



**HECA**  
Research  
Conference 2023

Tuesday, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2023

**cct** | College Dublin  
Computing • IT • Business



# **Embedding Universal Design for Learning in HECA Colleges: An Exploratory Study**

Marie O' Neill, EDI Officer  
CCT College Dublin

# Embedding UDL in HECA Colleges

## Ireland's Education 2022 Yearbook

Information, Commentary, and Insights on Education in Ireland in 2022

- INTRODUCTION
- EARLY CHILDHOOD
- PRIMARY
- SECOND LEVEL
- FURTHER EDUCATION & TRAINING
- HIGHER EDUCATION
- RESEARCH

## Embedding Universal Design for Learning in HECA Colleges

An exploratory study

The Higher Education Colleges Association, through its Academic Quality Enhancement Forum, recently conducted an exploratory study demonstrating that since the pandemic, universal design for learning (UDL) has shifted from an ad hoc enhancement activity to a key strategic imperative across HECA colleges. This article describes the findings of that study, showing how UDL has advanced from piecemeal and niche activity to be increasingly a strategic priority.

Every opportunity to build upon the principles of UDL must be leveraged across the entire academic community. The assumption of homogeneity continues to be challenged – HECA classrooms are vibrant and diverse settings. It is important that this diversity is harnessed when facilitating students to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and competence. (HECA, 2021)

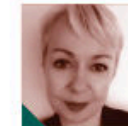
### Introduction

A recent report by the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA, 2021) describes how 'alternative assessment arrangements advanced the UDL agenda by providing students with greater choice and variety to demonstrate what they knew in assessments' (p.28). The report endorses universal design for learning (UDL) as a 'framework for supporting student success' (ibid., p.37) and recommends that HECA colleges prioritise UDL at both programme and institution level.

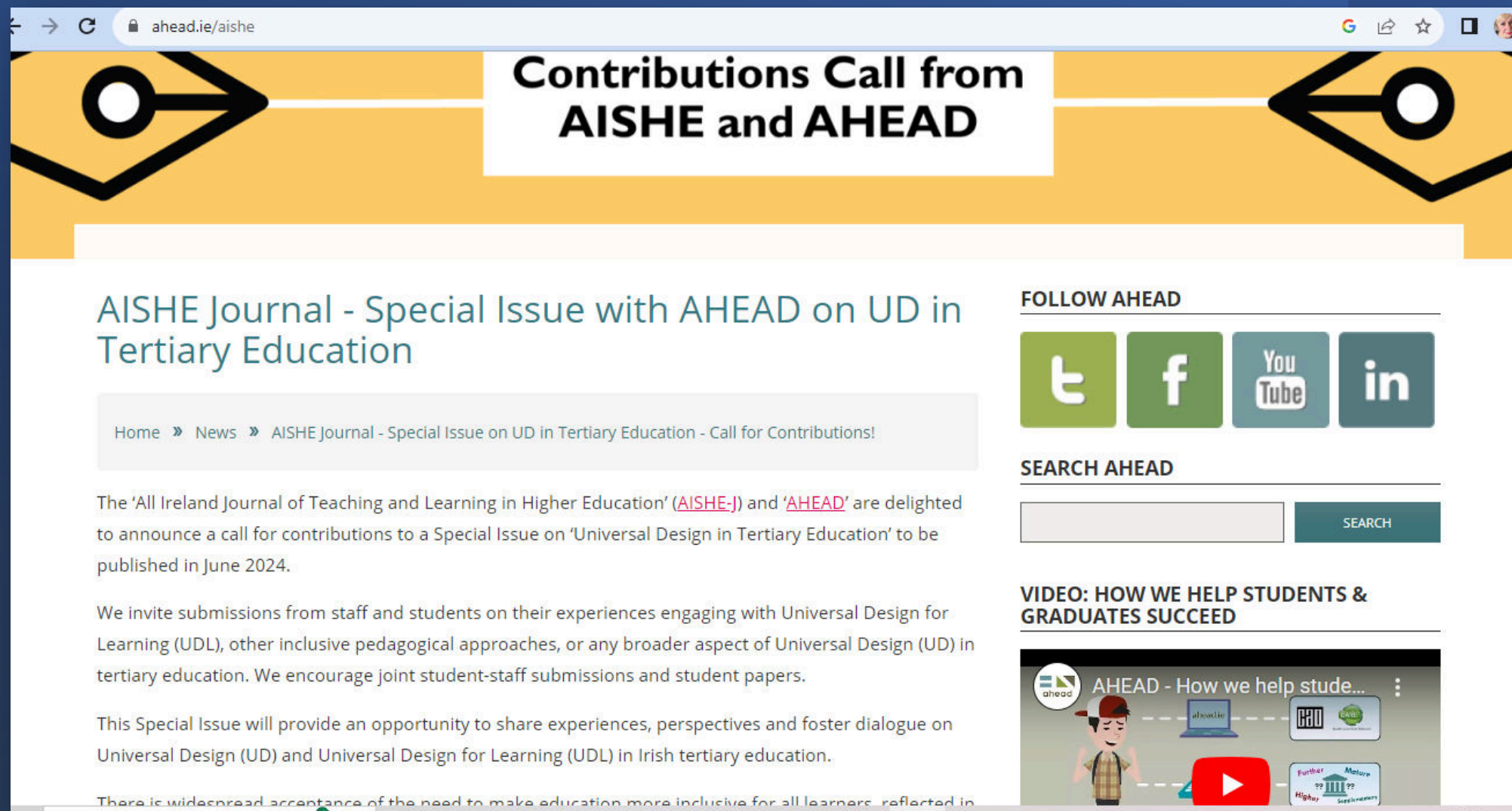
The shift from ad hoc enhancement activities to strategic embedding of UDL was implicit in the study. Consequently, in summer 2022, HECA's Academic Quality Enhancement Forum Committee (HAQEF) began an exploratory study to investigate the positioning of UDL across HECA colleges.



