Universal Design as a Catalyst for Change: Introducing the Special Issue on UD in Tertiary Education.

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We are delighted to welcome readers to this Special Issue on Universal Design in Tertiary Education. This issue is the result of a partnership between AHEAD and AISHE-J, inspired by the enthusiastic embrace of Universal Design across the Irish tertiary sector. AHEAD is an independent non-profit organization in Ireland working with and for disabled people to shape inclusive and empowering environments in tertiary education and employment. Collectively, we issued a call for contributions in September 2023, with an early submission date in January and a later one in April. We were overwhelmed with the response to this call, and we have 21 papers in this issue. They include research reports, case-studies, evaluations, position papers and reflective pieces. While most of the contributions are Irish, we are delighted that Australia, Canada, Chile and the UK are also represented.

As Richard Healy, Joanne Banks, and Dara Ryder note in their introduction to this issue, UD and UDL approaches are increasingly recognised as crucial in responding to the increased, and increasing, diversity of the student body.Dara and Richard in their capacity as the CEO and Research and Policy Officer of AHEAD respectively, and Joanna Banks, a lecturer in inclusive education at the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin, summarise the impact of national policy, reflected in initiatives such as PATH and SATLE funding. Much of the content of this special issue reflects work that has been supported and enabled by these national funding initiatives. A significant recent development is ALTITUDE, The National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education. We are delighted that this issue includes an article by Margaret Finch, a Universal Design Commitment Officer at Munster Technological University and eleven colleagues who have been involved in these national level initiatives. They discuss some of the actions, challenges and opportunities experienced, highlighting the impact of the 'expansive collaborations on empowering sustainable change in individual practice, institutional practice, and policy across tertiary education institutions.'

Particularly significant in the context of practice has been the AHEAD/National Forum digital badge in UDL. Almost 4,000 badges have been awarded to date and its impact is evident in many of the papers in this issue. A new badge, 'Universal Design beyond the classroom', was launched this year and extends the UD community of practice beyond teaching staff. This has very positive implications for the development of whole of institution approaches.

In our first contribution, 'Universal Design for learning policy in tertiary education in Ireland: Are we ready to commit?', Richard Healy, Dara Ryder and Joanne Banks provide an analysis of the role of UDL in tertiary education in Ireland[1]. The paper addresses the macro, or national policy level, the meso, or institutional level and the micro, or individual level. They argue that while Ireland is 'well placed to be a world leader in UDL implementation', there is a real need for greater commitment at institutional level accompanied by stable, predictable funding streams. In this context, the paper Democratising UDL Professional Development in Higher Education through Partnership and Platforming Local Leadership, provides a compelling account of the impact that an institution-wide approach can have. Daniel Elliot, Bairbre Fleming and Lisa Padden of the University for All Project at University College Dublin '...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 to achieve the programme goals.'

A notable theme in this issue is the use of UD/UDL as a catalyst or enabler to enhancing priorities in the context of broader approaches to inclusion. Perhaps unsurprisingly, mental health is a priority for many. Frederic Fovet, an UDL and Inclusion scholar and researcher based at Thompson Rivers University, reports on a study of the perceptions of academic staff, instructional designers and accessibility services staff on the impact of learning and assessment design on students' mental health. His article 'Exploring Staff and Faculty Perceptions of the Impact of Non-inclusive Design on Student Mental Health in Higher Education: Awareness, Impact and Responsiveness' argues for '... the discourse and the reflection around inclusive design to be fully extended to MH...' and for greater student empowerment. In 'UDL and the Social/Emotional Aspects of Learning: Embedding Mental Wellbeing is Everyone's

Business' Rachel Davies, Kevin Merry and Zoe Allman discuss the application of UDL principles to support embedding wellbeing in the curriculum in De Montfort University. Their experience highlights the value of a 'whole organisation' approach.   Bonnie Mullinix, Anna Santucci and Sharon Ultsch discuss UDL within the context of their 'Pedagogical Partners' initiative at UCC. Echoing the call from Fovet and others for greater student partnership, this PATH 4 funded project worked in partnership with staff to make teaching practices more inclusive. Together, these papers make as strong case for the potential of more inclusive practices to enhance student wellbeing.

