

Ireland's Approach to Universal Design in Tertiary Education is Maturing: An Introduction to this Special Issue.

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There has been a marked change in the demographics of students and learners engaging with further education and training (FET) and higher education (HE) in Ireland in the last ten years. The twin processes of internationalisation and a greater collective awareness regarding human rights and inclusivity has led to a multi-cultural, diverse student body and a need to reassess practices in the teaching and learning space in Irish tertiary education accordingly.

Across the current academic literature, the “traditional Irish student¹” is now considered a misnomer, with [research](#) demonstrating that the student body is now made up of learners from diverse social, linguistic, racial, religious and ability profiles. This is particularly evident in higher education, where disabled students, mature students and learners from previously under-represented cohorts are becoming [increasingly more prevalent across the tertiary education landscape](#). While many of these students require ancillary support, it has been postulated that the current system of supporting students with additional needs predominantly through individualised supports is not sustainable, nor is it fit for purpose. [AHEAD research](#) suggests that both students and support staff often find retrofitted supports to be ineffective and often arbitrarily applied, highlighting the need for an alternative approach to meet the needs of students proactively at point of delivery, a central tenet of universal design (UD).

Alongside this, the global economy is now firmly knowledge-based, and if all are to participate in society, the opportunity to gain an educational qualification has become more important than ever. As such, there is now an urgent need for an agile response from the Tertiary Education Sector to internalise and embed inclusivity into the core of teaching practice and

¹ Quirke, M., McCarthy, P., Treanor, D., & Mc Guckin, C. (2019). Tomorrow's disability officer—A cornerstone on the universal design campus. *Journal of Inclusive Practice in Further and Higher Education (JIPFHE)*, 11, 29-42.

overall institutional ethos. This transition has challenged educators and administrative staff alike to focus on providing greater accessibility, flexibility and choice for all students in teaching practice, student services, and the physical and digital environments in our institutions.

UD and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) frameworks are now becoming increasingly recognised internationally as effective responses to rising diversity within education and society more broadly. The broad range of impressive practice highlighted in this Special Issue on Ireland's Approach to Universal Design in Tertiary Education suggests that Ireland is well-placed to be an international leader in the implementation of these important frameworks in tertiary education.

This is supported by the findings in our own contribution to this issue¹, which highlights a significant national policy commitment to UD/UDL in Irish tertiary education (for example the [FET Strategy](#) and [The National Access Plan 2022-28](#)). The article also illustrates a significant rise in engagement with professional development on UD/UDL in Irish tertiary education, and a growing number of institutional projects implemented on the ground.

However, as discussed in the article, there are still some obstacles that hinder UD/UDL from becoming normalised in Ireland's HE and FET sectors. An examination of Strategic Plans and Strategic Performance Agreements of publicly funded tertiary education institutions illustrated that less than one in three HEIs explicitly mentioned UD and/or UDL in their Strategic Plans at the time of publication (2023). It is crucial that a firm commitment to UD/UDL practice is inserted into future iterations of these documents if UD/UDL is to become embedded in Ireland's tertiary education sector.

- Our article concluded with recommendations to further the implementation of UD/UDL in the tertiary education landscape in Ireland. These included:
- Strengthening the presence of UD/UDL in national policy through an increased emphasis on both in the HEA Systems Performance Framework.
- Further research into the teacher and learner perspectives of UD/UDL.

¹ Our contribution was originally published as a book chapter in *The Handbook on Higher Education and Disability*, Elgar Publishing, 2023.

- Increased long-term core funding to support implementation, training and the development of Communities of Practice.
- The development of a national charter for universal design in tertiary education to embed UD at the strategic level of tertiary education institutions.
- Recent Developments.

Developed in 2023, [ALTITUDE, The National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education](#) was published in March of 2024 with the goal of supporting institutions to develop their strategies and policies and embed UD more sustainably over time in their structures and practices. Stemming from the PATH 4¹ Phase 1 'Universal Design Fund' funding stream which sought to support the embedding of UD approaches across institutions and providers in tertiary education, the Charter was one of three national projects relating to universal design:

1. Develop a National Charter for the Implementation of Universal Design in Tertiary Education;
2. Universal Design training package for senior Leaders in Tertiary Education and a Symposium for Leadership;
3. Developing a template Web Accessibility Statement for Tertiary Education Institutions

One of the key achievements of the UD Charter project, however, has been the commitment by Higher Education Institutes and Education and Training Boards to being partners and collaborators in its development. The first step in the process was to form a National UD Charter group of over 50 members from across higher and further education to coordinate and deliver the project. This cross-sectoral development process represented a unique moment in Irish tertiary education by FET and HE institutions, collectively recognising the need to place human diversity at the heart of its provision.

The development of the Charter has, in and of itself, been transformative, given the deep stakeholder consultation process, which included a national consultation event, dialogue with

¹ PATH 4 is a strategic funding programme within the National Access Plan (2022-2028). Called the Programme for Access to Higher Education, it is implemented by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Higher Education Authority.

national agencies, the formation a National UD Charter group, as well as staff and student focus groups/surveys. This collaborative process has resulted in a greater sense of collective agency across the sector about how we will seek to embed a UD approach into the future. The Charter identifies four key pillars of our institution where a strategic approach to the application is required, and encourages collaborative effort from staff working within and between the pillars to embed the approach. Those pillars are:

- Learning, Teaching & Assessment;
- Supports, Services & Social Engagement;
- the Physical Environment;
- and the Digital Environment.

