

Democratising UDL Professional Development in Higher Education through Partnership and Platforming Local Leadership.

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Abstract.

In this case study, the authors describe a targeted programme which facilitates the widespread undertaking of training in Universal Design across their institution. This programme is a key part of the strategic whole institution approach to inclusion pioneered in and adopted by University College Dublin (UCD). The programme creates and empowers faculty to be local leaders in inclusion and Universal Design, and provides them with the structure, support and a community of practice in order to achieve the programme goals. The community of practice has been crucial to the success of the programme, particularly the partnership element. Since the inception of the programme, the number of colleagues completing training in Universal Design has increased threefold and has greatly raised the institutional awareness of the need for adopting Universal Design practices and created a sense of urgency behind it. Flexibility of the programme structure, the funding streams and leadership buy-in are recognised as vital ingredients for implementation.

Keywords: Inclusion, Partnership, Universal Design, Universal Design for Learning.

1. Introduction.

Introducing effective and long-lasting change in any large organisation is a long term and potentially challenging task. A Higher Education Institution (HEI) presents a unique landscape in change management that requires a multi-faceted approach which takes into account the nuances, autonomies and pressures that are at play across all levels of the organisation. It was in this HE landscape that the authors set out to embed inclusive practice across the organisation. It was prompted by the awareness that a systemic change process which would

create buy-in at all levels, and ensure ownership of inclusion, must go beyond dedicated access and inclusion professionals. 'University for All' is this evidence-driven process (Kelly, Padden & Fleming, 2023; Kelly, 2018; Kelly & Padden, 2018a). Launched in 2018 and iteratively developed over the subsequent years, this initiative has successfully begun this change process, seeing a number of systemic changes including the widespread training of faculty and professional staff in the area of Universal Design. One of the key drivers and enablers of University for All is building institutional capacity. In this context we define capacity building as "a system in which staff and faculty competence around diversity and inclusion is considered a core institutional value and a key indicator of success across departments and disciplines" (Barnett & Felten, 2016, p.4).

The development of the 'University for All' approach included an initial consultation phase where the objectives of the initiative were outlined in a series of meetings with disciplines and support/policy units. Teams were asked to outline their priority actions for improving inclusion. The purpose of this consultation was to socialise the initiative and also get buy-in through understanding and platforming local priorities. This helped to secure THE investment of individuals who may have resisted an initiative which was seen to be forcing institutional or national priorities on them and removing their agency. Following the consultation phase, the 'Toolkit for Inclusive Higher Education Institutions'¹ was developed and became the key tool and framework used in the workshops which followed (Kelly & Padden, 2018b). These workshops were led by local widening participation representatives and focused, again, on local priorities. The workshops were co-developed and included student panels to foreground the student voice and experience. The student panels were drawn from students with disabilities, low-income, mature and further education qualification holders. Students had the opportunity to speak frankly about their positive and negative experiences, and suggest actions to increase inclusivity.

In the context of a large research-intensive university, it can be challenging to position teaching and learning professional development as a priority for time-poor faculty (Kobayashi et. al., 2017). The promotion of Universal Design (UD) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) began in UCD ten years ago but was elevated following a successful partnership with AHEAD to develop the National Forum Digital Badge for Universal Design in Teaching and Learning. This badge now has over 3,500 awardees nationally and over 400 in UCD.

¹The toolkit is available at <https://www.ucd.ie/universityforall/resourcehub/toolkit/>

Nationally, UD awareness and implementation has increased significantly since the introduction of this Digital Badge and the Higher Education Authority's dedicated UD funding - PATH 4 Phase 1, designed to aid in the implementation of the commitment to UD in the National Access Plan (HEA, 2022). This funding has rapidly accelerated the national conversation around UD in tertiary education in Ireland and has supported the development of professional development programmes, a national charter, training for senior leadership and many other collaborative and individual projects in HEIs. In UCD, the Digital Badge has been delivered each semester since its launch and has been embedded in the institution's Teaching and Learning professional development programmes for faculty (Padden, 2023). The uptake rapidly increased upon the development of the '*Faculty Partnership Programme*', described in this article.

