability payment and managing to work in a stressful environment.'*
- *'Worried about losing benefits if I get full-time employment and is it worth it getting a full-time job money wise.'*
- *'I worry how disclosing will make my colleagues view me.'*
- *'My reasonable accommodation not being taken seriously – discrimination.'*
- *'I worry constantly about long-term unemployment.'*
 - *'Have been unsuccessful at countless interviews.'*
 - *'I worry about disclosing my disability to employers.'*
 - *'Have faced subtle discrimination when working – felt horrible.'*



Mock Interviews

Attendees could avail of a mock interview either online or in-person which were run by employer volunteers during the event. Each mock interview was 30 minutes and all attendees were given feedback and advice on how to improve on future interviews.



CV /Clinics

Attendees could opt to get their CV reviewed by an employer volunteer, either in-person or online. Each slot was 20 minutes and attendees received detailed feedback on how to improve or restructure their CV.



Hybrid Workshops

How to Stand Out from the Crowd – Enterprise Rent-A-Car

Enterprise Rent-a-Car delivered a workshop on how to stand out within an extremely competitive job market and showcase your best self. They shared their top tips on 'How to stand out from the crowd' and be a stand-out candidate.

Nail That Interview – Communications Clinic

Ann Heelan, UDL expert, consultant and interview coach with the Communications Clinic delivered a workshop on knowing where to start with interviews, delivering that opening statement and how to answer competency questions with your best experiences.

Networking in Online Communities – Mercer Marsh Benefits

At the presentation by Mercer Marsh Benefits, they explained how to network effectively using LinkedIn, online communities, and local events, and emphasised the importance of connections in unleashing your career potential.



Feedback from Employers and Attendees

Attendees' Evaluation

- The event received positive feedback with 95% of attendees stating that they benefited from attending Building the Future.
- 100% of attendees said the event was accessible.
- 85% of attendees stated that they were very likely to recommend the event to others.

Some comments from the attendees include:

- 'Brilliant all round. I could not have been happier with everything. I learned so much and got so much confidence and met some truly wonderful people. I was particularly grateful there was a quiet room for me to rest in, I didn't end up having to use it but knowing it was there, was a key factor in deciding whether to attend this event in case I had a flare-up. Thank you all so much for such a great event, I am very grateful.'
- 'I was very much excited about the event, the presenters, the stands. Everything was on point'.
- 'I thought it was informative. I wasn't entirely sure how to format my CV. It hasn't been updated in years and all I have is some work experience. It helped me know how to format it and what to include going forward. It also made me feel better about not having any 'real' experience on it.'



Building The Future was rated 2.8 out of 3 stars by attendees.

'I was very much excited about the event, the presenters, the stands. Everything was on point'.



'Brilliant all round. I could not have been happier with everything. I learned so much and got so much confidence and met some truly wonderful people. I was particularly grateful there was a quiet room for me to rest in, I didn't end up having to use it but knowing it was there, was a key factor in deciding whether to attend this event in case I had a flare-up.'

Employers' Evaluation

The event was also well received by employers who attended on the day.

- 93% of attending employers said the organisation of the event was excellent.
- 85% of attending employers stated that the Disability Awareness Training session prior to the event was excellent.
- 79% of employers stated they intended to follow-up directly with candidates they met at the event. This included opportunities for interviews and potential opportunities for employment within their organisation.

Some comments from the employers include:

→ 'Great event, big talent pool, great for increasing our recruitment outreach'

→ 'Well done all, great morning and great interaction with attendees'



GetAHEAD Employability Workshops & Bootcamp

GetAHEAD held three [Think Twice](#) workshops in 2023 on chosen topics to boost employability and prepare students and graduates for the world of work. Over 90 students and graduates with disabilities registered for these workshops.

Application Forms –February 21st

This workshop concentrated on maximising application forms when applying for jobs and tips for standing out to recruiters. The hour-long session covered the STAR (i.e., situation, task, action, results) approach to answering competency questions and general tips and guidance for completing application forms.

CV Writing –April 11th

This one-hour training session focused on the essential skills of building an effective CV. Attendees were shown how to structure a CV, various formatting tips and guidance on how to develop a skills-based CV.

How to Tell Employers About Your Disability –September 19th

This one-hour webinar gave attendees an overview of AHEAD's action plan for disclosure and the relevant legislation in Ireland. Throughout the webinar, attendees learned about how to tell employers about their disabilities, reasonable accommodations and available supports in both recruitment and the workplace.

Getting Remote Work Ready Bootcamp –November 28th

The 2023 GetAHEAD Bootcamp took place on November 28th, specifically targeting students and graduates with disabilities who were interested in remote work. The bootcamp was delivered in partnership with Grow Remote and featured insights into their Remote Work Ready course. Altogether 48 graduates registered to attend and the bootcamp covered the following topics:

- What remote work is and the types of remote operating models
- Benefits and challenges of remote work
- Skills and tools for remote work
- Managing your well-being while working remotely
- Finding remote work

GETAHEAD NETWORKING, TRAINING AND DISSEMINATION

GetAHEAD continues to develop and strengthen its relationships across the third level employment sector. Relationship building is integral to ensuring that the work of GetAHEAD is known and considered in preparing students and graduates with disabilities to join the workforce.

In 2023, GetAHEAD presented at various events, hosted stands at careers fairs and delivered training sessions to a range of stakeholders such as;

Disclosure Workshops:

- University of Galway
- National College of Art and Design
- Dell Technologies
- Cork County Council

Career Fairs:

- gradIreland's Summer Fair
- gradIreland Annual Careers Fair
- TU Dublin – Love your Career

HOW TO TELL EMPLOYERS ABOUT YOUR DISABILITY – A GUIDE TO DISCLOSURE



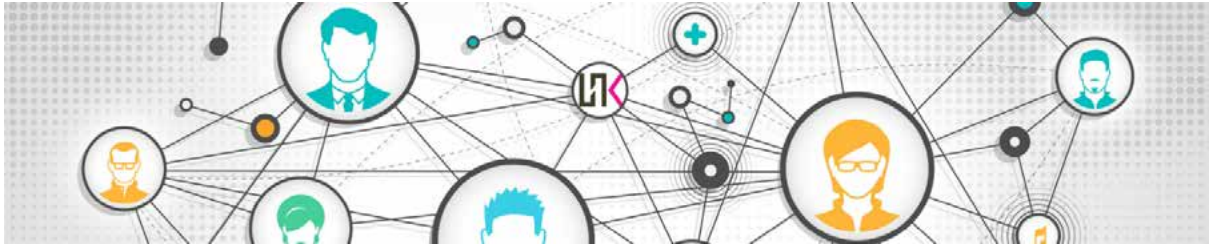
AHEAD's Guide to Disclosure was always one of AHEAD's most popular resources. The last update was in 2013 and given changes in language used around disability as well as key changes in policy such as the UNCRPD and the role of IHREC, it was important to update this guide to reflect not only these changes but new ways of blended working.

