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# Let's Start the Conversation: Inclusion is Everyone's Job

Ireland has agreed to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. This is an extraordinarily important, if long overdue development as Ireland was one of the first signatories back in 2007.

So what difference will it make? For a start it will not create any new rights for people with disabilities but it will explain how the fundamental human rights that we all enjoy, apply to people with disabilities. It gives us an international standard about involving people with disability and involving them as equal partners in key decisions about their lives. Ratification means that the state and its institutions promise to maintain these standards and what is more, will be held to account. The Department of Justice most likely will monitor progress.

The UNCRPD standard applies to all levels of education and states that people with disabilities have the right to **mainstream** education. To date this has been interpreted as access, as getting into the education system and in these terms, it has been successful. For example the numbers of students with disabilities getting into higher education has doubled since 2007 and now account for 6% of the student population.

The difficulty is that so far the approach taken to inclusion by institutions has been one of **add-on** supports, rather than an inclusive mainstream one. This is a sticking plaster approach which only works with small numbers and as numbers continue to increase such an approach is no longer workable and costly. It is also disrespectful and creates many barriers to inclusion for students with disabilities which are well documented.

There is a golden opportunity now with the signing of the UNCRPD to change all this and move from an add-on model to a fully inclusive one. The first step would be to explore with colleagues within the institutions what would **mainstream education** look like, how can they design their programmes for students with disabilities? What does it mean to them to be compliant with the UNCRPD standards? Fortunately this is not a green field site; there has been considerable work done already and there is a policy framework already in place. The Higher Education National Access Plan has a strong objective to '**mainstream the delivery of equity of access to higher education**'. All higher education institutions have articulated their commitment to equality and inclusion within their performance compacts. AHEAD in collaboration with DAWN have produced a position paper on Universal Design for Learning and have explored the challenges for the sector in designing a system around the inclusion of students with disabilities in the mainstream. So let's start the conversation, **Inclusion is Everyone's Job.**

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## Ann Heelan

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Ann Heelan is a consultant on Inclusive Education Practice and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for all students. Originally a teacher and then CEO of AHEAD for 20 Years, she has a track record of working in collaboration with national and international organisations to improve the opportunities and rights of students with disabilities in education. She has written on topics such as "Building Inclusive Learning Spaces," "Getting Started with UDL," "Inclusive Study Abroad," "Accessible Assessment," "Developing your UDL Practice," and "Building Communities of UDL Practice."

In her role in AHEAD, Ann established learning networks with staff in further and higher education, to support them to work together to make their practice more inclusive of students with disabilities. She was the winner of the Miriam Van Acker Award for Innovation in Inclusive Education in 2017, which recognises leadership in promoting inclusive practice for students with disabilities in tertiary education and employment.

Since 2020 she has been working with SOLAS on behalf of AHEAD to research and write the SOLAS publication on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for FET which SOLAS are due to be published in early in 2021.

She now runs a [Consultancy Service supporting staff in tertiary education](#) to get started and reduce the barriers for individual students and to develop UDL practice across the institution.

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