2. The Faculty Partnership Programme.

The '*Faculty Partnership Programme*' was conceived in 2021 to support and accelerate the implementation of UDL throughout the university. It offers faculty a structured opportunity to undertake the Digital Badge, to qualify as a UDL facilitator, and become a role model who will persuade and influence others as to the merits of inclusion for all students.

Participation enables faculty to become recognised leaders in the field of access and inclusion and the implementation of UD. It empowers them to lead the shift in thinking of UDL as being solely "...a way to improve accessibility..." to "...a framework for curriculum development with the ultimate goal of developing expert learners" (Black & Fraser, 2019, p.245). And in turning thinking into action, they are creating a sustainable UDL integration model (Fovet, 2021). Following a robust selection process, Faculty Partners were appointed in all six university colleges. The project team provides the programme with a structure, goals, funding, logistical support and advice.

The starting point for Faculty Partners is to complete the Digital Badge in Universal Design in Teaching & Learning and the accompanying Facilitator Badge. In a "pay it forward" model, Faculty Partners are then required to facilitate rollouts of the Digital Badge annually as part of the national rollout each October or locally in the Spring. Partners recruit their colleagues in their schools and colleges to complete the Digital Badge. This recruitment of colleagues has been particularly effective and has seen large numbers complete the training each year. In

addition to this influencing piece, Partners implement UDL within their own modules and teaching, going beyond the scope of the Digital Badge redesign². Providing them with a platform to share their work is an important part of the Programme: Faculty Partners presented their work at the University for All Symposium in May 2022 and each submitted a written case study of their work, which was published in February 2023 (Padden, Elliott et al., 2023).

Although Faculty Partners are working towards a common goal, the programme grants a considerable degree of autonomy in their individual UDL implementation in their own contexts and disciplines. The authors wanted the programme to be structured and supported but to also facilitate flexibility and choice in the direction, process and spending of their funding. This flexible structure has allowed Partners to focus on a diverse range of projects. The various projects serve as catalysts for more change within modules, classrooms and the learning environment. These changes are embedded in a sustainable manner, and tweaked and improved based on student feedback. They also serve as examples to colleagues who are looking to adopt a UDL approach, sparking conversations, dialogues and leading to new ideas.

This diversity has led to rich discussion and exchange of ideas in the community of practice that has formed. This has been facilitated through regular online meetings, a Google Chat space and in-person events around specific topics. This 'safe space' has been integral to the success of the programme as it has allowed Partners to venture ideas, discuss shared challenges and explore potential solutions which has fostered cross-disciplinary collaboration. They moved in and out of coaching and mentoring-type approaches, offering ideas, solutions and endorsement to colleagues who were posting about their initiatives or challenges in implementing their plans in their discipline. The tone of the messages was overwhelmingly positive and encouraging. Partners are less likely to feel isolated in their work thanks to this community and the cross pollination of the projects shows how UDL can be applied in a variety of different contexts and disciplines.

² The Redesign activity requires participants on the Badge to identify an area of their practice to redesign using UDL principles. It is a light touch change but plants the seed of UDL implementation and emphasises the value of adopting a Plus 1 approach.

2.1 Impact of the programme.

As noted above the uptake of the Digital Badge increased significantly upon introduction of our Faculty Partner Programme in 2021. Three hundred and ten colleagues have completed the Digital Badge since the start of the 2021-22 academic year, with particular increases noted in the Schools of our Faculty Partners. Research has pointed towards three distinct groups in faculty professional development uptake - those who frequently engage in these activities, those who engage in these activities but only with guidance and those who rarely or never engage in these activities (Shagrir, 2013). The '*Faculty Partnership*' programme likely provides the incentive and support for the group who require guidance to encourage engagement with professional development.

Table 1: Digital Badge holders by college year to year.

Year	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	Total
Arts & Humanities	5	2	3	35	31		76
Business	2	1	5	4	3	1	16
Engineering & Architecture	3	2	7	15	2	2	31
Health & Agricultural Sciences	13	3	20	61	48	4	149
Science	6	1	5	12	22	5	51
Social Sciences & Law	2		4	16	29	3	54
N/A	2	2	15	9	7	1	36
Grand Total	33	11	59	152	142	16	413

In the second iteration of the programme, funded by the PATH 4 initiative, we introduced a secondary goal. We asked our Faculty Partners to focus not just on increased participation in the Digital Badge but also to look to increase the number of Associate Professors and

Professors who were undertaking the training, having noticed that most of those attending the training were Assistant Professors and tutors or teaching assistants/fellows. Again, we have noted success in this area as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Role of faculty badge holders year to year.

