From Professors Wives to Livescribe Pens:
how the culture of inclusion has changed
in Higher Education

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AHEAD, the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability, was set up in 1988 by students with visual impairments in UCD who went to the registrar Professor John Kelly looking for support. Their plea at the time allegedly was that they were enjoying the whole college experience, but has a problem, they could not read the textbooks. Professor Kelly heard what they were saying and came up with a practical solution. He persuaded a group of professor's wives into volunteering for reading services for students with visual impairments and the rest is history.   What emerged from these beginnings was that Professor John Kelly saw the discrimination experienced by the students, and championed their cause within the sector and with the funding bodies. He secured funding to establish AHEAD back in 1988 and set about on a very strategic journey to change the culture and practice within higher education so that students with a disability who wanted to learn , could learn.

AHEAD celebrated its 25th year last year and has made a significant contribution to the development of a culture of inclusion in higher education over those years. In fact, Tom Boland, CEO of the HEA, has stated that the inclusion of students with disability would not have been so successful but for the work of AHEAD. Over the years AHEAD has conducted research on

URL: http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view221

the participation rates of students with disability in higher education and has provided the sector with robust data to track progress and to provide information on trends and gaps in provision for students with disability. This information has proved invaluable to institutions by providing them with robust data to compare and contrast provision and strategically plan to improve services on a sector and institutional basis. (See the latest participation rates on the AHEAD website www.ahead.ie.) For example the latest research clearly demonstrates the difficulties students with disabilities have with part time education, less than 1% of part time students have a disability, and with progressing from undergraduate to post graduate courses, (AHEAD 2015).

Over the years AHEAD research has influenced policy and practice in higher education. The first research into the participation rates of students with disability in higher education 1998/99 showed the stark reality that the participation of students with disability was less than 1%. This unacceptable situation led directly to the establishment of key cornerstones of support for students with disability in higher education. Firstly strategic funding was allocated b the HEA to facilitate the development of disability support services within the university sector was put in place. Secondly, Minister for Education Niamh Breathnach established the fund for students with disabilities.   To this day institutions rely heavily on this fund to provide for the cost of additional supports required by students with disability, for example costly sign language interpreters and personal assistants without which the students would not be able to engage in learning. The Fund initially run by AHEA was £100,000 and served 80 students with the universities. The documents from this fund indicate that it has a far more generous interpretation of what a reasonable accommodation is than is the case with today's fund. Unbelievably, it funded one student with a mobility difficulty to run a car and covered the cost of interpreters, tuition etc. This if very different from today where the fund at around 9 million euros for higher education serves over 8,000 students but it still remains the main source of funding for the additional cost of disability for institutions. The establishment of the fund was a game changer but other ,facilitators for change were the adoption by the institutions of equality

policies and the development by Government of the Equality and Disability legislation giving students with disabilities a legal framework within which to operate.

Over the years the role of AHEAD has changed with developments in the sector.   Initially, it advocated with faculty on behalf of students with disabilities but as disability support services developed internally in institutions, its role changed. AHEAD then worked in collaboration and partnership with staff in institutions in support of to improve the engagement of students with disabilities in all aspects of college life including study abroad and making the transition to work.   An example of this collaboration is the establishment of the Supplementary Entry scheme to higher education for students with disabilities which since has evolved into the DARE scheme.

A strength of AHEAD is its ear to the voice of students with disability.   Ten years ago graduates with disabilities approached AHEAD with their difficulties getting employment in spite of having the same 1st and 2nd class honors as any other graduate.   In their view the employers needed to be educated about the talent of graduates with disabilities and to get an opportunity to meet them face to face.   As a result AHEAD launched Get-Ahead in 2004 to give graduates with disabilities a voice and in 2005 secured EU EQUAL Funding to develop a model of best practice on the transition to work for graduates with disabilities. I am delighted to report that both programmes are mainstreamed and now funded by the Department of Social Protection. Get Ahead has a database of over 600 graduates with disabilities and works closely with Careers Advisors. The WAM programmed so far has secured over 250 jobs for graduates with disabilities and it also works with employers to change minds about disability, to see the talent of graduates and to identify barriers in their recruitment practices that would stop them tapping into that talent. WAM has developed a model for the transition to work for graduates with disabilities that includes an on line-learning tool on Mentoring for employers who employ graduates with disabilities.   This model has been presented to universities in Ireland, Singapore and Japan.

