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Shaping a
future where
students with
disabilities can
succeed

Looking AHEAD

Association for Higher
Education Access & Disability

**Strategic Plan
2015-2018**

AHEAD Strategic Plan 2015-2018

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Foreword from the board

As we look to and plan for the future, we do so against the backdrop of considerable change in higher education. More than ever before, there is now a greater emphasis on employment outcomes; a revolution in the application and use of technology; a greater understanding of learning, and a growing diversity in the student population. Part of this combination is an ever-increasing number of students with disabilities, all of whom have expectations of qualifications and careers, just like any other student.

Transitions of students with disabilities has been a key driver in past strategic objectives of AHEAD. That is, the movement of students with disabilities into higher education, and from higher education into the world of work. Our vision for the future is to shift the emphasis from 'transitions' to a focus on building an inclusive

learning environment in higher education that embeds flexibility and equality into learning and assessment practices across all higher education courses. We believe that the way to improve the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education is to embrace the principles of Universal Design for Learning in the design, planning and delivery of all activities and services. Therefore, a central anchor of this strategic plan is a commitment to the concept of Universal Design for Learning in education and employment.

This strategic plan is devised following consultation with a range of stakeholders including staff, the Board of Directors and external agencies. The Board of AHEAD extends its appreciation and thanks to all who participated in the process.

Members of the board

Professor Brendan Goldsmith

DIT (Chairperson)

Patricia Byrne

IADT Access Officer Representative (Secretary)

Andrew Blair

Bank of Ireland

Dr Ted Fleming

NUI Maynooth

Dr Phil Halligan

UCD

Annie Hoey

USI

Tina Lowe

UCD

Dr Marian McCarthy

UCC

Karen Money

NCI DARE Representative

Professor Micheal Shevlin

TCD

Vision

Shaping a future where students with disabilities can succeed.

Mission

To empower more students to succeed in education and graduate employment.

We Value

- A rights-based approach to the inclusion of people with disabilities in education and employment.
- The ability to deliver an independent and impartial voice to the community we serve.
- Collaboration, partnerships and engagement with key external stakeholders.
- The incorporation of the principles of Universal Design for Learning into the Irish education system

AHEAD seeks to achieve its mission by pursuing the following core strategic themes:

Theme A

To influence national policy to impact positively on the inclusion of students with disabilities in education and employment

Theme B

To develop AHEAD's existing and emerging partnerships and build on its successes

Theme C

To build relationships within the higher education sector to promote the integration of the principles of Universal Design for Learning in education and employment

Theme D

To sustain and grow the organisation of AHEAD through engagement with key strategic partners

Theme A

To influence national policy to impact positively on the inclusion of students with disabilities in education and employment

AHEAD will seek to influence national policy

1. by undertaking relevant research
 2. by hosting national and international events
 3. by providing information & training
 4. by lobbying at local and national levels
 5. by advocating the rights of students and graduates with disabilities
 6. by developing collaboration
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1. Research

- Undertake research that will lead to an improvement in access to education and employment for ALL students with disabilities.

2. National & international events

- Host national and international conferences and sponsored events on key relevant issues.
- Utilise these platforms to develop and engage with key stakeholders and agencies to ensure the incorporation of the principles of Universal Design for Learning in education and employment.

3. Information & training provision

- Build awareness and know-how on 'inclusivity' in education and employment through the delivery of practical and tailor-made training, with an emphasis on developing online learning and engagement.
- Share our knowledge and expertise to build staff capacity in the further education sector to cater for students with disabilities.
- Support the newly formed Educational and Training Boards (ETBs) to develop a more systematic approach to the management of their students with disabilities.

4. Lobby at local, national and international levels

- Highlight access to education and employment issues for students/graduates with disabilities at every opportunity and across all sectors.
- Advocate the building of an inclusive assessment system in education and employment through the promotion of the concept of Universal Design for Learning.