Year	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	Total
Tutor			2	32	28		62
Lecturer/Assistant Professor	23	5	22	78	67		195
Associate Professor	6	3	5	14	9		37
Professor	1				8	9	18
Yearly Total	30	8	29	124	112	9	312

As the number of Digital Badge holders in UCD has increased, efforts are now being made to evaluate the impact of the widespread adoption of UDL on student outcomes; through auditing Universal Design practices across Schools and individual modules as well as a university wide student survey. UDL is now been woven into other funding opportunities, including Erasmus+ projects, and wider Equality, Diversity and Inclusion initiatives in the university. The Digital Badge is often used as a springboard for Faculty to engage in additional professional development on accessibility and assistive technology or inclusive assessment and intercultural learning offered by our colleagues in UCD Teaching & Learning.

3. Conclusion: Advice for Others.

The creation of a communication platform that acts as a virtual staffroom has been vital to the success of the project, particularly when the programme was in its infancy. This platform was established to communicate key messages expeditiously to the myriad group of partners with participants engaging informally and productively with each other. Colleagues began sharing

ideas and encouragement with each other. As the Faculty Partnership evolved additional new partners were added. They joined this existing constructive space and became equally constructive and supportive. Monitoring and observing the interactions in the 'Google Chat' space illustrated the value and power of team dynamics. This is particularly important in workspaces where individuals, particularly academic faculty, tend to work independently and typically without endorsement or feedback from peers. The Faculty Partnership Programme offered this to participants and they were clearly empowered and engaged with it. This aspect of the programme highlighted the merit of creating a community of practice and the interpersonal benefits of this are as important as any other aspect of it.

Our experience of developing the Faculty Partnership Programme has led us to recognise the need for both structure and flexibility. As the Partnership programme is offered to a range of different faculties and their unique contexts, the need for flexibility is critical. Our experience is that colleagues liked an overarching structure that they could use as a prompt or guide, but they need flexibility in how they implement their local plans.

The emerging consensus about the importance of diversity and inclusion as core institutional values brings the concept of value into focus. For any initiative or concept to have value, it must have related funding. Funding of a programme, such as the one described, is critical. This is well illustrated earlier in this paper in demonstrating the rapid acceleration of the national conversation around UD in higher education in Ireland because there was funding attached. The process described in this article could not have been initiated or progressed without a dedicated funding stream. Our experience highlights the added value that a dedicated funding stream can offer. It acts as a catalyst for action, prompts engagement and encourages colleagues to strategise and discuss project proposals and plans.

The funding stream needs to have a clear timeline, with a structure to require partners to develop a specific project proposal maximising the use of funding while also remaining focused on discipline-specific and institutional strategic goals to embed Universal Design and inclusive practice. The funding should be time-bound ensuring that projects are initiated within a reasonable time-frame and examples should be provided and shared with partners. An issue we had not anticipated was the challenge partners may have with spending funding as most of their ideas required time and other resources rather than direct funding. We had anticipated that the funding could be used to buy out time but this seemed not to be practicable in most cases. Funding was used in a wide variety of ways: developing resources for colleagues,

creating accessible and inclusive learning materials and tools for students to use such as video storytelling, designing new modules, choice of assessment and learning activities enabling meaningful group and project work as well as peer review.

The final, and most significant ingredient for our work, and the work of inclusion, is senior leadership endorsement and support. In a practical sense, we communicated directly with these senior leaders upon the launch of the programme and later when partners were appointed. We also asked our Faculty Partners to meet with key senior local stakeholders and work with them on relevant projects - in our institution this included colleagues leading on teaching and learning, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Widening Participation. The key to mainstreaming is to have all colleagues assume responsibility for access and inclusion. We can only consider being a university for all when all colleagues recognise its merit and importance. The role of leadership in conveying and promoting this concept is critical.

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