Updates to the guide commenced in January 2023 and underwent a restructuring process. The previous guide offered advice to students/graduates with disabilities, employers and career advisors. This new guide was streamlined to have a focus only on disabled people. Feedback was sought from the AHEAD/USI's Students with Disabilities Advisory Group on the structure and the word disclosure.

As a result, the guide was renamed – 'How to tell Employers about your Disability – A Guide to Disclosure.'

The [publication](#) is available on AHEAD's website.

LINK – EUROPEAN LEARNING NETWORK



LINK is a learning network made up of partners from seven European countries, all of which share knowledge, best practice, and experience with the aim of raising the quality of service for third level students with disabilities across Europe. Countries represented include Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, the UK and Slovenia. By learning about what is happening in other countries and how similar organisations are achieving their aims, we seek to broaden our understanding and better inform our contributions to policy and practice in Ireland.

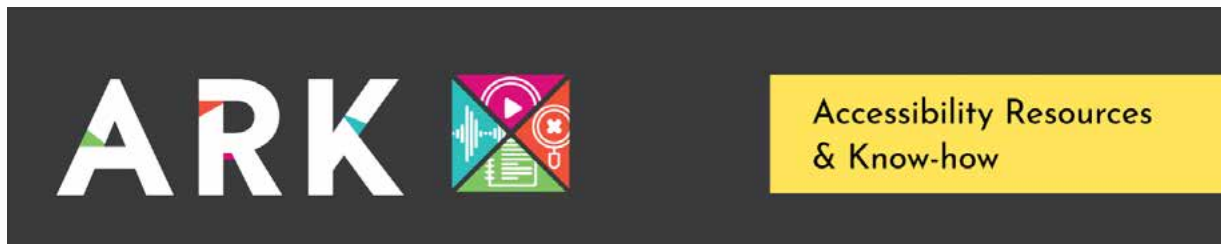
As vice-chair, AHEAD helped organise three online meetings and one in-person meeting which took place in 2023. Each year the group works together to select a theme and develop one output, such as a policy paper or a short piece of practical guidance. After much discussion, the group decided that the theme for 2023 would focus on guidance and career counsellors and how they can effectively work with students with disabilities.

Subsequently, the group agreed to produce a set of principles to aid counsellors when working with students with disabilities. The final product will include 10 overarching principles supported by evidence from partners throughout Europe. Evidence for each principle may include online resources (e.g., reports, classes, and articles), quotes from staff and/or students, pieces of government legislation, and/or examples from staff members. After the design process (likely to take place in early March 2024), the principles along with their supporting evidence will be produced in a poster form and available for distribution to guidance counsellors at events and on request. The LINK Network is also looking forward to presenting their work on Principles for Guidance Counsellors in a hybrid format at the 2024 AHEAD Conference.

After completing the role of vice-chair of the network for 2023, AHEAD will now step in to serve as chair of the LINK network for a one-year period in 2024 as part of the network rotation.

Find out more about the LINK Network [here](#).

ARK – DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY SHORT COURSES



In 2022, AHEAD launched [ARK \(Accessibility Resource and Know-how\)](#), a digital accessibility and inclusion resource hub for tertiary education which provides practical resources and know-how to support a range of institutional staff to be more accessible in their roles. AHEAD continued to disseminate ARK across 2023, leading to increased engagement with the key resources hosted within it. The ARK platform incorporates a guidance pack, an accessibility and legislation page which helps audiences digest and apply legislation jargon at their own institutional levels, and a series of short know-how ARK courses.

Besides promotional work, 2023 also saw the key development and launch of the newest ARK course titled 'Disability 101: Awareness, Equity, and Inclusion'. The learning outcomes for this course are as follows:

- Understand the range and nature of disabilities, as well as alternative 'models' of disability.
- Understand the impact that disabilities can have in education and/or the workplace.
- Be aware of relevant legislation to protect the rights of disabled people.
- Consider how improved processes, practices and policies within your organisation could create better working or learning environments for all, including those with disabilities.

The ARK platform can help with:

- Assisting with guidance to help institutions meet their legal accessibility compliance.
- Providing a better digital experience for all.
- Embedding principles of Universal Design for Learning into education practices to cater to a diverse student body.
- Helping educators create a more accessible and dynamic virtual learning platform to better engage learners.

The most popular resources included in ARK have been our 2-hour self-directed online short courses:

- [Free Course: An Introduction to Digital Accessibility for Educators.](#)
- [Free Course: Digital accessibility - a Whole Institution Approach.](#)
- [Free Course: Developing a Web Accessibility Statement](#)
- [An Introduction to Universal Design for Learning](#)
- [Designing Course Layouts for Learner Success](#)
- [Disability 101: Awareness, Inclusion, and Equity \(launched Dec 2023\)](#)

All ARK courses are 1-2 hours in length and are freely accessible via the AHEAD website, with an official ARK digital badge issued on completion. ARK courses, along with other resources provided by ARK, are available on demand through the AHEAD website. Additionally, institutions are able to embed ARK courses into their own professional development systems for free, due to the use of a Creative Commons license.

To promote awareness of the ARK platform, AHEAD presented a poster at ATU Sligo's annual UDL Conference in June 2023. As ARK expands, AHEAD plans on focusing more on dissemination of ARK including presenting at conferences and including ARK links in mail-outs and social media posts. Similarly, AHEAD has released ARK course content to over 10 organisations who host ARK information on their own internal CPD platforms.