**Naomi Jackson**  
Dean of Academic Affairs, CCT College Dublin



**Marie O'Neill**  
Head of Enhancement and Head of the Centre for Teaching and Learning, CCT College Dublin



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL [ahead.ie/aishe](https://www.ahead.ie/aishe). The page has a yellow header with large stylized eyes on either side of the main title. The main title is "Contributions Call from AISHE and AHEAD". Below this is a section titled "AISHE Journal - Special Issue with AHEAD on UD in Tertiary Education". A breadcrumb trail reads: Home » News » AISHE Journal - Special Issue on UD in Tertiary Education - Call for Contributions!. The main text states that the 'All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education' (AISHE-J) and 'AHEAD' are delighted to announce a call for contributions to a Special Issue on 'Universal Design in Tertiary Education' to be published in June 2024. It invites submissions from staff and students on their experiences engaging with Universal Design for Learning (UDL), other inclusive pedagogical approaches, or any broader aspect of Universal Design (UD) in tertiary education. It encourages joint student-staff submissions and student papers. The text continues: "This Special Issue will provide an opportunity to share experiences, perspectives and foster dialogue on Universal Design (UD) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Irish tertiary education." and "There is widespread acceptance of the need to make education more inclusive for all learners, reflected in". On the right side, there is a "FOLLOW AHEAD" section with social media icons for Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Below that is a "SEARCH AHEAD" section with a search bar and a "SEARCH" button. At the bottom right, there is a video player titled "VIDEO: HOW WE HELP STUDENTS & GRADUATES SUCCEED" showing a cartoon character and various educational icons.

## Contributions Call from AISHE and AHEAD

### AISHE Journal - Special Issue with AHEAD on UD in Tertiary Education

Home » News » AISHE Journal - Special Issue on UD in Tertiary Education - Call for Contributions!

The 'All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education' ([AISHE-J](#)) and '[AHEAD](#)' are delighted to announce a call for contributions to a Special Issue on 'Universal Design in Tertiary Education' to be published in June 2024.

We invite submissions from staff and students on their experiences engaging with Universal Design for Learning (UDL), other inclusive pedagogical approaches, or any broader aspect of Universal Design (UD) in tertiary education. We encourage joint student-staff submissions and student papers.

This Special Issue will provide an opportunity to share experiences, perspectives and foster dialogue on Universal Design (UD) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Irish tertiary education.

There is widespread acceptance of the need to make education more inclusive for all learners, reflected in

