INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Position Paper:

A road map for disability support in higher education in Ireland

DAWN
Disability Advisors Working Network
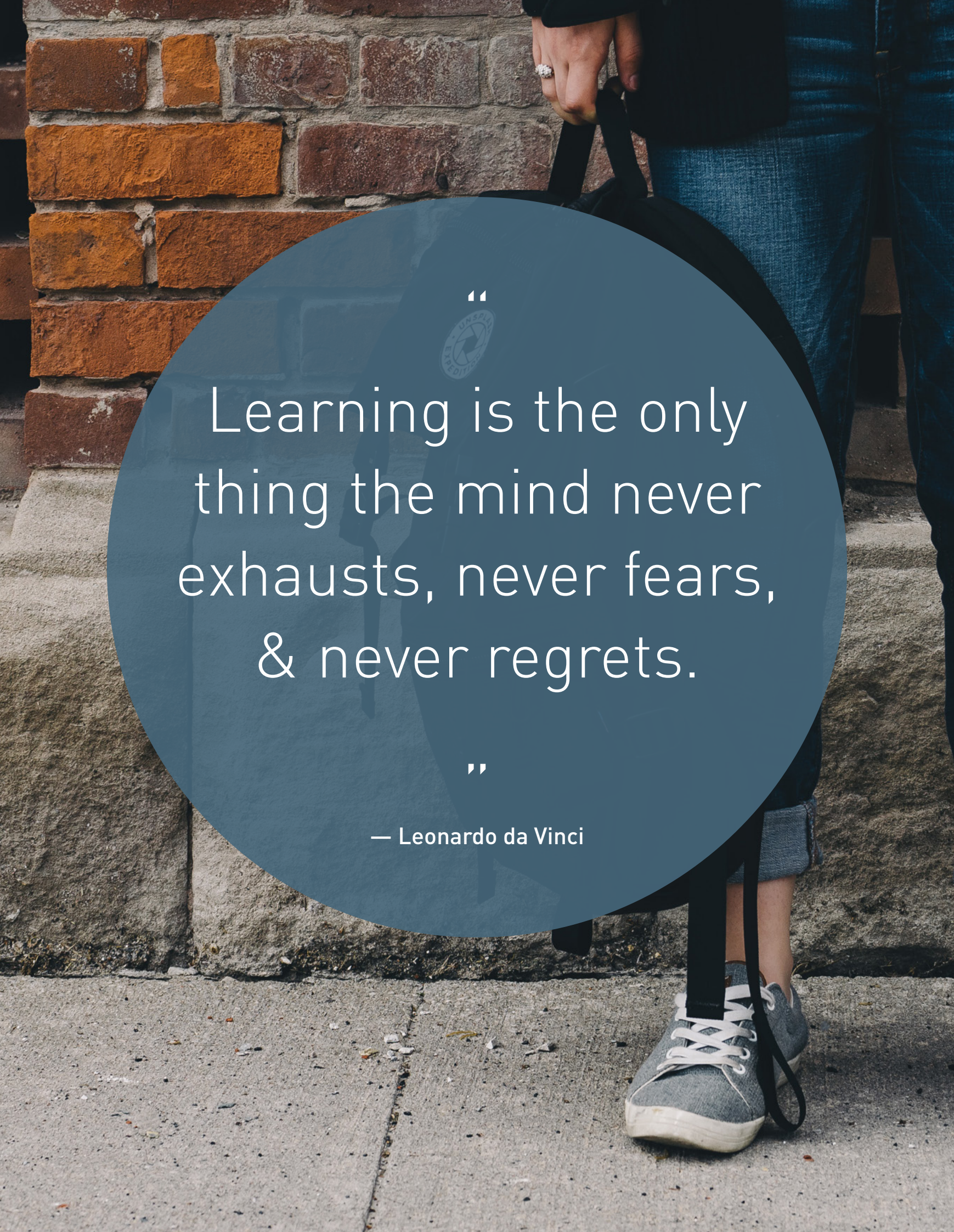
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Association for Higher Education Access & Disability

Introduction

Inclusive Learning and the Provision of Reasonable Accommodations to Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in Ireland, is a report produced by the Disability Advisers Working Network (DAWN) in collaboration with the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD). It brings together two years of research on the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education and concludes that an inclusive approach based on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles would provide an effective framework to include and improve the retention of, not only students with disabilities, but a diverse range of students including migrants, mature students, international students, and students from different socio-economic backgrounds. This paper will outline the benefits of taking such an approach to catering for diversity in higher education.