2023 ARK course Completion Statistics:

In 2023, A total of 1,156 badges were issued for completion of ARK courses. This represents a notable 160% increase in completions from 2022, when only 442 badges were issued. The breakdown of badges issued is as follows:

ARK courses	Badges
Digital Accessibility – A Whole Institution Approach	307
Digital Accessibility for Educators	242
Universal Design for Learning: Getting Started	230
Designing Course Layouts for Learner Success	138
Digital Accessibility Master Badge	117
Creating an Accessibility Statement	96
Disability 101 (launched mid-December 2023)	26

At the suggested time of 120 minutes to complete one course, and 1,156 badges being issued in 2023, this equates to roughly **2,312 hours** of time spent by tertiary education staff taking ARK courses in 2023.

Note: these statistics only include those who took courses directly with AHEAD, and do not include participants who completed ARK courses embedded in internal CPD systems by HEIs and ETBs nationally.

BETTER OPTIONS - ONLINE FAIR FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES



Better Options is AHEAD's annual event for students and adults with disabilities and specific learning difficulties to explore post-secondary school options in education. The event was held online this year on November 18th. A total of 383 participants from 22 counties of Ireland registered to attend the event throughout the day. Since moving online, Better Options has continued to grow, with registration increasing from 222 in 2021, to 348 in 2022 and now 383 in 2023. The online format allows people from a wider geographical range to attend the event, which seems to be popular among the audience.

The programme for Better Options 2023 was as follows:

- **DARE to Dream - an overview of the DARE scheme** - Our first talk covered how the DARE scheme works, which colleges are included, who can apply, and how the HEAR & DARE schemes affect each other. Thuba Moyo from Maynooth University delivered this intriguing and informative talk.

- **What's out there? University and Beyond** – Better Options also covered information on full- and part-time courses in further education and training, progression routes, and adult education guidance services, delivered by Jennifer McKenzie, Guidance Specialist (formerly at NCGE). Damian Walshe from Apprenticeships Ireland talked us through all things Apprenticeship. Dr Orla Slattery the new chair of INHEF (the Inclusive National Higher Education Forum) covered the college courses available in higher education across Ireland for students with intellectual disabilities.
- **Getting College Ready** – In this section, Better Options covered everything attendees may need to know to feel college ready. These topics included: academic writing; organisation; how to break down assignments into bite-size tasks; looking after your mental health; looking for accommodation early; and why you should consider registering with the Disability Support Service. Lorraine Gallagher, Information and Training Officer at AHEAD delivered this session.
- **Assistive Technology is for Everyone** – Our final session covered how AT can help with assignments and college work, given by Deirdre Madden, assistive technology officer at UCC.

As part of Better Options, AHEAD also hosted a free one-to-one Information Video-Call Service for attendees to ask questions about their specific circumstances. This ongoing session was available by sign-up and proved very popular and helpful. Over 20 attendees with specific questions availed of this private service.

AHEAD START COURSE – SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION – 2023



With the increase in the number of students with disabilities in education, educational institutions are legally responsible under Irish law to ensure that these students are included and accommodated. AHEAD Start is a training course aimed at helping educational institute staff to support the increasing number of students with disabilities. It runs once a year and comprises 25 hours of online course material including webinars, feedback exercises, online modules, and assignments to be completed over an 8-week term.

Prior to Covid-19, AHEAD Start took a blended learning approach, both online and in-person. In 2021, AHEAD Start was redesigned and adapted to be delivered entirely online. With the success of the online format, AHEAD Start continued completely remotely and online for the 2023 roll-out.

AHEAD Start 2023 saw 46 registrants from across both the Further and Higher Education sectors, including occupational therapists, safety instructors, learning support tutors, lecturers, guidance counsellors, 'Teaching English as a Foreign Language' staff and access and inclusion officers. Due to the online format, these participants came from a wide geographical spread across Ireland.

The AHEAD Start course is broken into four online modules: (1) Disability, Attitudes, Policy and Legislation – A History; (2) Understanding Disability and its Educational Impact; (3) Supports and Reasonable Accommodations; and (4) Needs Assessment and Funding.

Supporting information sessions were delivered as online interactive webinars:

- **Webinar 1:** An introduction to the AHEAD Start course, including the online player and other online materials and resources. Barrister-at-law, Katie Ridge presented to participants on 'Understanding Legal Obligations for Educational Establishments' (January 2023).
- **Webinar 2:** 'Assistive Technology Solutions in Tertiary Education' with Danielle O'Rourke AHEAD e-Learning and Digital Media Officer (February 2023).
- **Webinar 3:** 'Demystifying Educational Psychologists' Reports' with Fiona Quinn, University College Dublin and Needs Assessment and Final Assignment' with Lorraine Gallagher, Course Tutor, Information & Training Officer, AHEAD (February 2023).
- **Webinar 4:** Drop-in session for participants to discuss the needs assessment assignment and any other questions about supporting students with disabilities.

The webinars incorporated knowledge and tips from area experts in the disability field. The sessions were designed to be interactive with participants encouraged to share ideas and experiences in small breakout rooms. All webinars were captioned, recorded, and made available on the AHEAD Start platform for those who could not make the live broadcast and for participants to re-visit if they wished.

AHEAD Start participants also completed short reflective pieces at the end of each module, posting these to the course discussion board. For the final course assignment, all participants completed a needs assessment which was submitted to the course tutor. The final course assignment involved participants completing a mock needs assessment from a choice of three fictional students. The needs assessment could be completed by using a pre-designed Word format template or by creating a submission video. AHEAD Start remains one of AHEAD's key resources for the professional development of staff involved in delivering supports for students with disabilities in Further and Higher Education.

Click [here](#) to watch the promotional video on the AHEAD Start course.

GATHER – DISCOVERING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY TOGETHER



In 2022, AHEAD hosted the inaugural gATher event. This free 3-day online event aimed to gather the AT Community in Further and Higher Education, to share ideas and insights about the multifaceted topic of AT and how it can be used to pave the way for student success. Following positive feedback from the 2022 event, AHEAD ran gATher again in 2023, running from May 22nd to May 24th.

This year, gATher was designed and presented in collaboration with NALA (the National Adult Literacy Agency) and AONTAS (the National Adult Learning Organisation), to expand the reach of the event into community education and literacy provision. The three organisations created a gATher project team which met six times from January to May 2023. The group worked collaboratively in designing the submission process, curating the programme, and devising the communications plan for gATher. This collaboration between the three organisations has proved effective in forming symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationships.