#### FOLLOW AHEAD

Twitter Facebook YouTube LinkedIn

#### SEARCH AHEAD

SEARCH

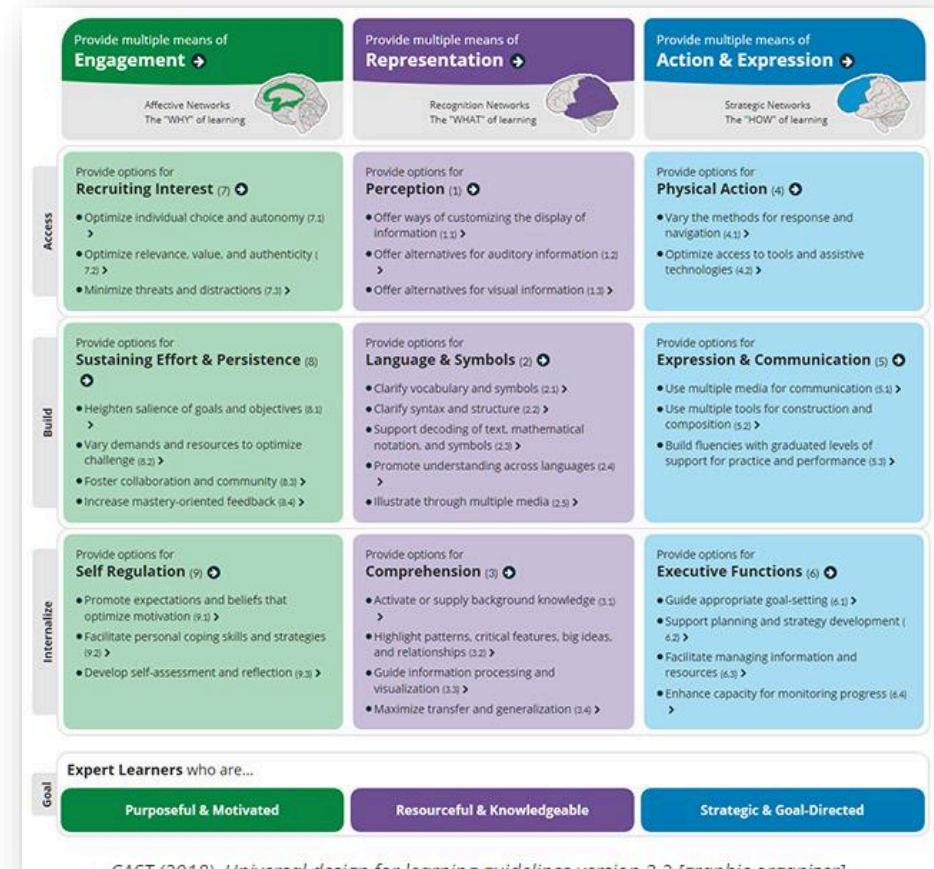
#### VIDEO: HOW WE HELP STUDENTS & GRADUATES SUCCEED

AHEAD - How we help stude...



# Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

In the 1990s, the Centre for Applied Special Technology created the CAST framework, incorporating guidelines that offer “concrete suggestions for applying the UDL framework to practice and help ensure that all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities” (CAST, 2018)



Source: [http://udloncampus.cast.org/page/udl\\_about](http://udloncampus.cast.org/page/udl_about)

# Universal Design for Learning at CCT

- UDL is a key priority in the CCT **Strategic Plan** and CCT Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy
- Institutional Commitment to **Ahead/National Forum digital badge in UDL**. Six staff members are taking the current iteration.
- CCT has passed stage 1 of the **AsIAm accreditation process to become an autism friendly college**. Project led by Neil Gallagher, College President.
- CCT is an **institutional member of AHEAD** and of the **Disability Advisors Working Network (DAWN)**



# The Importance of Research on UDL

**273%**

rise in the number of  
disabled students in HE  
over the last 13 years

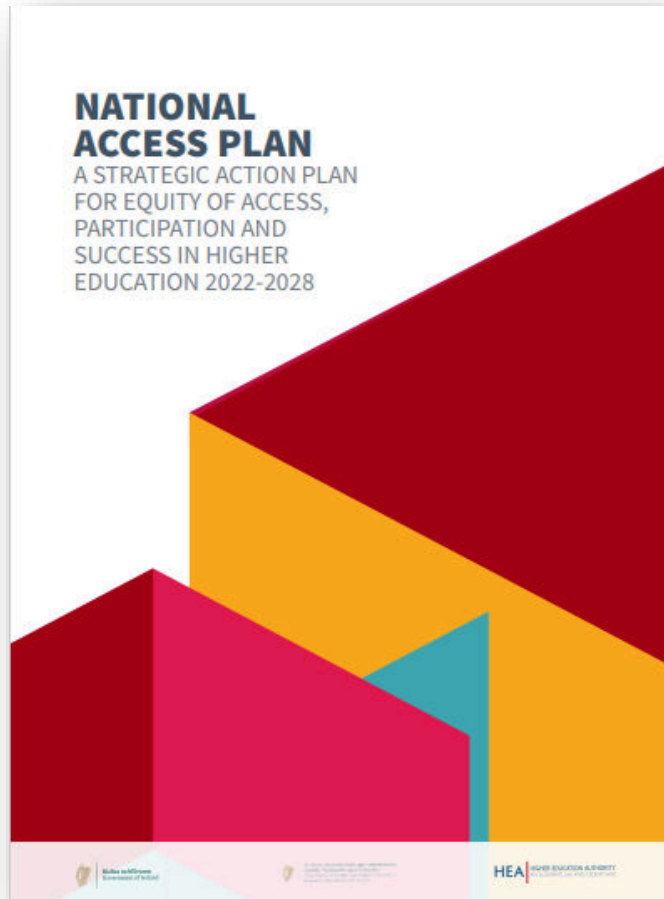
Students with Disabilities  
Engaged with Support  
Services in Higher  
Education in Ireland  
2021/22



 **ahead**  
creating inclusive environments in education  
and employment for people with disabilities

Source: [https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/AHEAD\\_Research\\_Report\\_22\\_Interactive.pdf](https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/AHEAD_Research_Report_22_Interactive.pdf)