Since the publication of the Charter, the momentum around UD implementation in tertiary education has continued. In June 2024, [the Unlocking Inclusion Toolkit](#) was published, which seeks to support institutions on how to mainstream full participation of all students by utilising Universal Design principles. It contains key guidance, self-reflective tools, and case study examples of good practice in action which support the implementation of the ALTITUDE Charter.

Development has also been completed of the remaining national projects which fall under the PATH 4 funding, such as the work package focussing on leadership approaches to supporting UD and the development of a template Web Accessibility Statement for Tertiary Education Institutions. There is a recognised need to build capacity among senior leaders in UD to enhance UD applications in strategy, policy and implementation for furthering equity of educational experience for all students and staff, and [the Leadership in Universal Design module](#) developed (due to be released in Sept 2024) will play a vital role in supporting that.

Building on the stakeholder engagement in the development of the Charter, the ALTITUDE project intends in the coming year to develop a national community of practice for individuals and institutions who are implementing the Charter to share good practice and provide peer to peer support. By [joining this ALTITUDE Community list](#), stakeholders will be notified about ALTITUDE Community news and events.

Given the role of funding in influencing the successful implementation of the ALTITUDE Charter, the government's announcement of an additional [€1.8 million as part of the Path 4 Phase 1 for inclusion measures across tertiary education is also significant](#). Additionally, a significant proportion of *Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement Funding in Higher Education* or SATLE funding (over €10 million since 2022) in recent years has been used by HEIs to fund UDL initiatives.

Recent years have also highlighted the extent to which national policies are placing greater emphasis on access and inclusion. For example, the increased focus on student success and equality, diversity and inclusion in the recently published HEA System Performance Framework (2023-2028) provides a strong platform for progress on the universal design agenda. Similarly, in FET, the current development of the new FET strategy which will launch in 2025, offers a significant opportunity to set a clear direction of travel on how we embed universal design in tertiary education.

Where to Next for the Sector?

In recent years, the further education and training and higher education sectors are more readily embracing the need to meet the challenge of rising diversity through universal design. Our attempts to embed this approach are maturing, but we have a long way to travel, and the ALTITUDE Charter provides a vehicle to facilitate progress in the decade ahead.

But as we move on from the 'committed champions' phase in our efforts to introduce universal design towards efforts on more widespread adoption, we have identified some core values we believe should inform our approach at all levels to fully operationalise it:

Collaboration and Community.

More than anything else, if we are to succeed in embedding an 'inclusion is everyone's business' approach to tertiary education, then by definition, everyone must be part of the effort. The ALTITUDE Charter promotes the development of institutional working groups, communities of practice and opportunities for shared learning for staff working across the four pillars within our institutions. It is only by fostering collective responsibility for inclusion that we can get staff and key functions in our institutions to view their roles through a universal design lens and make meaningful changes. Collaboration between institutions and across the FET

and HE sectors will add enormous value to this effort, so it is vital that national communities are further developed and sustained. Spaces to share quality practice such as this Journal are an important facet of building effective communities.

Iterative Progress – Building on Strengths.

Our efforts to embed a universal design approach must prioritise steady, iterative, progress, over unsustainable attempts to transform our practices in a short period of time. Every institution has pockets of good practice and areas of strength in universal design practice already, and it is vital to recognise that. We must encourage institutions to build on their strengths, share their practice, identify areas for improvement and learn from others in the community who can support them in their efforts.

Inclusive Leadership.

Without true buy-in from leaders at an institutional and national level, our attempts to develop truly flexible and inclusive systems, programmes and environments cannot be sustained. Leaders increasingly recognise that universal design is an essential component of futureproofing their institutions and that it is intrinsic to maintaining the quality of the education we provide. However, leaders must commit to building a greater understanding of what universal design really means, and their role in both modelling and supporting it in their institutions. The aforementioned CPD module on Leadership in Universal Design recently developed under PATH 4 funding provides an important resource for leaders seeking to increase their awareness.

Sustainable Funding & National Signposting.

If policy makers recognise that inclusion is 'core' to the business of FET and HE institutions, then by definition it should be supported through core funding. Funding streams such as PATH have been hugely welcomed by the sector, but the short timeframes and time-bound nature of the funding means the great practice developed is often not sustained, and quality staff depart for more secure positions. Addressing the core funding gap in FET and Higher Education and using policy instruments to ensure that the embedding of a UD approach is central to the accountability of how the increased funding is utilised, is vital. Policy makers must also ensure that universal design is embedded as part of general criteria for all funding streams across the

sector, such as in those for capital funding, transformation projects and research.

The ALTITUDE Charter offers us the vehicle for progress, so for now, we call on institutions to begin strategic dialogue in their institutions about what a meaningful implementation structure might look like, and for policy makers to explore how they can encourage, support, and provide oversight on the embedding of a universal design approach in the decade ahead. This special issue gives a flavour of the wonderful practice that could be replicated and embedded across our institutions if we grasp the opportunity.