With the joint promotion of all three organisations (AHEAD, NALA, and AONTAS), over 320 people registered to attend gATher 2023. The developed programme was dynamic, thought provoking, and innovative, as shown in the highlights below.

HIGHER OPTIONS PRESENCE

AHEAD had a presenter's booth during all three days of the Irish Times' Higher Options Fair 2023 which ran from September 20th to 22nd in the RDS in Dublin. Higher Options provides students, parents, and guidance counsellors with the opportunity to discover study and employment options that are available to students upon completion of their Leaving Certificate.

AHEAD had a full booth at the event and at least two staff members per day to answer questions and provide advice to students, parents, and guidance counsellors. They received questions regarding SUSI, HEAR, and DARE schemes, options for students with specific learning disabilities, as well as options for mature students with disabilities, among others.:

- Guide to Guidance Counsellors – How to cater to students with disabilities
- Going to College Guide (recently published)
- What AHEAD Does

INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY COLLABORATION WITH IRISH UNIVERSITIES ASSOCIATION (IUA)

Running from October 2022 to April 2023, AHEAD worked with the Irish Universities Association to support the delivery of an institutional roadshow on Inclusive Mobility. This roadshow aimed to raise awareness on a range of resources and guidance documents on how to boost participation in Erasmus by disabled and other disadvantaged students. Following four Inclusive Mobility Roadshow events in 2022, 2023 saw the final two collaborative events in the following universities:

- February 15th – University of Galway
- March 1st – University College Dublin

At each roadshow event, a mix of institutional staff represented from different departments took part, including the international office, disability, access office and registrar's office.

The collaborative sessions with AHEAD and IUA served to inform a wider body of national work on inclusion in international mobility.

THE AHEAD JOURNAL – A REVIEW OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES

The online AHEAD Journal is a space in which professionals and students/graduates can share experiences and good practice, air ideas, raise concerns and explore what is going on in the world of inclusive education and employment. The AHEAD Journal features articles on UDL, disability support and inclusive employment, among other topics, and is a great space for individuals to stay abreast of trends and current happenings in the disability and inclusion field.

The AHEAD Journal has become a key method of dissemination and sharing of good practice from AHEAD and an important space to discuss issues arising in the sector. The journal also gives users a great opportunity to collaborate with key stakeholders in education and employment and offers them a platform to highlight their work.

Issue 16 of the AHEAD Journal was released in 2023, with 9 new articles published.

[Read the AHEAD journal.](#)

16th

An illustration of a woman with long brown hair, wearing a pink short-sleeved shirt and blue pants, holding a white smartphone in her right hand. She is standing to the right of the large text '16th'.

**Issue of the AHEAD Journal
was released in 2023, with
9 new articles published.**

INFORMATION EMAIL AND TELEPHONE HELPLINE

AHEAD provides an information service to the public via phone and email. The range of queries the information services deal with is very broad, ranging from questions in relation to education, troubleshooting in the workplace and knowing the rights of a disabled person.

The helpline receives calls and emails from individuals who are experiencing difficulties or have questions related to the field of disabilities that need to be addressed. Our Information and Training Officer, Lorraine Gallagher, is trained to help the individuals unpack their issues and suggest possible routes for answers. Lorraine encourages callers to develop their self-advocacy skills through signposting supports and services they can avail of.

The helpline is also contacted by staff working in colleges and across varying fields of employment throughout Ireland. In this field, people usually reach out to the helpline for guidance on best practices and procedures for supporting students and employees with disabilities.

Not only do we help individuals resolve important issues, but the information we receive also assists in shaping policy development for the sector. This information provides valuable perspectives on the experiences of students and staff in tertiary education and the workforce, giving us a glimpse of what is happening on the ground.

Theme C – Promoting UDL

**To promote the principles
of universal design for
learning (UDL) by creating an
understanding of UDL across
all learning environments**

The following section outlines key strategic education activities undertaken during the year relating to Theme C of our Strategic Plan 2019-2023.

THEME C

DIGITAL BADGE FOR UNIVERSAL DESIGN IN TEACHING AND LEARNING – UDL BADGE 2023

Please note, only the resources required by AHEAD to coordinate the higher education group undertaking this course were taken from HEA funding. Funding for the coordination of the FET group comes from SOLAS under their support for AHEAD's further education activities.



As part of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning's open access digital badge initiative, in 2017 AHEAD and UCD Access and Lifelong Learning teamed up to create the digital badge for Universal Design in Teaching and Learning. This badge is a 25-hour preparatory course covering an introduction to UDL and supporting staff to make their first UDL implementation. For participants, the course involves:

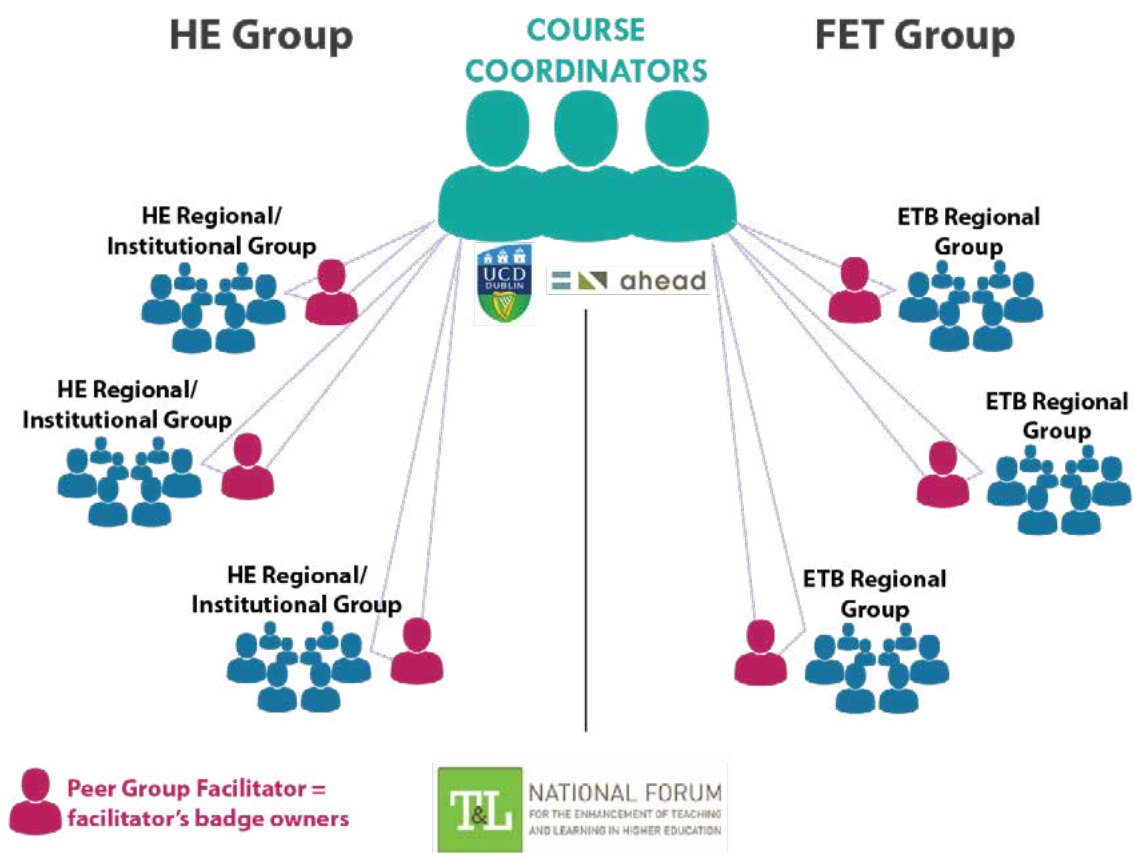
- Approximately 25 hours over 10 weeks
- 3 live webinars (orientation – what's happening)

