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# A New DAWN: a Road Map for Inclusion

'I have one of your students' is a common communication from faculty to Access and Disability Officers. It is a telling remark as it reveals a lot about the culture within HEIs in which many staff see the Disability/Access Office as responsible for all disadvantaged students and don't see it as part of their job. This raises the question about just how inclusive institutions are, do they welcome all of their non-traditional students? Do they ensure that this cohort of students feel that they belong? The ever growing diversity of students together with modularisation, pressure on staffing and changing standards and requirements leads to less contact time between students and lecturers, and less understanding of the needs of these students.

Yet all of the research on student engagement and well-being emphasises the importance for students of a sense of belonging. Belonging, in an academic environment, according to Liz Thomas of Edge Hill University, is tied up with the capacity of the student to cope with the academic demands of the course, to reach the academic milestones and to be supported in doing so.

DAWN - the Disability Advisors Working Network - deal day-to-day with students at the edge and work at the front line with staff to build inclusive learning environments in their institutions. DAWN is aware that the Add-On funding model of inclusion in operation in HEIs is unsustainable. With 6% of students nationally having a disability and up to 45% of students from non-traditional backgrounds, the 'I have one of your students' approach to inclusion is surely obsolete. It is not enough anymore to leave inclusion to the Access and Disability Office, inclusion is a whole institution approach and is everyone's job from admissions officer, to faculty, to careers.

DAWN are working collaboratively with AHEAD exploring the changes needed to build a more inclusive and engaging institutional environment. It is not a green field site and there are many examples of inclusive initiatives in every institution. The challenge is to mainstream inclusion and to make it everyone's responsibility; part of everyone's job.

DAWN together with AHEAD are advocating for a system of Universal Design for Learning in higher education, (UDL). UDL is a new way of thinking about learning.

UDL is an approach to design and delivery of curriculum and learning built on three key principles:

1. Every student learns differently and this must be built into the curriculum, methods of teaching, and assessment.
2. There are many ways of teaching and learning that faculty and those supporting inclusion need to have knowledge of and also the skill to choose ones which best meet the differing learning needs of a diverse group of students.
3. Within this context of UDL and inclusive practices, formative assessment is an important part of the learning process.

DAWN and AHEAD have developed a road map for the introduction of UDL which builds on current good practices and explores the changes needed to move UDL on, including job roles. A Position Paper: Inclusive Education – a

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road map for disability support in higher education will be launched on the 7th December. Watch this space...

Ann Heelan, Executive Director November, 2017

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**Ann Heelan**

[UniversalDesignforLearning.ie](http://UniversalDesignforLearning.ie)

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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This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit [www.ahead.ie/journal](http://www.ahead.ie/journal) for more information

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