Given the recent government initiative to expand delivery of high education to students with intellectual disability, under PATH 4 Phase 2, 'Empowering Diversity: A Case Study on Inclusive Assessment and Universal Design for Learning in a Post-secondary Programme for Students with Intellectual Disabilities is a particularly timely contribution. In this article, Donatella Camedda, Jennifer Banks and Barbara Ringwood of the Trinity Center for People with Intellectual Disabilities, examine UDL as an enabler of inclusive assessment for students with intellectual disability and conclude that the student voice is critical to developing inclusive practices. Indeed, it is notable that assessment is a strong theme in the contributions. Many other contributions also illustrate the impact of applying UDL principles to assessment. For example, teacher Geraldine Kyle and learner Amy Reilly reflect on the experience of inclusive assessment in the context of an Advanced Certificate in Phlebotomy and how this fosters learner engagement.

Some of the articles in this issue highlight the affordances of digital technologies in the context of more inclusive practices. While much discussion of artificial intelligence (AI) in tertiary education is concerned with the challenges it poses, Geraldine McDermott and Catherine O'Donoghue argue that AI, used well, can help to reduce barriers to learning and make it more accessible. They provide practical advice on how to do this. Declan Treanor, Faolan Doecke Launders and Kieran Lewis are concerned with sensory inclusivity. Their article 'The TCD Sense Map's Role in Fostering Sensory Inclusivity at Trinity College Dublin' describes the development of the TCD Sense Map. This innovative tool is '... designed to empower Trinity students and staff to better navigate college environments, by providing detailed information on the sensory characteristics, physical access, and use of spaces' and makes a strong statement about the commitment to inclusivity. In 'Escape to learning: Digital escape rooms and Universal Design

for Learning', Cormac Flynn, of Atlantic Technological University offers an innovative approach to promoting student engagement using digital escape rooms. The article discusses how digital escape rooms are aligned with UDL principles.

Of course, digital technologies also present challenges. Emma Riordan and colleagues focus on digital accessibility in language learning. They discuss a project at University College Cork to make German digital language supports more accessible. Academic staff worked in partnership with a student intern, and this was crucial to the success of the project. They identified a range of challenges, including some specific to language learning, such as bilingual texts and visual aids and discuss the solutions they found.

Many of the contributions consider UD and, inclusive practice more broadly, within the context of specific disciplines, providing important insights into the practical implementation of UD/UDL principles within a range of curricula. It is fitting that the issue includes a paper concerned with design education. P.J. White, a Senior lecturer in Design at the South-Eastern Technological University and colleagues explore the perspectives of design educators working in Ireland and Chile. Their findings are used to inform a draft framework that identifies the conditions for embedding UD in design education. This work will be expanded to include educators in Africa, North America and Australia/Oceania.

In 'How Universal Design for Learning can support and retain STEM learners across tertiary education: A perspective', Tracy Galvin and Kevin Morgan of the University of Ulster consider inclusivity within STEM disciplines. They discuss the use of UDL to support laboratory-based teaching and highlight the potential of UDL to engage and support STEM learners. Clare Finnegan, St Angela's College Sligo, is also concerned with STEM, specifically student Science teachers. She reports on a study that evaluated the use of videos to support preparation for laboratory classes. The findings indicate that students used the videos to reduce stress and boost confidence, emphasising again the link between student wellbeing and learning and teaching approaches. Another STEM focused contribution by Nataliya Romanyatova, an instructional designer and postdoctoral researcher at South-Eastern Technological University, also highlights the importance of student partnership. The author reflects on her experience of implementing several different approaches, as part of her UDL journey, concluding that partnership is a chance '...to include *"everyone's thinking"* into *"our mutual teaching and learning*

space" in a new, meaningful and transformative way'.