- 5 self-directed modules (the knowledge base)
- 4 peer group meetings
- 1 redesign activity (implementing UDL in real time)
- Week 5-9 drop-ins
- Optional: Facilitator badge training – 5 hours extra.

Staff in the sector can undertake the course directly with us through our annual national roll-outs of the badge. In addition, they can also participate in training to become course facilitators themselves and roll out the badge locally in their own FET/HE institutions using the facilitators pack provided. In 2023, AHEAD ran a major national roll-out of the Digital Badge for Universal Design in Teaching and Learning with our partners in UCD Access and Lifelong Learning, running from October to December along with a short online commencement ceremony to run on February 20th 2024. The course was rolled out simultaneously to groups in FET and HE, with the resources required to coordinate the HE group provided through AHEAD's core HE funding with the HEA, and the resources required to coordinate the FET group provided through AHEAD's core FET funding with SOLAS.

Scaling with Innovative Partnership Model of UDL Badge Delivery

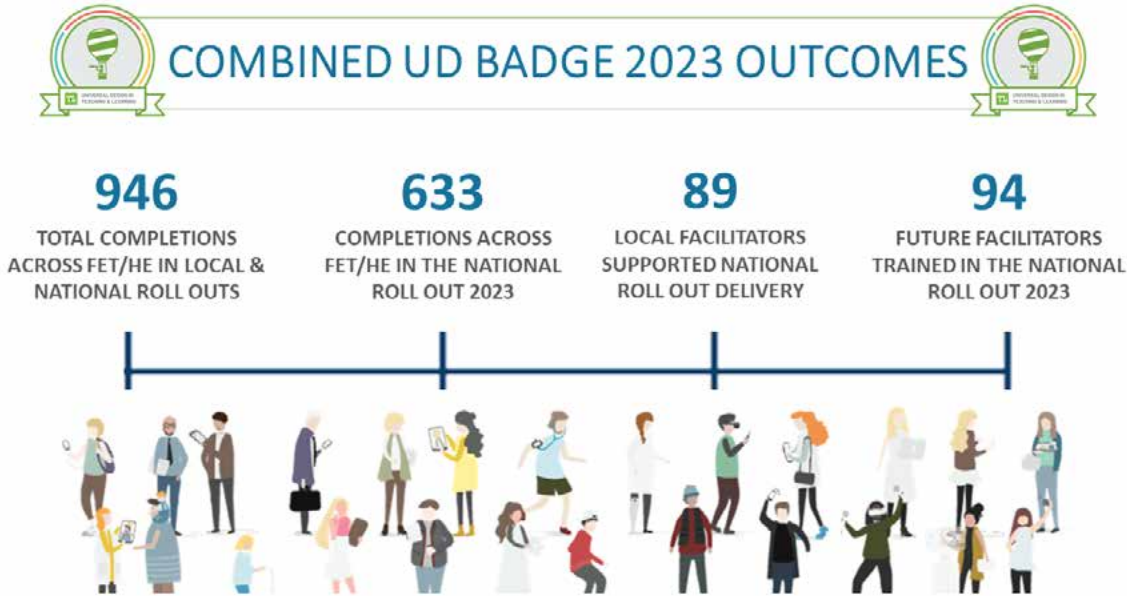
In our innovative model of course delivery which facilitates the increasing scale of delivery, AHEAD and UCD manage the central course delivery and main course communications. Previously trained Peer Group Facilitators in FET/HE institutions across the country manage local peer groups, ensuring they are moving through the course together and that the groups are functioning well.



This innovative model of delivery has enabled us to achieve a massive increase in the number of UDL badges awarded through the national roll-out of the UDL Badge across FET and HE. The increased capacity was achieved by teaming up with 89 previously trained UDL badge facilitators across 30 individual FET and HE institutions. We also offered participants the opportunity to enrol in the add-on facilitators badge which equips future facilitators with the skills they need to roll the course out in their own institutions or partner with us in our national roll-outs.

Following the registration of over 1,000 initial expressions of interest during the summer, more than 700 participants enrolled for week 1 of the course in October. After 10 weeks of learning, interacting with peers and undertaking a UDL redesign, awarding of the UDL Badge took place early in 2024. The UDL Badge was awarded to 543 individuals, 247 of whom were FET staff, and 296 of whom were HE staff.

Additionally, 90 participants were awarded the new UD Beyond the Classroom Badge (see below) as part of a national pilot programme operation by UCD and AHEAD. The addition of this new badge brought the total number of UD badges awarded in the national roll-out to 633.