Learning is the only thing the mind never exhausts, never fears, & never regrets.

— Leonardo da Vinci

How to use this document

This document is part of a series of 3 publications and an online resource:

1   **Position Paper** - A road map for disability support in higher education in Ireland.

2   **Inclusive Learning and the Provision of Reasonable Accommodations to Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in Ireland.**

3   **Establishing an Inclusive Learning Environment - The Role of the Disability Service in Higher Education in Ireland – A Vision for Future Development.**

4   **Online resource/manua**l outlining good practices in Inclusive Learning and the Provision of Reasonable Accommodations for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in Ireland – coming 2018.

Background

Culturally, the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education has been evolving over the past 30 years. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, two key actions were influential in getting the process started. Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and University College Dublin (UCD) set up AHEAD in 1988 as an agency to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education and in 1994, seeing the need for equity for students with disabilities, the Minister for Education set up the Fund for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education. This fund worked in two ways. Firstly, it removed the perceived financial burden on institutions to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities such as readers, scribes, assistive technology, additional study supports, and extra time in exams. Secondly, it facilitated the development of disability/access support services across the sector, which in turn provided this cohort of students with reasonable accommodations/supports, without which they could not meet their course demands.

Of equal significance is the evolution of innovative inclusive practices in higher education; the development of knowledge about how students with certain types of disabilities learn differently; the acquisition of skills to support a diversity of learners; and the use of assistive technology enhanced learning. However, the diverse student body in higher education today requires a far more innovative and problem-solving approach to teaching and learning. We believe that access to higher education for under-represented students is at a crossroads

of reduced funding, proposed student loans and myths about the characteristics of what constitutes 'the best' students. Greater attention needs to be paid to the inclusion of the diverse student body now in higher education. Disability support services throughout the sector can lead the way and can show how small innovations initiated for individual students can lead to bigger changes that build the capacity of institutions to respond and adapt to diversity.

Challenges: a new demographic

Today, there is considerable diversity in our higher education system including many students from traditionally under-represented groups such as those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, mature students, migrants, and students with disabilities. It can be anticipated that the participation of students from under-represented groups in higher education will increase in line with the goals set out in the Higher Education Authority National Access Plan 2015-2019.

The numbers of students with disabilities in higher education is increasing year-on-year and now stands at over 11,000 representing 5.2% (AHEAD 2016)[1] of the student population. The cohort of students with disabilities consists of individuals with visible and invisible disabilities, and the objective is to ensure that they have the same opportunities as any other student to maximize their success. The development of disability support services together with advances in technology have made a positive impact on the ability of students with disabilities to study independently and to graduate.

As part of the evolution of disability support services, the network of Disability/Access Officers (DAWN) have developed national standards for the provision of reliable disability support services across the sector, in relation to processes such as admissions (DARE), needs assessments, examination supports, and criteria for receiving additional disability supports.

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1 AHEAD, Numbers of Students with Disabilities Studying in Higher Education in Ireland 2015/16, AHEAD Educational Press, Dublin 2016.

These national standards ensure that students can rely on a similar level of service provision, irrespective of which college they attend. In parallel with recent developments in higher education, there have been significant shifts towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in the mainstream second-level education system, as a result of targeted policies by the Department of Education and Skills. These changes have generated higher expectations among students with a range of disabilities and their parents, of full participation in higher education and prospects of a successful career. These outcomes should be viewed as a huge success for the sector, given that just twenty years ago this cohort had little prospect of university qualifications, let alone the expectation of a professional career.

However, while the journey so far has been successful, it comes with a word of caution. So far the inclusion of students with disabilities has been built on a model of add-on supports provided to students through the Fund for Students with Disabilities. Twenty three years on from the introduction of the Fund (1994) it is clear that this model is no longer sustainable and needs an overhaul. There has since been a steady annual increase in the numbers of students with disabilities in higher education, a rise in the cost of adding-on individualised, specialised supports and, furthermore, a general shift in thinking regarding the concept of inclusion of students in college life. In the past, students with disabilities who were provided with specialised supports were expected to assimilate into the general practice of institutions.

However, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities advocates a human rights model of inclusion and argues that persons with disabilities deserve the same treatment as anyone else. There has also been a shift in National Policy and the HEA emphasises the need to implement a more mainstream approach to inclusion to *"enhance the quality of the learning experience and progression outcomes of all students"*[2].

Providing a fully inclusive learning environment for all students is complex and creating a culture of engagement and inclusion of all students requires a shift in thinking and a change of behaviour at an institutional level. In this ever changing higher education environment, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides an effective framework to improve the learning experience of all students within a mainstream teaching environment. With inclusive curriculum design that is based on an understanding of the variability of student needs, together with a more flexible approach to teaching and assessment, the majority of student needs can be addressed within mainstream learning environments. The move to create inclusive learning environments is a challenge, but it is already happening to some degree within institutions and is promoted by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning. It is also aligned with the framework of HEA performance compacts 2014-16, which directs higher education institutions towards their objective of achieving equal access for under-represented groups and increasing student participation. Taking a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach to inclusion across the whole institution, its systems and processes, will provide an effective model for managing a diversity of students across this sector. The UDL model requires the involvement of all staff, meaning it is everyone's job to build a culture that respects difference and empowers all students to achieve.

2 National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019. (2015). Dublin

Universal Design for Learning

UDL: an inclusive approach

An approach that includes all students comes under the name of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

The HEA anticipates in its National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education that the numbers of disadvantaged students will continue to increase and it has specifically targeted students with sensory disabilities, migrants, and members of the travelling community as groups requiring more support. This will put increasing pressures on the sector to come up with ways to ensure equality for all of this diversity of students.

AHEAD, together with DAWN, strongly advocate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in higher education as a model of inclusive practice that can cater for a diverse student base including students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, mature students, members of the travelling community, international students and students with disabilities, including students with mental health difficulties and specific learning difficulties. UDL is an inclusive approach that helps institutions build a system in which all students have meaningful and challenging learning experiences that enable them to succeed. The development of inclusive learning systems may require a change in how we think about educational practice and a move towards developing a broader pedagogy in order to respond to a diversity of students. Therefore, responding to diversity also demands a commitment from all staff and institution management to recognise

that it is everyone's job, not just the role of a dedicated support team. The traditional system of teaching and learning favours the academically high achieving school leaver and embeds many barriers to learning for non–traditional learners, who form a big part of the student cohort in many institutions. UDL has the advantage of meeting the learning needs of most students by embedding a choice of learning activities, scaffolding and technology into a continuum of mainstream teaching and study supports. Robust academic and occupational standards of courses are maintained together with the requirement to meet national and international standards in equity and human rights. To date the model of support for students who have a disability and other non- traditional student groups has been an add-on, retrofit model. In this model, additional supports are added on to mainstream provision in a segregated manner through the disability office, mature student services, international offices etc. However, this model is not sustainable due the growth in student numbers, as it is unrealistic to keep adding on expensive supports to the mainstream service provision in increasing quantities.

This add-on specialist model is obsolete and ethically unsound. It has the potential to discriminate against students who are placed outside of the mainstream functions within higher education and it risks non-compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) article 24.5 which states that:

"States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others".

The UNCRPD intends to protect the rights of people with disabilities and most EU countries have ratified the convention, with Ireland due to follow suit in 2018. The convention sets specific requirements for how member states should enact policies to ensure that persons with disabilities can fulfil essential human rights such as access to education. The UNCRPD defines universal design and accessibility as key facets in the development of an inclusive environment. The ideology of universal design originated in the USA as a building design concept and its principles have now influenced other areas such as education and information & communication technology (ICT), both in the US and across the EU.

A systematic approach to inclusion

Moving to a UDL model in managing diversity means a change of thinking and practice across the whole institution. According to the UDLL Erasmus project 2016[3] , this means that any change in one area of the system has a knock-on effect on the preceding and following parts, creating a domino-type effect. For example, if the admissions policy of an institution positively discriminates in favour of admitting students with visual impairments and blindness, then this will have an impact on all other areas - for example how the institution provides accessible information, how ICT is embedded in teaching, how the library provides eBooks and how performance is examined.

The time is right to explore UDL as a solution to diversity in HEIs. Most institutions have centres of education and teaching and learning to support academic staff and there is an established National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning to incentivise and direct changes. Yet, institutions have been slow to adopt the principles of inclusion in their mainstream practice and changes in teaching and learning practice have been taking place largely in isolation. Often, students with disabilities have not been perceived as key stakeholders in many change initiatives taking place, for example the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning ICT initiative.