Annmarie Curneen's article, 'Universal Design for Learning as a Two-pronged Approach to Inclusive Practice in Initial Teacher Education in Ireland' provides a thoughtful analysis of the diversity both within schools and initial teacher education (ITE) and how UDL can be used as a framework to support inclusive practice in ITE. A lecturer in education at Hibernia College, Annmarie concludes '... we are presented with the opportunity to realise meaningful inclusive education...[t]his will not be easy and will require hard work, persistence and commitment however this paper argues that utilising a UDL framework will equip educators at all levels with a pedagogical inclusive framework that supports them in this endeavour'. Melissa Lynch, a lecturer at DCU, reflects on her journey as a 'fledging;' lecturer implementing UDL principles to support first-year Education and Training students. The article evidences the transformative effect of this journey, concluding that '[b]y fostering a culture of reflective practice and continual improvement, we can ensure that our classrooms remain dynamic, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse needs of our students.'

Within the context of a Business curriculum, Miriam Edwards and Valeria Cotronei-Baird, at the University of Melbourne, discuss the development of employability skills and argue that the UDL principles offer opportunities to '...make employability skills explicit in the curriculum...' While their focus is discipline-specific, their exploration of the potential of UDL to enhance employability is likely to be of wide interest. In 'Beyond Boundaries: A reflection on the implementation of universal design for learning in business school pedagogy', Noel Carroll and Johanna Clancy, Assistant Professors at the University of Galway, reflect on implementing UDL within a university business school inspired by their recent completion of the AHEAD/National Forum digital badge in UDL. They explain how implementing UDL has transformed their philosophy and practice and conclude that '... UDL serves as a mindset as much as a strategy, a tangible and enjoyable practice that offers intangible, often unquantifiable benefits for lecturers, students and higher education institutions'.

It is striking how many of our contributions have emphasised the potential of student empowerment and the role of partnership in enabling more inclusive learning and teaching. It is perhaps fitting to end with Colin Tierney's paper on 'Empowering students through a digital badge in UDL'. This paper charts the collaborative design of UDL digital badge in order to

empower **them** to become advocates for inclusive practices.

The contributions to this Special Issue offer a diverse range of evidence, experiences and stories but all bear witness to the transformative impact that engagement with UDL has on practice and learning. While a majority of the contributions address micro-level initiatives, there is also a clear focus on the institution-level and beyond, which is crucial to future progress. The issue gives a rich insight into the UD/UDL landscape in Ireland, its growth and vibrancy, and is further enriched by contributions from overseas**.** A broad range of stakeholder perspectives are explored across a wide range of disciplines and the importance of student empowerment is clear. What emerges is a sense of rich and diverse communities of practice further empowered by national funding and educational initiatives.

The process of editing and producing this Special Issue has also had a transformative impact on the AISHE-J. It offered an opportunity to reflect on our processes and practices and identify ways to make them more accessible. For example, we have updated our author guidelines to require that documents be accessibility checked and that images include alt text. We will also be upgrading to a newer version of OJS that will use file names as the defaults in downloads. These are simple measures that we should have had in place but did not. We are very grateful to Dara Ryder for his guidance on accessibility. An additional enhancement to AISHE-J's includes the assignment of Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs) to individual articles providing a permanent, stable link for each article aiding discoverability, preservation and standard citation practices. We would like to thank Jane Buggle, Editorial Board member, for her work on this process.

On a final note, we would like to express our heartfelt thanks to the very many people who made this issue possible. Sincere thanks to all those in the UD/UDL community of practice who volunteered to review of this issue and generously shared their time and expertise. We are very grateful to the many authors who have taken the time to share their work, experiences and, most strikingly, their commitment to inclusion. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to Dara and the team at AHEAD for partnering with us to bring this Special Issue to life. We would also like to congratulate Dara on being recognised by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) for his work in the UDL space in collaboration with the Irish tertiary education community.

The UDL landscape continues to evolve. The CAST Framework, Version 3 published in 2024 emphasises equity, incorporating feedback from educators and researchers to eliminate systemic barriers and enhance learning opportunities for all students. We look forward to the next steps on this journey.

We hope that you enjoy this issue.