Some 94 participants were also awarded their facilitator badge and will be able to support AHEAD and UCD with the roll-out of the course in the coming years. In 2023, 313 UDL badges were awarded to individuals participating in local roll-outs of the course operating in their institution, bringing the total number of UD badges issued through all methods to 946. Strong feedback was received from participants in both badges on the quality of the courses, and the impact their participation had on their practice and mindset.



UDL BADGE 2023 EVALUATION



98%

Agree or strongly agree their participation had a **significant impact on their teaching and learning practices**

99%

Rated the **quality of the course as Good, Very Good or Excellent**

97%

Said that this digital badge **deepened their understanding of UDL**



A diverse group of staff roles from tertiary education participated, including lecturers, tutors, principals and managers, occupational therapists, career advisors, technology-enhanced learning professionals, Youth Reach staff, adult literacy tutors, project managers and disability support staff.



COMBINED UD BADGE 2023 IMPACT



“This has opened the door to rethink how I approach teaching and how to ensure that I include and meet the needs of every student and learner that I interact with.”



“There was a highly affective asynchronous online learning environment which allowed participants to control the speed of their learning and catch up at a time and in a way that best suited their needs. This...both modelled best practice in terms of UDL and fostered a culture of learner autonomy that addresses the time pressures of daily working life.”



“Usually, non-teaching staff get left out – or regarded as less important than teaching staff but Universal Design is essential for all staff. Thanks for a thought-provoking course, professionally presented with excellent support throughout.”



To reward participants for their hard work, AHEAD along with the National Forum and UCD are delivering an online UDL Badge Commencement for the 2023 badge graduates in February 2024. This commencement will include a celebration of award completion, short speeches from SOLAS and the HEA, a brief outline of how the badge can be used, and a promotion for the UDL based John Kelly Awards.



Previously trained UDL badge facilitators from institutions such as the National Learning Network, University College Cork, National College of Ireland, Dublin City University, Maynooth University and NUI Galway also rolled out the UDL Badge for their own staff independently of our national roll-out in 2023, meaning a significant number of further UDL badges were issued.

A total of 3,855 UDL Badges have now been issued across the FET and HE sector since the course was developed in 2017. This online course and the associated innovative delivery model which immensely widens its reach, is key to our strategy of promoting the principles of UDL by creating an understanding of UDL in all learning environments.

Past Facilitator Feedback Event

On April 25th 2023, AHEAD and UCD hosted a feedback event for Peer Group Facilitators of the 2022 national roll-out, to capture their experiences and gather tips and advice on improvements to both the content of the course, and the model of delivery for the national roll-out. More than 50 facilitators attended the session.

This feedback was used to draw up an improvements list which the badge team worked through in advance of the national roll-out.

National Roll-Out 2023 Peer Group Facilitator Information Event

On May 29th 2023, AHEAD and UCD hosted an information session for previously trained UDL badge facilitators who were interested in supporting delivery of the 2023 national roll-out of the UDL Badge, by managing peer groups in their local institution.

More than 80 facilitators registered to attend this event, with potential collaborators advised to confirm their commitment to participate by the end of June 2023. Participants were walked through the role of a peer group facilitator, the draft schedules for the badge, the hours of expected commitment etc. Potential peer group facilitators were also told about the new 'UD Beyond the Classroom' badge and where/when they can expect to play a part in that badge delivery as well.

Facilitator Training

On Sept 5th 2024, AHEAD and UCD hosted a training day for the 89 UDL badge facilitators recruited to support the national roll-out, which helped them to understand how the course operates, and explore their precise role in supporting its delivery.

Read more about the [digital badge](#)

DIGITAL BADGE FOR UNIVERSAL DESIGN BEYOND THE CLASSROOM- 2023 PILOT



AHEAD in collaboration with UCD and the National Learning Forum have launched and undertaken the pilot running of the Universal Design Beyond the Classroom course and badge.

The course development process, including the creation of the badge, was detailed and lengthy with three separate groups working in collaboration for the formation of the course. The Steering Group (quarterly), Working Group and Technical Group (monthly) met regularly, each contributing valuable expertise to the course.

What differentiates the UD Beyond Badge from the previously launched UDL Badge is that the new badge has a wider universal design focus for professionals beyond the classroom. Rather than emphasising the educator as the main audience, the new badge will look towards a whole of institution audience, targeting all institution staff and volunteers. Ultimately, the UD Beyond the Classroom Badge will add a new dimension of universal design practice to the tertiary education landscape in Ireland. The goals for the UD Beyond Badge are as follows:

- Create a collaborative culture of student engagement to remove barriers of learning and foster equity, inclusivity, and success.
- Empower staff to support learner success beyond the classroom.
- Collaborative capacity building for success, support, and engagement of professionals to create cultural change for inclusion of all learners/students.
- Empower staff to foster cultural change, promote inclusion and support learner success beyond the classroom.

The UD Beyond Badge pilot was rolled out in 2023 targeting 90 specific institutional staff members balanced between FET and HE. After finishing the pilot programme, the participants and those who provided input for the steering, working, and technical groups are working together to provide comprehensive feedback on the course. Initial feedback gathered from participants via an anonymous questionnaire have proven very positive with 93% of participants strongly agreeing that the badge has deepened their understanding of UD. In addition, 86% of participants strongly agree that the course will have a significant impact on their practice. Despite such positive reviews, constructive and beneficial feedback was still received which will inform modifications and adaptations to the course. The intent is to publicly launch the UD Beyond the Classroom Badge and course to the wider sector alongside the regular national roll-out of the UDL Badge in October 2024.

Quotes from pilot badge feedback:

- 'Usually, non-teaching staff get left out – or regarded as less important than teaching staff but Universal Design is essential for all staff.'
- 'Fantastic opportunity, I feel everybody working in higher or further education should be encouraged to complete this course as part of workplace training!'
- 'A thought provoking-course, professionally presented with excellent support throughout.'
- 'You have developed a phenomenal resource, and I cannot praise ye enough. The badge will undoubtedly enhance the practice of many and inspire the integration of UD across multiple settings.'
- 'You have provided me not only with a knowledge base but with a change in perspective to embrace the diversity of the world we live in and apply inclusion in a tangible way to my practice. Thank you so much.'

Thanks to a tremendous collaborative effort between UCD and AHEAD, the UD Beyond the Classroom Badge will now be available to train staff in Further and Higher Education based outside of the classroom environment throughout Ireland. In what has been a very positive endeavour, AHEAD and UCD look forward to promoting the public launch of the 2024 UD Beyond the Classroom Badge and running both badges for a large national cohort once again in 2024.