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3 Universal Design for Learning - A Best Practice Guideline. (2016). 2016: Universell/NTNU.

REPORT:

Inclusive Learning & the Provision of Reasonable Accommodations to Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in Ireland

Introduction

In response to the challenges outlined in this document and the opportunities that the concept of UDL affords to meet them, AHEAD, in collaboration with DAWN, have drafted a report detailing a vision of how an inclusive model like UDL would work for all students, including those with disabilities. To work, Universal Design for Learning requires the support of national policies and implementation frameworks, along with commitment across the whole institution to reducing barriers in the learning environment and in turn a recognition that inclusion requires a continuum of supports that reaches from the classroom to the disability support officer and incorporates the provision of reasonable accommodations, (see figure 1 below). The report Inclusive Learning and the Provision of Reasonable Accommodations to Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in Ireland details guidelines for the allocation of reasonable accommodations through the disability support services. Not only are reasonable accommodations a legal requirement but they are essential to the retention and progression of students with disabilities and often address barriers that cannot be addressed in the mainstream academic practice.
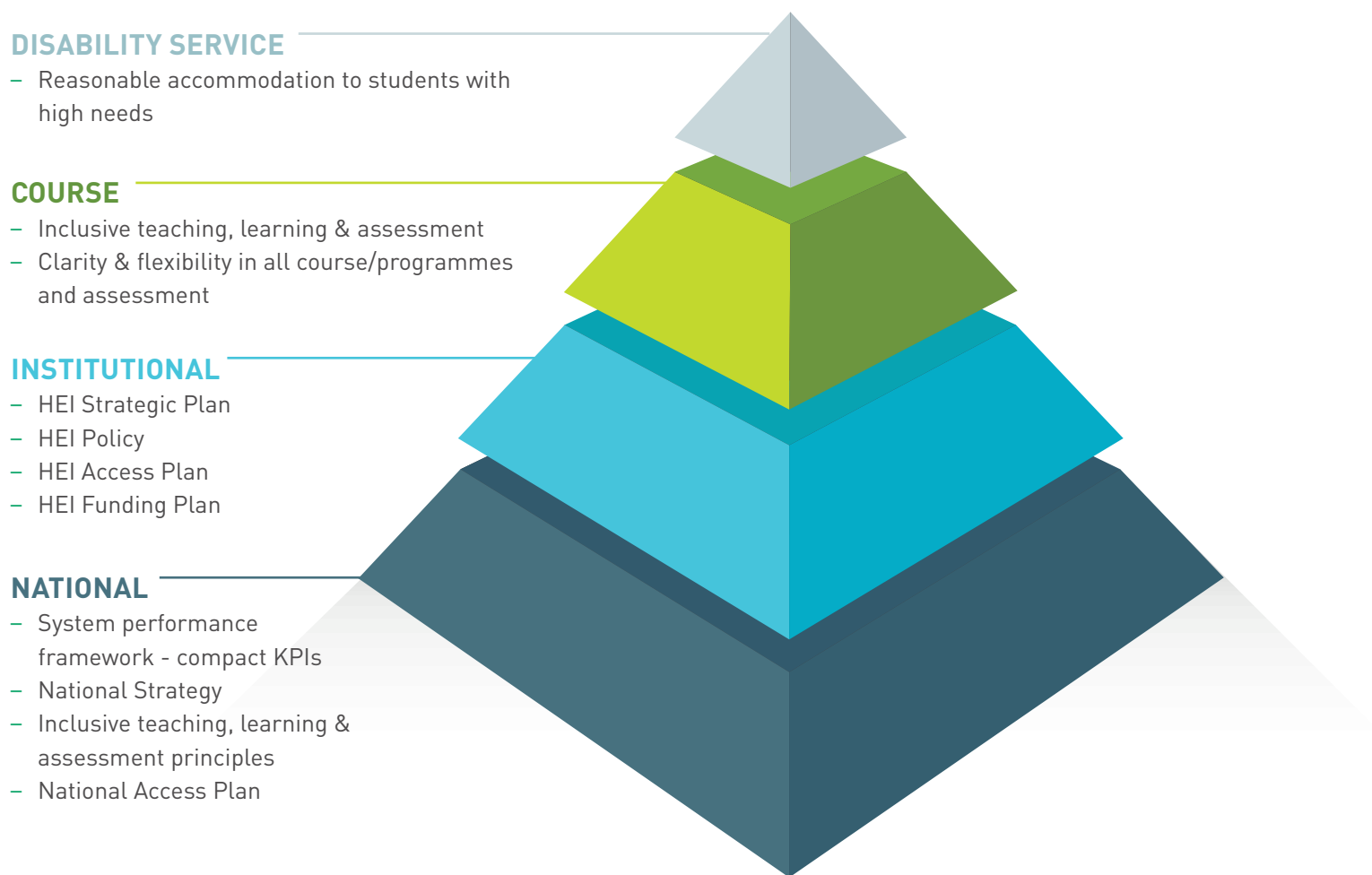
In moving to a Universal Design for Learning approach to inclusion, the report maps out responsibilities at:
– A national /HEA level
– An Institutional Level
– Course level
– Disability Support Services level