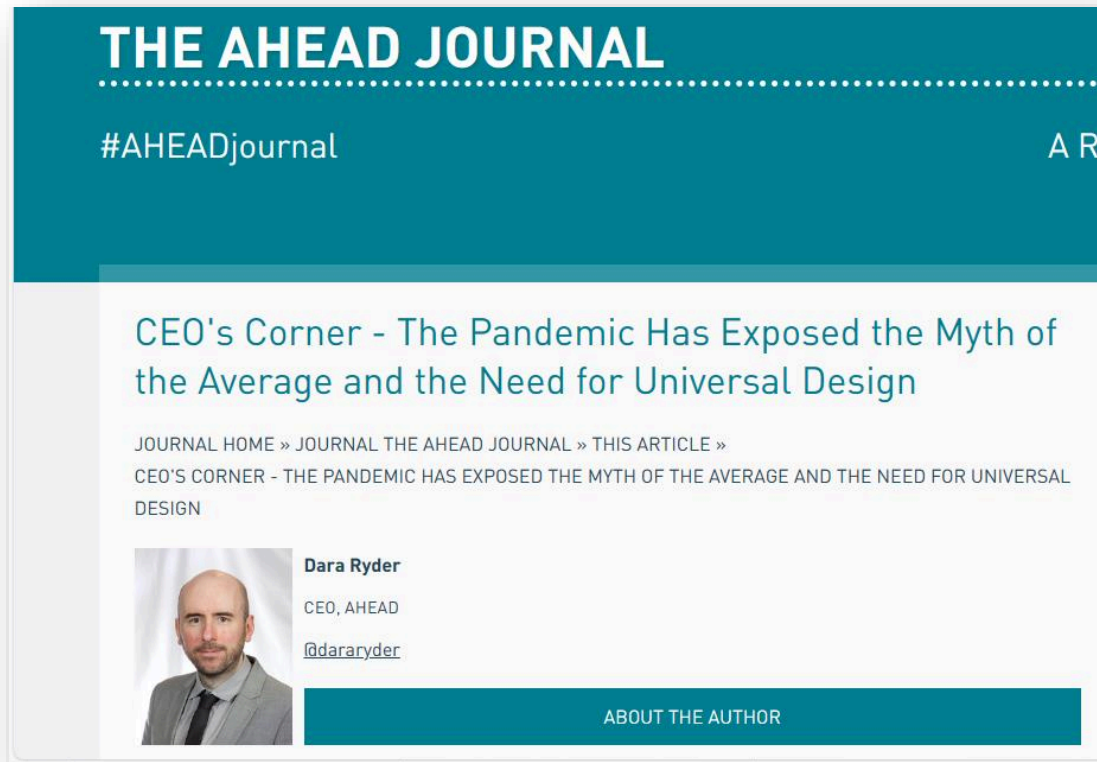
# Sectoral Priority: Widening Access



**We must put students at the core of the Plan, through the five student-centred goals, and prioritise universal design in all aspects of higher education.”**

**(HEA, 2022, p.20)**

# The Myth of the Average Student

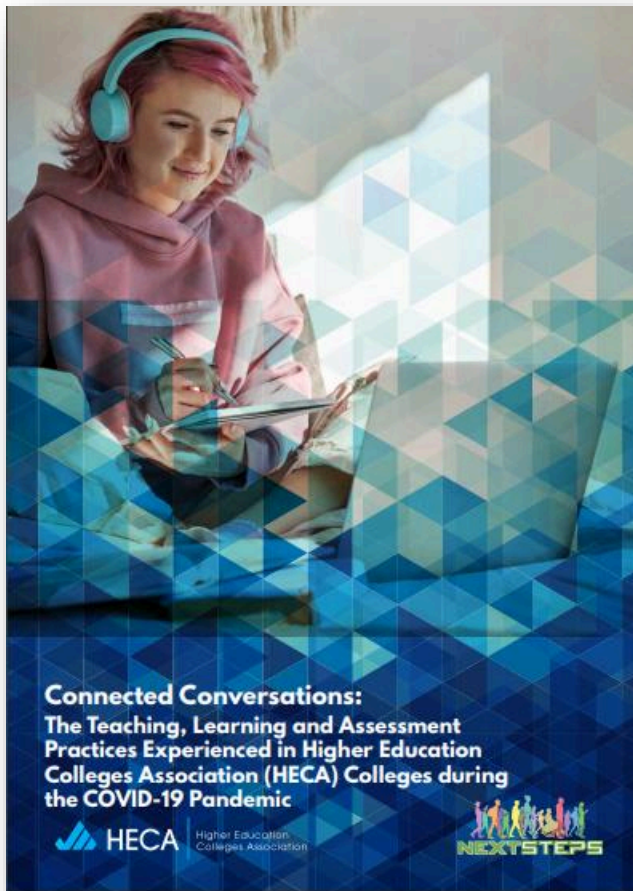


**‘Learning is as unique to individuals as their fingerprints or DNA’. (Hall et al., 2012)....More than ever, we need to take the learning from AHEAD’s research, and other Covid-19 research across the education and employment sector....which we can channel into better systems with more accessibility, flexibility and choice built into their design. In this way, we can ask our students and staff to bend a little less to our education and workplace systems, and start ensuring the systems can bend a little more to fit people instead.(Ryder, 2021, Para 6.)**