In the past ten years, the student profile in higher education has changed dramatically and it now includes over 10,000 students with a range of different disabilities and learning difficulty in higher education.   To-day all of the higher education institutions have dedicated disability support services offering advice and support to students with disability and they are all committed to diversity, social inclusion, digital technology and to more flexible teaching and learning.

This means that the Higher Education institutions through their Disability Support offices have developed a unique body of research, knowledge and expertise on quality provision for the inclusion of students with a range of disabilities in a demanding academic environment. This knowledge enables and supports other faculty staff to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of disability in education and the adaptations and simple solutions they can apply to their area to be more inclusive of these students. In particular many disability support offices have technology experts who have developed a unique expertise and skill on the use of technology in education that is now informing mainstream higher education.   Furthermore this knowledge of how to embed digital technology in education is being actively shared with staff in secondary and further education, for example UCC offered training in using technology to teachers in local secondary schools which was very well received.   AHEAD in collaboration with the sector shares this emerging body of knowledge and expertise about best inclusive practice through workshops, spotlight seminars and articles.

As mentioned already Higher Education campuses are very different from ten years ago. Crucially there is a much more diverse population of students who have high expectations of careers and are technology savvy. To say campuses are diverse spaces is a cliché, but nonetheless true. Higher Education is made up of 15% international students, 15% mature students, students from different socio-economic backgrounds and up to 6% of students with a disability and specific learning difficulties and this diversity is set to increase. The recent HEA Consultation Document on Access outlines clear plans to increase the participation rates from

previously under-represented groups in higher education including students from different socio economic backgrounds, immigrants and students with sensory disability. At a policy level there is a recognition that bringing a different profile of student into higher education has implications for teaching and learning and that the traditional model of packing students into stuffy lecture halls to write notes will not work for all students and needs to change. As a consequence there is an appetite for change amongst faculty and it is an objective of AHEAD to work collectively with staff to embed inclusive practices into all aspects of the changing environment including study abroad, sport, and transition into work.

All higher education institutions have clear commitments and stated performance compacts around equal access and quality teaching and learning. But as we know there can be quite a gap between policy and practice and while most staff in higher education want to do their best for all of the students, when confronted with students with a disability, for example a deaf student, they do not know what to do.   They are uncertain whether or not it is ok to do something different for one student over another. They do not want to give one student an advantage over another. Inclusion can be daunting for the lecturer on the ground so what is he/she to do? How is he/she to respond to this rapidly changing make up of students in his classroom?

One solution that AHEAD is actively promoting in collaboration with the sector is **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**.   UDL is a new way of thinking about managing diversity in education that has emerged in the USA and countries like Norway.   Universal Design is an architectural term applied to the design of buildings where the designer takes on board the requirements of all the users of the building. Fundamentally UDL is based on the idea that everyone is different and that everyone learns in different ways. This makes sense, but the difficulties arise because education is based on the average student.   Listen to Sir Ken Robinson's Ted Talk in this regard.   UDL is not rocket science and there are many examples of good practice in the sector. UDL asks the educator to reflect on his/her own teaching practice

to identify barriers for the different students taking the courses. To do this he\she can use the tools of UDL, which involve multiple means of representation, multiple means of expression and multiple means of engagement.

UDL asks the academic to acknowledge the complexity of learning and to understand deeply the differences among learners.   It challenges him/her to stretch and interest the learner rather than cognitively overload them. According to researchers such as Bruner, Vygotsky, and more recently Dr. Ray Land and Dr. Betty Higgs who spoke at the NAIRTL Conference 2010[1], many students do not navigate this learning space very well and become lost and confused about what they are learning.