UDL Model - Strategies & Responsibilities

The report describes how the concept of Universal Design for Learning requires the commitment of institutions at all levels including government at a national level and institutions at a local level. Figure 1 defines roles and responsibilities at a national, institutional, and programme level.

Figure 1: Proposed model of inclusive practice in higher education in Ireland.

DISABILITY SERVICE
– Reasonable accommodation to students with high needs

COURSE
– Inclusive teaching, learning & assessment
– Clarity & flexibility in all course/programmes and assessment

INSTITUTIONAL
– HEI Strategic Plan
– HEI Policy
– HEI Access Plan
– HEI Funding Plan

NATIONAL
– System performance framework - compact KPIs
– National Strategy
– Inclusive teaching, learning & assessment principles
– National Access Plan

Inclusive Strategies at a National Level can include:

The report highlights key strategies

– HEI Strategic Plan, Access Plans, Teaching & Learning Plans, and service plans for the European Social Fund and Fund for Students with Disabilities (ESF FSD) should show clear plans for mainstreaming of inclusive teaching, learning and assessment and the development of an infrastructure and culture to ensure a HEI wide approach is taken.

– Continued Professional Development (CPD) plans and programmes within institutions should prioritise inclusive practice, in particular for new staff.

– Review of the Access Allocation in the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM) model needs to take account of any changes in the ESF FSD and data used to determine HEI allocations.

– The Taskforce responsible for the design, development and implementation of a new model for allocating ESF FSD funding should refer to this report for guidance on changes required to allow for improved efficiencies in allocation of funding and mainstreaming of some disability services in all HEIs.

Responsibilities at an Institutional Level

Strong, effective, and committed leadership in the area of inclusion can be provided by senior teams within HEIs to introduce innovation and clear thinking needed to build a culture of inclusion and to reduce the barriers faced by students with disabilities. Building institutional wide inclusion involves partnership and collaboration with all stakeholders across all HEI user groups including academic faculties, education departments, disability support services, student representative groups, and other functions.

Building a sustainable and feasible policy is a crucial and powerful tool for successfully implementing the UDL concept in higher education. At a macro level policy makers and management play a key role in developing awareness and creating visions and strategies for change that are sustainable. Any sustainable strategy will involve producing action plans and allowing for staff across functions to share knowledge and to work collaboratively on solutions to ensure students with disabilities have equal access to learning and to a successful college experience. Figure 2 below describes responsibilities for implementing UDL at an institutional level described in the universal design model of inclusion.

Figure 2: Roles & Responsibilities at an Institutional Level[4]

AT THE MACRO LEVEL

Demands from society and overall planning

– Policy

– Visions

– Ethics and basic values in society

– Acts and regulations

– Strategies

Strategic Lead: The Governing Body

– Create visions

– Define values

– Ownership

– Make a framework for reporting and quality assurance

– React to acts and legislation

AT THE MESO LEVEL

Planning and implementing at a system level

– Action plans

– Technical quality standards

– Regulations

– Subject-specific instructions

Implemented by: program coordinators, service providers at all levels and the UD and UDL coordinator (or disability office)

– Curricula design and course planning/ syllabus

– Service and systems

– Day-to-day management

– Evaluation

AT THE MICRO LEVEL

The individual in relation to context Individual perspectives

– User experience

– Teaching and learning

– The student

– Academic staff

Implemented by: teachers, counsellors, and the individual student

– Individual education plans

– Use of learning activities and technology

– UDL and accommodations

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4 Universal Design for Learning - A Best Practice Guideline. (2017). 2017: Universell/NTNU.