5. Advocate the right to be included in all aspects of education

- Lobby the HEA to remove the barriers to progression from further education into higher education.
- Campaign that part-time students with disabilities have access to support services in higher education.
- Raise awareness of the needs of students with disabilities on outgoing mobility programmes, such as Erasmus plus programmes, through the provision of training seminars to upskill and build capacity of relevant staff.

6. Develop collaboration

- Acknowledge relationship building as an inherent strategic component of all undertakings.
- Invest resources into building and developing knowledge and expertise through the maintenance of existing relationships and through continual linking up with new networks of practitioners and professionals, both nationally and internationally.

AHEAD sets out to develop its existing partnerships

1. by maximising its impact through working with its Membership Forum
 2. by providing networks of graduates currently making the transition from third-level education to full time employment - **Student Connect**
 3. by working with and supporting employers to create a more inclusive workplace - **Graduate Connect**
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1. Membership – a forum for mutual learning & knowledge exchange

- Consult and collaborate with member institutions of higher education to undertake collaborative research and disseminate findings.
- Promote an understanding of the requirements of operational staff and students alike to foster inclusion in the higher education system.

2. Student Connect – a forum for students/ graduates with disabilities

- Target students and graduates with disabilities through the 'GetAHEAD' initiative.
- Improve employment opportunities by operating an open-door policy to students of ALL disabilities.
- Provide a safe space in which students/graduates can openly chat about their disability-related issues.
- Provide a direct face-to-face access link to employers where students/graduates can freely explore the world of work.

3. Graduate Connect – creating a more inclusive workplace

- Act as a conduit of learning between higher education and the world of work in relation to the transitioning of graduates with disabilities through the 'Willing Able Mentoring' (WAM) work placement initiative.
- Create direct engagement platforms which complement the GetAHEAD initiative and which promote direct engagement between employers and graduates.
- Build employer networks that examine and generate practical work-orientated solutions to operational issues, with a focus on 'inclusive work practices'.
- Develop and deliver the WAM Mentoring Programme that engages with and supports on the ground staff participating in the WAM work placement initiative.

Theme C

To build relationships within the higher education sector to promote the integration of the principles of Universal Design for Learning in education and employment

AHEAD will seek to achieve this goal

1. by establishing AHEAD as a resource for Universal Design for Learning
 2. by enhancing and sharing knowledge of Universal Design for Learning and mutual learning in higher education
 3. by building expertise in, and knowledge of, Universal Design for Learning through the development of and engagement with national and international partnerships
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1. Establish AHEAD as a resource for Universal Design for Learning

- Develop AHEAD's capacity to build a go-to resource on the principles of Universal Design for Learning in education and employment, and share this knowledge with our partners and stakeholders.

2. Enhance and share knowledge of Universal Design for Learning through engagement with national and international stakeholders

- Collaborate with key players and policy makers in the higher education sector to advocate the adoption of a policy of universal design for learning.

3. Develop knowledge exchange and mutual learning

- Create forums to exchange knowledge and learning with occupational and operational staff and with national and international networks.

Theme D

To sustain and grow the
organisation of AHEAD
through engagement with
key strategic partners

AHEAD seeks to achieve organisational development

1. by proactively communicating AHEAD as a resource for Universal Design for Learning with expertise across further and higher education and employment
 2. by providing relevant material across the education and employment sectors through the development of its online multimedia presence
 3. by engaging in useful dialogue with the HEA and other government agencies to champion the rights of students with disabilities
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1. Communicate AHEAD as a resource for Universal Design for Learning

- Consolidate the collective learning and outcomes from AHEAD's strategic alliances and partners.
- Proactively publicise and share AHEAD's knowledge, resources and expertise with its members, network of partners and other professionals working in the field of access to education and employment for students/ graduates with disabilities.
- Showcase organisational successes on an on-going basis.

2. Develop its online multimedia presence

- Provide appropriate high quality material through its online journals, web and social media to wider audiences.