Professor Liz Thomas[2] in her research into the student experience also argues for the importance of engagement, particularly for those non-traditional students who do not believe they belong in higher education. Her research suggests a clear relationship between enabling the student to cope with the new academic demands of their discipline and the student's sense of belonging on a higher education course.   From a UDL perspective, it is also important to assure the accessibility of all higher education opportunities to all students including work placement, Erasmus study abroad placements and social and leisure activities.

As well as considering ways of engagement, the lecturer can create a learning environment that works for all of his/her students by building multiple ways of representation into courses, using technology, eLearning, multimedia, problem solving and a variety of good practice

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1Dr. Ray Land, Keynote talk at NAIRTL 2010, Trinity College Dublin

2Professor Liz Thomas, CSSI Conference, Dundalk, 2013

teaching techniques. Ensuring the use of accessible formats and good communication strategies in all presentations will ensure the student with learning difficulties can learn successfully within the mainstream classroom.

UDL also embeds the idea of multiple ways of expression.   This view is not new as choice and variability is regarded as good assessment practice, but not often used as assessment instruments. Dr. Geraldine O'Neill[1] argues for embracing self-monitoring as an essential learning tool for students in higher education. She advocates that students need to develop the skills to reflect on and self-monitor their own work.   A very real example of this was demonstrated by Dr. Sheera Murphy[2] at the Spotlight on Dyslexia in IADT in June 2014. Setting assignments with explicit marking schemes and criteria for completion makes the learning outcomes explicit and enables self-monitoring.

By designing the curriculum around the expected variability of learners, our fictitious Dr. Smith is maximizing learning opportunities for all students and minimizing the need for retrofitting and subsequent accommodations.

Universal Design for Learning represents a complete shift in thinking about learning in higher education. It marks a change that reflects recent knowledge about neuroscience, the act of learning itself, technology and how to engage the learner by facilitating a process of learning that places the learner at the centre.

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1   O'Neill, G (2010) Formative Assessment: Practical Ideas for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of feedback to students, UCD Teaching and Learning

hZp://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/UCDTLT0025.pdf

2   Dr. Sheera Murphy, Spotlight on Dyslexia Seminar, IADT June 2014

This change in thinking is already happening. For example the Nursing schools in particular UCD, have played a key leadership role in creating an inclusive learning spaces.   Their research identified a number of attitudinal and structural barriers with the clinical placement, for example a nursing student with dyslexia going on to a hospital ward can met with negative assumptions and as a result have a difficulty experience. For many students with disability on professional courses that require mandatory work placements, the placement can present very real barriers. AHEAD they worked in collaboration with the nursing schools recommending a number of changes such as the introduction of a more holistic needs assessment system and a programmed of CPD for clinical partners which subsequently led to the development of national guideline to including students with disabilities on clinical placements.

We have come a long way from relying on volunteers to read to visually impaired student to using technology such as a live scribe pen that enables that student to operate with independence. AHEAD continues to play its part in changing the culture in higher education to be to embrace those students at the edge in the knowledge that any adaptations made for students who learn differently will be good for all students. As a partner in the European LINK Network we can share new ideas, innovations and emerging models of learning that embed good learning experiences for students with disability and learning difficulties, and we do this through our conferences and increasingly our new on-line courses. This year, the AHEAD conference 2015 is exploring the idea of Universal Design for Learning and giving practitoners an opportunity to hear and learn from world experts about innovations and good practices already taking place across the sector.   It will offer an opportunity to talk to, and hear from experts such as Dr. David Rose, founder member of CAST and Dr. Tim Cords a qualified doctor who happens to be blind.

In sharing this reflection with you, the reader, I want to take the opportunity to invite you to make use of the resources and guidance offered by AHEAD so that together we can make the student learning environment fully inclusive for all our students. Our AHEAD website is

www.ahead.ie