Source: <https://www.ahead.ie/journal/CEOs-Corner-The-Pandemic-Has-Exposed-the-Myth-of-the-Average-and-the-Need-for-Universal-Design>



# HECA's Connected Conversations



**“Alternative assessment arrangements advanced the UDL agenda by providing students with greater choice and variety to demonstrate what they knew in assessments” (HECA, 2022, p28)**

**“Every opportunity to build upon the principles of UDL must be leveraged. The assumption of homogeneity continues to be challenged – HECA classrooms are vibrant and diverse settings” (HECA, 2021, p44)**

# Research Questions and Methodology

**What is the strategic positioning of UDL in a post-pandemic HECA landscape?**

**How is UDL being embedded across HECA Colleges?**

- Exploratory study using a qualitative approach (focus groups)
- Feedback was coded and analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006)
- Triangulation with the academic literature

# Sample

Three focus groups were conducted with participants from **five of the twelve HECA colleges**.

Participants were staff working in **executive, senior leadership, and middle management positions in operations, quality assurance (QA), programme management, and learning support**, along with **instructional designers**. Some had **lecturing** duties.

The five participating colleges offer programmes in business, ICT, and the humanities, leading to awards up to and including level 9 of the National Framework for Qualifications to approximately 20,000 learners

# Literature Review

- UDL supports **all learners** to do better (Rose & Meyer, 2002).
- Variety and **choice in assessment** are crucial to implementing UDL (AHEAD, 2021)
- “The **multimodal nature of digital tools** facilitates the integration of varied formats and flexible options into the learning experience” (Rao, 2021)
- **Lecture capture** aligns well with the principles of universal design (Watt et al., 2014).
- UDL can support other institutional priorities, such as **culturally sensitive teaching** (Kieran and Anderson, 2018)
- **Quality frameworks combined with universal-design principles** can enhance the online teaching and learning experience for learners (Robinson & Wizer, 2016)



# Theme 1: The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated UDL implementation as a strategic priority on a whole-of-institution basis in HECA Colleges

**“We have just gone through a year of strategic planning. We want to make our plans in relation to UDL more explicit. The level of support that we offered during the pandemic has informed our strategic plan.”**

**College 4**

**“The embedding and articulation of UDL in strategies gives you a power in the context of implementation on the ground.”**

**College 1**

**“UDL is not just a checklist, it’s a mindset.”**

**College 4**

# Theme 2: QA processes further support the implementation of UDL

**“Preparing for re-engagement was the real reset mode in relation to UDL.”**  
**College 2**

**“Annual reporting to QQI has also helped to accelerate the deeper embedding of UDL principles.”**  
**College 2**

**“Validation and programmatic review panels ask what is the profile of your learner and your graduate. These questions speak to inclusion.”**  
**College 4**

**“The more UDL is linked to QA and becomes part of what we do, the more the need for accommodations will be reduced”**  
**College 4**

**“The QQI online-only pilot for short courses gave us key insights into how to engage learners, including learners with disabilities, in a purely online teaching and learning environment.”**  
**College 3**

# Theme 3: UDL is increasingly integrated into governance structures and QA policies

- All participants indicated that **UDL is prioritised by boards and committees, including academic councils**, in HECA colleges. Larger HECA colleges have dedicated **inclusion committees**.
- Participants confirmed that their institutions' quality assurance manuals do not include a dedicated UDL policy but do apply the **principles of UDL across a range of policies**.
- **All colleges have a dedicated accommodations policy** and staff with responsibility for accommodations.
- All agreed, however, that **UDL has to be a collective responsibility**

"Awareness of UDL is strong,  
but **full and consistent  
implementation of UDL  
remains an ongoing priority.**"  
College 1

"The language of universal design is slowly  
making its way into policies and  
procedures."  
College 4

# Theme 4: Programme design is instrumental in UDL implementation

- Focus group participants highlighted the importance of **maintaining a student focus and proactive instead of reactive approaches to UDL implementation.**
- Also emphasised was the **benefit of drilling into the CAST guidelines, not just the principles, when embarking on inclusive programme design**

**“The holy grail of a fully collaborative design process with students is very difficult to pull off. **We want to include the student voice, however.**”**

**College 4**

**“CAST can put a structure on what we are already doing.”**

**College 2**

**“Learner survey feedback, including from learners with specific needs, informs programme design, but fully embedding a student partnership approach remains a work in progress.”**

**College 2**



# Theme 5: Technology is a key enabler of UDL

- Ensuring the **technical competency of staff** engaging with UDL was emphasised, along with providing access to the correct software for both learners and staff.
- **Asynchronous learning** was highlighted as a key UDL enabler.