'You have provided me not only with a knowledge base but with a change in perspective to embrace the diversity of the world we live in and apply inclusion in a tangible way to my practice. Thank you so much.'



'You have developed a phenomenal resource, and I cannot praise ye enough. The badge will undoubtedly enhance the practice of many and inspire the integration of UD across multiple settings.'

THE JOHN KELLY AWARDS FOR UNIVERSAL DESIGN IN FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION 2023



As part of AHEAD's ongoing partnership with UCD Access and Lifelong Learning concerning the promotion of UDL through the UDL Badge, both organisations have collaboratively redeveloped and expanded the John Kelly Awards.

To allow institutions and organisations the opportunity to further embed and develop UDL within their institutions, the Collaborative John Kelly award category will return in-person in 2024, hosted by the 2022 winners Atlantic Technical University. The 2023 awards focused solely on the individual awards for FET and HE professionals.

Applications and Review

The John Kelly Awards received over 20 applications with a more balanced breakdown between FET and higher education than in previous years. The applications were delivered to a strong international expert review panel to score and shortlist, with each application being scored multiple times by different judges.

The shortlisted finalists were as follows:



Further Education & Training

Marie Collins
CDETB

Aoife Keaney
NLN

Geraldine Kyle
KCETB

Celia O'Shea
Kerry College

Higher Education

Kate Dunne
ATU Connemara

Pauline Logue
ATU

Jenny Moffett
RCSI

Trish O'Connell
ATU Galway City

Final Event

The revamped John Kelly Awards aim to celebrate and recognise excellence in the embedding of UD in both individual practice and, more systematically, through strategic collaborative action. This year the John Kelly Awards were held in an online-only format on Tuesday, November 14th with only the individual award categories celebrated. It is planned to return to a hybrid event in 2024 celebrating all categories, in collaboration with the ATU Sligo UDL Conference.

2023 Event Outline

- Finalists Presentations (FET): Marie Collins CDETБ, Aoife Keaney NLN, Geraldine Kyle KCETB and winner Celia O'Shea Kerry College.
- Finalists Presentations (HE): Kate Dunne ATU Connemara, Pauline Logue ATU, Trish O'Connell ATU Galway City and winner Jenny Moffett RCSI.
- Keynote from [Dr Loui Lord Nelson](#) on Sustaining Momentum in UDL (Judges convening in background to decide winners).
- Panel discussion moderated by Daniel Elliott UCD; including Dr Loui Lord Nelson, and the winners of the John Kelly Awards 2022; Dr Maureen Haran, Dr Niamh Plunkett, Dr Anita Byrne.

182 professionals registered to attend the John Kelly Awards in 2023.

The presenter slides from the John Kelly Awards are available [here](#)

The recording of the John Kelly Awards is available [here](#)

UDL FOR FET PRACTITIONERS GUIDANCE AND RESOURCE HUB

The UDL for FET Practitioners guidance features guidance and real-life examples of UDL for FET practice. The associated resource hub includes:

- The full guidance document (book length)
- A summary version for learning at a glance
- A suite of reflective tools to be used in conjunction with the guidance
- An online resource hub including more resources and video case studies.



In 2023, AHEAD continued to update the resource hub adding new case study videos, and links to new resources in the sector. This resource hub, along with the UDL Badge, acts as a cornerstone of AHEAD's work to build a greater understanding of UDL practice in FET and is a key resource for all FET and HE practitioners.

AHEAD has continued to actively promote the UDL for FET resource hub, and the hub has received thousands of views on the AHEAD website across 2023. This highlights how important this resource has become within the FET sector. The resource is also viewable by direct link on the SOLAS and ETBI websites.

The UDL for FEY practitioners guidance and resource hub are available [here](#)

AHEAD
Capacity
Building

AHEAD EVENTS

AHEAD delivered 18 events (details of each are provided above) in 2023 for which a total of 2,954 people registered. These events have been designed to help AHEAD achieve its strategic goals and objectives related to creating inclusive environments in the field of education and employment. Examples of key events include the highly successful WAMinar series, AHEAD Annual International Conference (delivered in hybrid format), the Building the Future Careers Fair, the Better Options college fair for students with disabilities, GATHER and GetAHEAD's Think Twice Workshops.

TAILORED TRAINING IN EDUCATION

AHEAD delivered 85 (up 13% from 2022) direct training sessions to approximately 1,882 (up 38%) participants across the employment and education sectors on request in 2023.

Key themes of the trainings conducted include disability awareness, inclusive recruitment, the implementation of the universal design for learning framework, excellence in supporting students with disabilities in all aspects of education including extracurricular activities, assistive technologies, and digital accessibility.

Please note that these figures only include the tailored training sessions we delivered in 2023 at the request of individual organisations. They do not include participation in our regular training programmes, such as AHEAD Start, the Digital Badge for Universal Design in Teaching and Learning, ARK courses and the online training that is integral to participation in WAM.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO EXTERNAL EVENTS

Collaboration and shared learning are central to all of AHEAD's undertakings. AHEAD is committed to networking with and amplifying the experiences of learners, students and graduates with disabilities and staff across education and employment.

A sample of the 26 external events AHEAD staff contributed directly to via presentations or as exhibitors are:

- The ETBI National Conference
- The 'UDL: Climbing the Ladder' National Conference
- The Maynooth University/CAST UDL Conference
- The QQI AI Webinar Series
- The DLO Network Conference

Additionally, AHEAD staff participated actively in 37 other external events such as:

- Inclusion Ireland – Make Your Workplace Work For Everyone
- National Academic Integrity Masterclass w/Kane Murdoch
- QQI Conference: 20 years of the NFQ
- NAPD Annual Conference
- As I Am Annual Conference

COMMUNICATION AND ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

AHEAD's website and social media channels remain a key tool in supporting us to deliver information and advice to our key stakeholders and to raise awareness of our work.

The website provides information for students on how to access college and make the most of their college experience. It also offers guidance for graduates on looking for work, for staff in education seeking best practice for supporting students and for employers interested in inclusive recruitment.

