
Allyship: A Resource Hub for Accessibility in Student Life

The Idea/Introduction

When you reflect back on your time in college, where did you take your learning from? Our first thought might be of an engaging lecture, a thought provoking tutorial or an interesting lab – and of course, we'd be right. But, what we might forget to mention is all the learning we absorbed outside of formal learning environments.

Students get an opportunity to develop hugely valuable soft skills through their participation in the social aspects of student life. Involvement in clubs and societies or engagement with the student union can enable students to pick up on valuable employability skills like event management, communication, leadership and organisation.

It's important that students with disabilities can access all elements of student life and have the same opportunities as their peers. To make this a possibility, it's vital these elements are inclusive and accessible. For a number of years, AHEAD has tried to promote this by providing Disability Awareness and Accessibility training for incoming Student Union Officers as part of the Union of Students in Ireland's (USI) Student Union Training (SUT), regularly providing training to clubs and society committees, and meeting with student's unions to talk about the accessibility of events and campaigns that they're running.

Delivering these training sessions is a great conversation starter, however, there is only so much that can be covered in a 2-hour training session. Those who engage with students with disabilities needed a resource where they could refer back to when questions came up during planning of events or campaigns.

Developing the resource hub

Once the idea was there and a resource hub was to be created, we had to look at what information should be included. For the resource to be a useful tool it would have to have input from students with disabilities themselves and input from the people who would be using it. We decided to call this hub the 'Allyship' – as we hoped with the right tools, information and guidance on accessibility we could create better allies to students with disabilities.

Firstly, we checked in with our USI/AHEAD Co-Chaired Students with Disabilities Advisory Group. This is a group of students with disabilities who meet regularly with AHEAD and USI. The group offers guidance into the work of AHEAD and plays an important role in bringing the student voice into the work of AHEAD.

The Advisory Group members thought it was important to include information on accessibility including:

- **accessible events, both virtual and in-person**
- **how to be an inclusive and accessible class representative**
- **accessible communications.**

Other than students, we felt it was important to check in with the target audience for the resource – those who will be supporting students with disabilities, in particular Student Union Officers. Every year at Student Union Training

(SUT), the training event run by USI for them AHEAD facilitates a session on Disability Awareness.

On the 21st of July at SUT, we had a soft launch of the Allyship Hub at our session with the incoming Union Officers. Here we gathered their feedback on what we had created so far and were able to get a sense of what other information would be useful for them while supporting students with disabilities in their roles. This gave us really valuable insight and helped us to brainstorm additional web pages and topics we could further develop on the resource hub, going forward.

We collected feedback on topics we had already developed and gathered ideas for future topics at the training session by using Menti.com – you can see responses below (Fig 1 and 2):

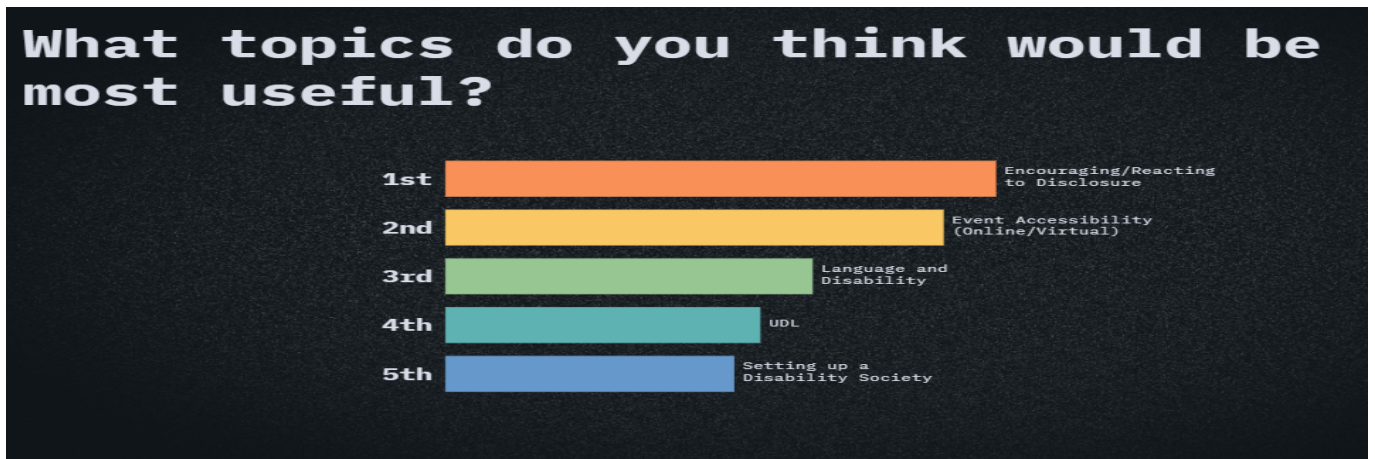


Fig 1.