**“It took a global pandemic to bring about universal access to class recordings across the sector. They are so important.” College 1**

**“Gamification is good for UDL, as is storytelling.”  
College 5**

**“Our educational technologist is a key enabler of UDL. He is responsive to learner needs and keeps in close communication with them.”  
College 2**



Source: <https://ucd.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/lecture-capture-effective-tool-universal/docview/1561088365/se-2?accountid=14507>

# Theme 6: Educational initiatives and guidelines promote engagement with UDL

Focus group participants identify informal as well as formal education and training initiatives for staff as important

**“There is a postgraduate programme of education within our college in which UDL is taught to staff.”**  
**College 1**

**“We need to train all faculty to ensure that all learners receive an equitable teaching and learning experience.”**  
**College 3**

**“Informal meet-ups between colleagues to discuss UDL have also helped re implementation, supporting a cross-pollination of ideas across the college.”**  
**College 1**

**“We have a college-wide nourishing environment in relation to UDL. Approximately 40 staff have taken the National Forum and AHEAD digital badge in universal design. . . . The badge is embedded in our culture.”**  
**College 1**

# Theme 7: Diverse feedback mechanisms are central to advancing UDL

**“Programme board meetings are an essential QA mechanism for ensuring that we have met the needs of our learners, including learners with disabilities. Learning analytics are also important.”**  
**College 4**

**“Our next step is to scaffold in the student voice.”**  
**College 1**

**“Anecdotal feedback is important. You also need to ask questions you can’t ask on a feedback form. We need to have more focus groups with staff and learners and not just the feedback surveys. Equally, open-door policies where learners with disabilities can come and chat with us are so important.”**  
**College 3**

**“In our weekly operational meeting, faculty can feed back about learners with disabilities.”**  
**College 4**

# Theme 8: UDL forms part of an increasing focus on Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)

**‘There is some overlap between UDL and EDI. In our college, the EDI perspective is considered across college activities and committees. After every meeting, we ask, “What are the EDI implications of this?”**

**College 1**

**“The principles of UDL in the context of curriculum helps to remove barriers in the absence of funding.”**

**College 1**

The screenshot shows the Sage Journals website interface. At the top, there's a search bar with the text 'Search this journal' and 'Enter search terms...'. Below the search bar, there are navigation links for 'Browse by discipline' and 'Information for'. The main header area is dark red with the text 'Education and Urban Society'. Below this, there's a white box containing the article title 'Connecting Universal Design for Learning With Culturally Responsive Teaching' by Laura Kieran and Christine Anderson. The article is marked as 'Available access' and 'Research article', and it was first published online on July 3, 2018. The volume and issue information is 'Volume 51, Issue 9'. Below the article title, there are links for 'Contents', 'PDF / ePub', 'Cite article', 'Share options', and 'Information, rights and permissions'. The abstract text is visible at the bottom of the screenshot.

**Sage Journals** Search this journal Enter search terms... Advanced search

Browse by discipline Information for

**Education and Urban Society**

Impact Factor: 1.2 / 5-Year Impact Factor: 1

Available access | Research article | First published online July 3, 2018

**Connecting Universal Design for Learning With Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Laura Kieran and Christine Anderson View all authors and affiliations

Volume 51, Issue 9 | <https://doi-org.ucd.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0013124518785012>

Contents | PDF / ePub | Cite article | Share options | Information, rights and permissions

**Abstract**

Urban students are increasingly diverse in race, culture, language, and background knowledge. Educators must consider how students' differences affect learning and align pedagogies that address this diversity. Universal design for learning (UDL) has provided educators with a framework for differentiation to address

Source: <https://doi-org.ucd.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0013124518785012>



# Summary of Findings



Feedback from an exploratory study with five HECA colleges indicates that **UDL has advanced from piecemeal enhancement activity promoted by champions to an increasingly strategic priority.**



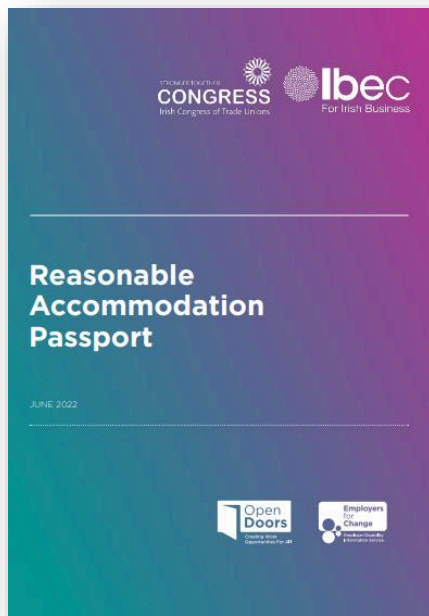
**UDL in HECA colleges engages staff across a range of functions** including quality assurance, library, learning support, and teaching and learning.