Key stats relating to our online presence and our stakeholder engagement with it include:

- Due to Google discontinuing Google Analytics and launching a new platform, it is not possible to confirm the number of website page views for 2023.
- 35.6% open rate on our weekly mailout. An open rate of 25% would be industry standard and in 2022 our open rate was 30%, meaning we are performing exceptionally.
- 73,929 views on our YouTube channel in 2023.
- 7,864 total followers on our Twitter Account – 346 new followers added in 2023, a good increase considering the fragility of the platform since the changeover in Twitter management and algorithm updates which have made reach more challenging.
- 7.3K total likes on our Facebook page.
- 4,704 followers on our LinkedIn account – an increase of 1,759 (60%) from 2022.

While the overall number of LinkedIn followers may seem smaller than our other accounts, the LinkedIn algorithm prioritises engagement (likes, shares, comments) over reach which means that we have a very engaged audience. We aim to continue growing the LinkedIn audience as a means to grow the WAMworks database and general profile of WAM.

AHEAD

Organisational Matters

OUR TEAM

AHEAD would like to recognise the huge contribution of our team of staff in delivering on our strategic goals and undertaking a significant body of work in 2023. Their commitment to quality outcomes for students and graduates with disabilities underpins all of our activities.

AHEAD MEMBERSHIP

AHEAD recognises the importance of support from, and collaboration with, its member organisations, which are predominantly made up of higher education institutions, education and training boards (ETBs), private colleges and related NGOs/representative bodies. The funding that membership fees generate and the positive engagement that results from AHEAD's relationship with its members is vital to AHEAD's mission to create inclusive environments in education.

The income from membership fees supplements and supports the grants provided by our key funders in education and employment, supports the sustainability of the organisation, and enables us to achieve much more than would otherwise be possible.

GOVERNANCE

Our Board is committed to attaining the highest standards of corporate governance. AHEAD is compliant with the Charities Governance Code, a code of practice for good governance in the charities sector. Visit [the Charities Governance Code](#) for more information. We review our organisation's compliance with the principles in the Code annually and we confirm that our organisation is committed to the standards outlined in these principles.

Specifically, among other good governance standards the following are in place:

- Role of Chair and CEO separate.
- Board of Directors independent of Management.
- Board Members are voluntary and unpaid.
- Regular Board Meetings.
- Board Handbook and related policies in place and associated Code of Conduct for the Board.
- Board roles and responsibilities of the Board as a whole for individual Directors, Secretary, Treasurer and the Chair are clearly set out.
- Employee Handbook in place with associated policies and procedures for staff.
- Formal and In-depth performance and development system exists and is carried out annually with all staff.
- Separate induction process for new directors and staff.
- Financial Information presented at every board meeting.
- Directors periodically undertake a strategic planning process involving Directors, Senior Leadership Team, staff and other stakeholders. The Directors agree the basic values of AHEAD at this process and review the legal form and Constitution.
- Annual Report is published and accounts are independently audited.
- Four Board subcommittees exist: Governance; Recruitment and Remuneration; Succession Planning; and Research. Terms of Reference set out for each committee.

- A risk policy is in place and the risk register is reviewed at quarterly Senior Leadership Team meetings to identify risks and determine ways to manage them. Risk is a standing item on the Board agenda.

We believe good governance is essential to demonstrate high levels of transparency and accountability to all our stakeholders and funders.

Many improvements to the governance of the organisation have been implemented during the reporting year, many of which have boosted our compliance with the Charities Governance Code. They include:

- Completion of the Strategic Plan 2024 to 2028.
- Ongoing quarterly risk reviews of the risk register.
- Review of succession in the Board. The Board Succession Review Committee was formed to review such matters with a view to strengthen the Board's performance.
- A Board self-evaluation was completed.
- The review and updating of the Employee Handbook.
- New policies on reserves, apportionment of expenditure, Garda vetting (all staff are now garda vetted), health & safety.
- We proactively record the percentage of the staff who have a disclosed disability, recorded as 65% as of December 31st 2023.

Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty

All public bodies in Ireland have responsibility to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of their employees, customers, service users and everyone affected by their plans and policies. This is a legal obligation called the [Public Sector Equality and Human rights Duty](#). Although AHEAD does not meet the definition of a public body under the relevant legislation, as an organisation with the majority of its funding from public sources, we have nonetheless made a commitment to satisfy this Public Sector Equality and Duty requirement.

There are three principles which are required to permeate the planning, operation, and delivery of services by a public body:

- Eliminate discrimination.
- Promote equality of opportunity and treatment for staff and the public.
- Protect the human rights of staff and service users.

In adopting our Strategic Plan 2024-2028 we have embedded human rights policies which will inform the culture of AHEAD over that term.

In our work, AHEAD is aware of human rights and equality considerations. Some examples in our work includes accessible website, promoting accessible recruitment in AHEAD and in the WAM Programme. AHEAD has a workforce where 65% of our employees have disclosed a disability.

The Senior Leadership Team has been tasked with looking at embedding Public Sector Duty in AHEAD's policies and procedures, reflecting our commitment to the Duty.

OVERVIEW OF ENERGY USAGE 2023

Energy Usage

- **Grid Electricity:** 4,093 kWh
- **Thermal:** 4,378 kWh
- **Renewable:** 0 kWh TFC
- **Consumption (TPER):** 2.9% better than 2022
- **Consumption (TPER):** 38.4% better than the baseline

AHEAD
Financial
Statement

AHEAD FINANCIAL STATEMENT

INCOME	2022 €	2023 €
Department of Social Protection – Get AHEAD	90,000	95,250
Department of Social Protection - WAM	300,000	359,236
Higher Education Authority	325,146	336,000
SOLAS	244,050	268,261
AHEAD Training/Research	15,361	13,208
Membership	31,289	42,900
AHEAD conference	4,114	23,998
Publications	-	-
TOTAL INCOME	1,009,960	1,138,853

EXPENDITURE	2022 €	2023 €
Wages and salaries	707,736	759,949
Training Costs	36,371	26,597
Conferences and meetings	50,297	100,903
Printing and stationery	3,711	13,392
Travel and subsistence	8,612	16,443
Professional fees	77,299	55,444
IT & Web Development	86,161	52,772
Other expenses	42,676	65,929
Depreciation	16,761	17,860
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	1,029,624	1,109,289

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Thank you

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AHEAD

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