3. Champion the rights of students with disabilities

- Engage in useful discourse with the HEA and other State agencies to champion the rights of students with disabilities to access further and higher education and employment.

Context

This Strategic Plan, entitled Looking AHEAD 2015-2018, sets out AHEAD's strategic priorities and future direction. Core to fulfilling its Vision/Mission statements is the building of a shared vision around the disability agenda with key partnerships and external agencies. The symbiotic relationship between AHEAD and the Higher Education Authority (HEA), has been instrumental to its development and success. Equally, the support of the Department of Social Protection has enabled AHEAD to highlight the gap between education and employment for graduates with disabilities and to work with employers on bridging that gap. As we plan for future engagement across the education and employment spectrums, we do so with their backing as expressed within the consultation process of this strategic plan.

The Higher Education Authority – championing the rights of students with disabilities

“AHEAD is an independent non-profit organisation working to promote full access to, and participation in, further and higher education for students with disabilities and to enhance their employment prospects on graduation. One of the Higher Education Authority’s (HEA) core strategic objectives is the achievement of greater equality of access to higher education and the HEA and AHEAD have worked in partnership since the early 1990s in pursuing this objective for people with disabilities. AHEAD complements, supports and advises the HEA and the higher education sector in developing and implementing policies and practices to advance equity of access and participation in higher education by people with disabilities.

Recent initiatives that have been supported by AHEAD include the development and implementation of three national access plans by the Department of Education and Skills, the HEA and the higher education sector. AHEAD has also advised work by institutions on the development of admission routes to higher education, in particular the Disability Access Route to Higher Education (DARE). The organisation has co-ordinated the publication of good practice guidelines for providers of supports and services for students with disabilities as well as the development of a Charter for Inclusive Teaching and Learning and the promotion of national and international best practice for universal design.”

The Department of Social Protection - supporting employment progression for graduates with disabilities

The mission of the Department of Social Protection is ‘To promote active participation and inclusion in society through the provision of income supports, employment services and other services’. To this end, the Department focuses on maximising employability by providing among other support, targeted activation and training referral and employment services. The Department strategies in this regard are reflected in the supports that it provides to AHEAD through two interacting programmes: Willing Able Mentoring and Get AHEAD. Both of these programmes focus on and provide supports to students and graduates with disabilities.

Thanks to deliberate Government policy of mainstream education and support, students with disabilities now have the expectation of further and higher education and careers. However, it is acknowledged that young adults with disabilities have less straightforward access to employment and have a greater risk of long term unemployment. The activities that these programmes provide, such as job fairs and supports for graduates with a disability seeking employment, work placements for graduates with disabilities and employer engagement, provide a tailored approach to assisting graduates with a disability transition into employment. The programmes also complement the work of the Department of Social Protection’s new integrated employment and supports service INTREO, which is currently being rolled out across the country.

Challenges AHEAD

There are a number of external factors, the outcomes of which are as yet unknown, that may impact on the implementation of this plan. The key issues for AHEAD in the coming years are:

- The nature of annual core funding, which makes it difficult to plan over the longer term. All AHEAD activities are contingent on its ability to secure matching funds.
- To build on its collaboration with the HEA to influence the development of national policy on the progression of students with disabilities into higher education.
- Through its designated role of disability representative on the Educational Training Boards (ETBs), AHEAD will need to try to find the resources to support this sector to develop systems and structures that are inclusive of students of all disabilities.
- To highlight the barriers and blocks that some students with disabilities in the second-level education system¹ are encountering and to propose solutions to improve their situation. This will require the building of key contacts to systematically inform the policy decision-makers in this sector.
- AHEAD is a small organisation with limited resources and cannot, on its own, bring about certain changes. Therefore, it will need to further develop its role as a consensus builder with key groups and agencies in the education and employment sectors.

¹ Improving Second-level Education: Using Evidence for Policy Development:
Author(s): Smyth, Emer / McCoy, Selina: ESRI
Economic Renewal Series 005
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