**A continued focus on implementation across all programmes and institutional workflows remains a priority**, informed by sectoral developments and good practice as promoted by bodies such as AHEAD and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning.

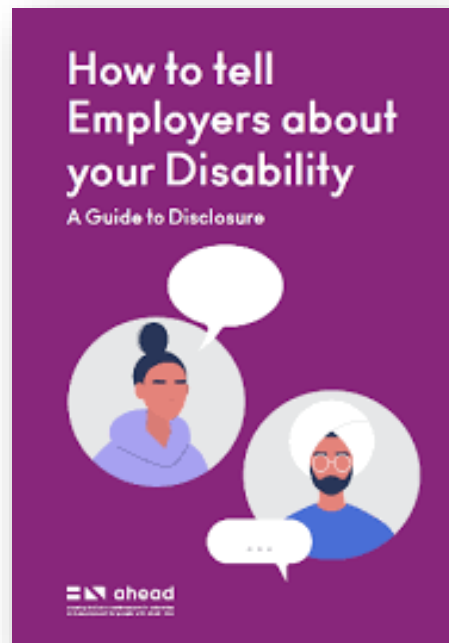
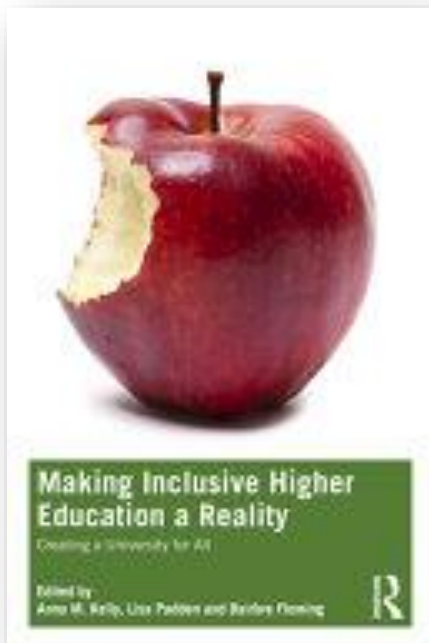


**The findings of this study could inform the construction of a survey tool to test themes on a larger scale across all HECA colleges**, providing an evidence-based framework for the strategic and cohesive implementation of UDL HECA-wide.