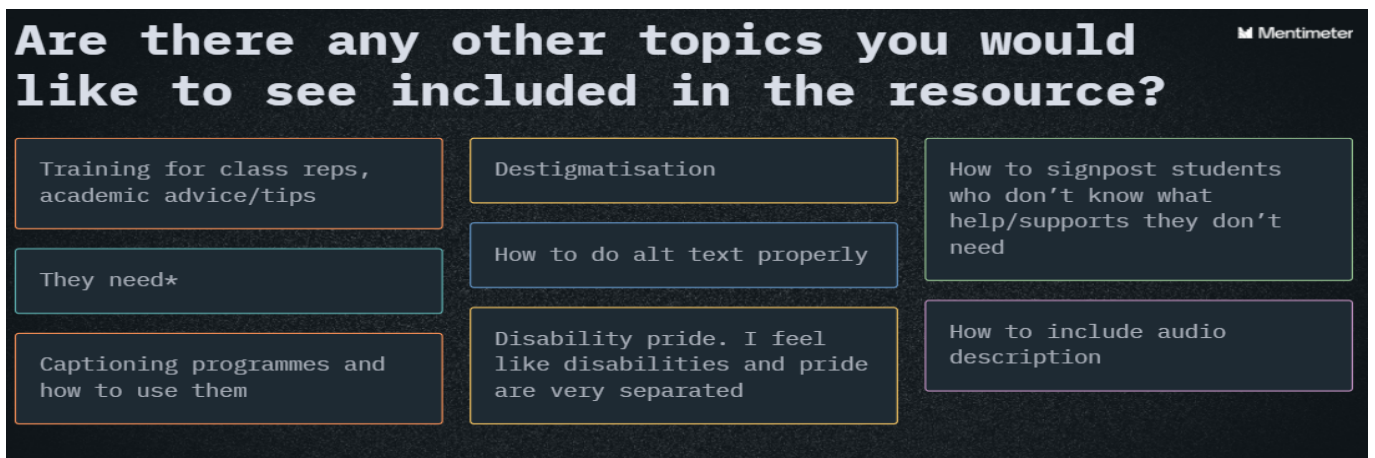


Fig 2

Launching the platform

Once we had incorporated feedback from the Officers at the Student Union Training, we had an official launch of the platform on the 17th September 2021. To launch the platform our GetAHEAD Intern, Laocin Brennan, hosted a takeover of AHEAD's Twitter campaign – he shared his experience of the launch below:

I planned the Twitter Takeover with our Events and Communications Officer. Having been involved with making the Allyship I was keen to show it off well. I sent out forty tweets (including replies) on Friday 17th.

The tweets had almost 9, 878 impressions that day.

I included a variety of content and spaced them throughout the morning and afternoon. The content contained:

- A brief introduction to AHEAD, and myself
- Polls on accessibility topics (e.g.: what do accessible events mean to you?)
- A video interview of myself talking about my GetAHEAD internship
- Advice on disclosure
- Promotion for my GetAHEAD blogs.

The Twitter Takeover was a great success, with three of the Allyship pages being in AHEAD’s top ten visited pages.”



Fig 3.



Fig 4.

Content

When we first had the idea for the resource hub, the plan was to aim the content only at Student Union Officers. However, after speaking to the Students with Disabilities Advisory Group we felt it was important to widen the scope to include other people who could benefit from guidance on accessibility, including class representatives and club and society committee members.

We've developed web pages of information on the following topics:

- Language and Disability
- Disclosure
- Accessible Events
- Accessible Societies

[You can read these articles and visit the Allyship Hub here.](#)

The Allyship hub will also soon contain downloadable checklists where people can check in on accessibility. These checklists will include topics like:

- How accessible is my event?
- Being an accessible class rep
- How to be the best accessibility contact

Contact us

The Allyship hub is not a one-off project, it will continue to be developed and content will be added to the hub as it is needed. We are really open to any ideas you might have on how we can help those supporting students with disabilities in extracurricular student life incorporate accessible and inclusive practices. If you have any comments

or ideas for the hub, please contact Hannah - hannah.kelly@ahead.ie



Hannah Kelly

Student and Graduate Engagement Officer, AHEAD

Hannah (she/her) is the Student and Graduate Engagement Officer in AHEAD. Her role involves working to include the student voice in the work of AHEAD and creating inclusive environments for disabled students in extracurricular settings. As part of her role, she was the co-founder and now coordinator of the USI/AHEAD Students with Disabilities Advisory group. This group helps to inform the strategy and policy of AHEAD and USI concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in HE and FE. Outside of her work with AHEAD, Hannah is a volunteer with Dublin Lesbian Line and is a public speaker, particularly in the areas of intersectionality and inclusion.

This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