The report describes how we can build on previous learning, such as the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum (TIC) Project, to create a model of inclusive practice based on principles of universal design through:

1. The active and variable engagement of students from pre-entry to graduation.
2. Providing multiple means of representation of learning and pedagogy.
3. Providing multiple means of action and assessment.

TIC views all students as being situated along a continuum of learner differences with individual learning needs. Traditional teaching practices respond to some, but not all, needs. Most HEIs focus on the provision of additional supports arranged via the disability support office, TIC recognises that inclusion of students with disabilities requires the commitment of the whole college i.e. it is part of everyone's job.

The model of Universal Design for Learning is underpinned by certain assumptions:

– The roles and responsibilities at a macro and micro level will be clearly described and agreed within institutions.
– Inclusion is embedded within strategic goals and objectives of the institution.
– Every student is different and the curriculum will be designed to be sufficiently variable so as to be accessed by a diverse group of students, with varying levels of skill and ability.
– Universal Design for Learning (also known as inclusive teaching & learning) is recognised as a set of principles for improving teaching and learning.

Such an approach is endorsed within the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 which states that we should "ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population" (HEA, 2015, p. 14).[3]

Responsibilities at Course Level

This section focuses on how courses can be designed to offer choice to students at a mainstream faculty level, thus reducing the need for add on support at the classroom level (see level 1 of Figure 3 below). The responsibility for ensuring that curricula, teaching practices and assessment methods are designed around the needs of the students, lies with faculty. All services and physical environments should embed inclusive practices that can accommodate the range of needs within a diverse student body in line with goal 1.5 of the HEA National Access Plan 2015 - 2019 - to 'enhance the quality of the learning experience and progression outcomes for students' (HEA, 2015, p. 26).

Course design needs to build in flexibility and use multiple methods to engage the huge diversity to be found in the student body through diversified teaching, learning, and assessment practices.

Responsibilities at a Disability Support Level

This level provides supports to students with disabilities. It is anticipated that there will always be a cohort of students who may require additional supports not provided through the mainstream and these additional services are provided via the disability support services. Staff should work at the apex of the Universal Design for Learning pyramid (see Figure 3) to provide specialist supports to the few students who require them.

Figure 3: The Universal Design for Learning Pyramid[6]

LEVEL 4
Personal Assistant

LEVEL 3
Individual accommodation

LEVEL 2
Students with similar needs

LEVEL 1
Universal Design
for the majority
of students

SPECIAL

GENERAL

6 Universal Design for Learning - A Best Practice Guideline. (2016). 2016: Universell/NTNU.

Conclusion

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a new and sustainable solution to the problem of diversity in higher education. Adopting the UDL model is challenging for HEIs as it will require a change in thinking about educational practice in order to improve the experience and retention of the diverse range of students in the HE sector, including those with disabilities.

Moving towards UDL means a cultural shift from the current retrofit model of support for students with disabilities to one which is designed around the fact that many of the barriers to learning can be addressed within the learning environment and that all learners are different. It moves away from seeing different groups of learners as requiring separate strategies, towards a UDL framework that recognises that every student is different and aims to design curricula to meet those different needs. This UDL framework has a significant advantage as multiple approaches do not have to be developed for different categories of students - UDL is sufficiently flexible to work for ALL students including those with disabilities, mental health difficulties, migrants, international students, mature students, and students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

UDL provides a framework to build greater capacity across the campus by making diversity and retention everyone's business and creating communities for staff to reflect on their own practices, and to collaborate and share ideas on building sustainable and inclusive pedagogy for the diverse student population. Within a UDL model the role of the disability support office will be to support students with disabilities, but also to engage at all levels and assist staff across the institution with the practical tools for the implementation of Universal Design for Learning.

It is an ideal time for institutions to strategically promote UDL across campus as it is clearly aligned with performance compacts in relation to teaching and learning, retention and inclusion. In addition, we recommend that the HEA continue to provide financial supports to institutions who can demonstrate that their related efforts are worth the investment.

Thank you

Association for Higher Education Access & Disability