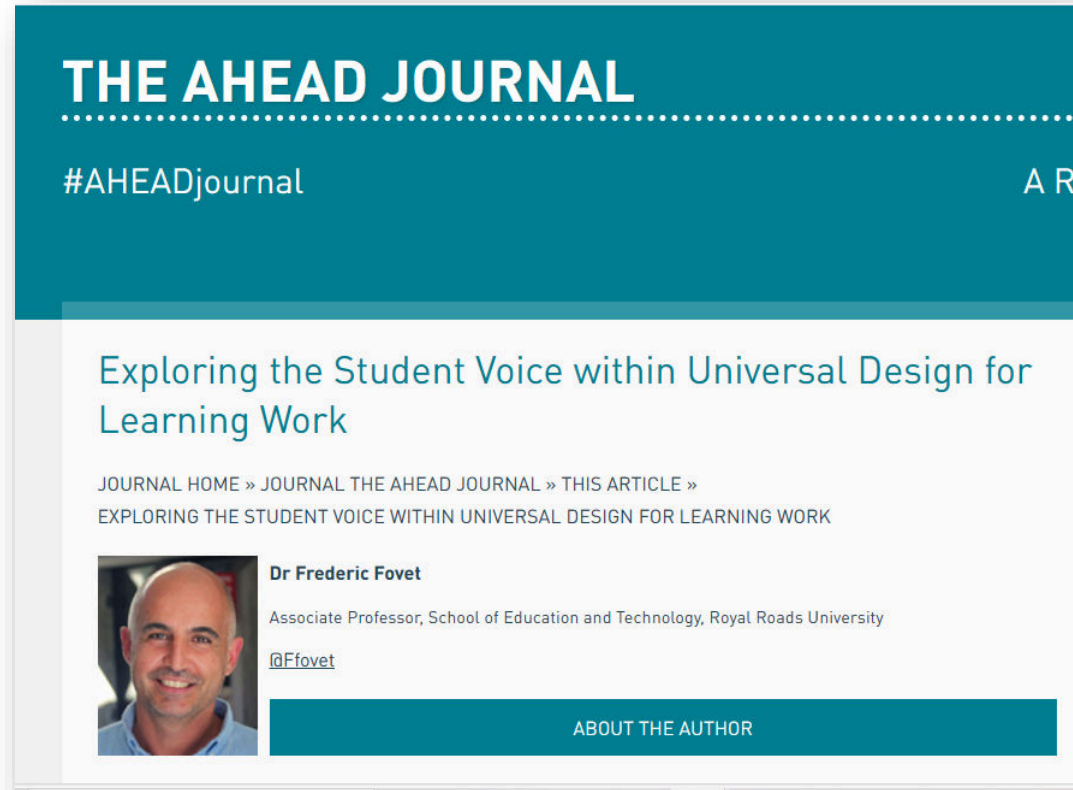


# Next Steps for HECA

- Continued **migration from compliance to commitment**
- Continue to foster **evidence based, whole of institution approaches to UDL**
- Prioritise UDL in QA, governance, enhancement, EDI and programme design activities and strategies **leveraging student partnership and the student voice**
- **Prioritise Universal design for employees**
- Continue to participate in **national communities of practice** and engage with key organisations as AHEAD/AsIAM.
- **Expand the HECA evidence base/research output** in relation to UDL implementation particularly in the context of impact and the student voice.
- Continued **advocacy for Government funding**



# Exploring the Student Voice in Universal Design



**“As main stakeholders in this process of change, the student body will need to be actively involved and engaged.** When I was involved in the implementation of UDL as the director of an accessibility service, I designed a workshop for students which was meant to introduce the student body to the notion of UDL and to encourage participants to become active partners in the scaling up of UDL efforts (Beck, Diaz del Castillo, Fovet, Mole & Noga, 2014). This is an effective first step, but campuses also need to proactively involve student unions, and **create political goodwill from the student body at large, around the process.**” (Fovet, 2018, Para 11)

Source: <https://www.ahead.ie/journal/Exploring-the-Student-Voice-within-Universal-Design-for-Learning-Work>

# Thank you



Email: [moneill@cct.ie](mailto:moneill@cct.ie)



Twitter: @marielibrarian



LinkedIn:  
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/marie-o-neill-9340747a/>



# References

- AHEAD (2022) Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2021/22
- Available at:  
[https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/AHEAD\\_Research\\_Report\\_22\\_Interactive.pdf](https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/AHEAD_Research_Report_22_Interactive.pdf)
- AHEAD (2023) How to Tell an Employer about Your Disability. A Guide to Disclosure. Available at:  
[https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/AHEAD\\_DisclosureGuide2023-digital.pdf](https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/AHEAD_DisclosureGuide2023-digital.pdf)
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77–101.
- CAST (2018) UDL CAST Guidelines.  
<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>
- CAST (2018) UDL CAST Guidelines.  
<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>
- Fovet (2018) Exploring the Student Voice within Universal Design for Learning Work. *Ahead Journal*. Issue 8.  
<https://www.ahead.ie/journal/Exploring-the-Student-Voice-within-Universal-Design-for-Learning-Work>

# References

- Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2022) National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022–2028.  
<https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/national-access-plan-2022-2028/>
- Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) (2021) Next Steps: Connected Conversations: The Teaching, Learning and Assessment Practices Experienced in Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) Colleges during the COVID-19 Pandemic.  
<https://heca.ie/wp-content/uploads/NextSteps-HECA-Report-compressed.pdf>
- IBEC (2023) Reasonable Accommodations Passport.  
[https://ictu.ie/sites/default/files/users/user319/Reasonable%20Accommodation%20Passport%202022\\_V4.pdf](https://ictu.ie/sites/default/files/users/user319/Reasonable%20Accommodation%20Passport%202022_V4.pdf)
- Kieran, L. and Anderson, C. (2018) 'Connecting universal design for learning with culturally responsive teaching', Education and Urban Society, 51(9).  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0013124518785012>
- Kelly, A., Padden L. & Flemming B. (Eds) (2023) Making Inclusive Higher Education a Reality. Creating a University for All. Routledge.

# References

- Rao, K. (2021) 'Inclusive instructional design: Applying UDL to online learning', Journal of Applied Design.  
[https://edtechbooks.org/jaid\\_10\\_1/preparing\\_teachers\\_f](https://edtechbooks.org/jaid_10_1/preparing_teachers_f)
- Robinson, D. and Wizer, D. (2016) 'Universal Design for Learning and the Quality Matters guidelines for the design and implementation of online learning events', International Journal of Technology in Teaching and Learning, 12(1), 17–32.  
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1213328>
- Rose, D. H. and Meyer, A. (2002) Teaching Every Student in the Digital Age: Universal Design for Learning. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Ryder, Dara, (2021) CEO's Corner. The Pandemic has Exposed the Myth of the Average and the Need for Universal Design. Ahead Journal. Issue 13. <https://www.ahead.ie/journal/CEOs-Corner-The-Pandemic-Has-Exposed-the-Myth-of-the-Average-and-the-Need-for-Universal-Design>
- Watt, S., Vajoczki, S., Voros, G., Vine, M., Fenton, N., and Tarkowski, J. (2014) 'Lecture capture: An effective tool for universal instructional design?', Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 44(2), 1–29.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1038356.pdf>