Student Engagement – Sharing Our Learning

We in AHEAD took part in an Erasmus+ project with partners in Norway and Belgium. It was an innovative and exciting project from the get-go – setting out to establish what Universal Design of Learning (UDL) meant for European higher education institutions and stakeholders. Each partner had responsibility for engaging with one sector of the higher education population; our focus was on the student population. The goal was to develop a toolkit for students, with students.

The challenge, we quickly learned however, was to engage students in the first instance. While the project was focused on UDL, we decided to not just engage with students with disabilities, but also to seek to engage with the student population. Sounds edgy, doesn't it?!

On setting out to achieve our objective we were increasingly being lead to believe 'students don't respond', 'don't engage', 'are too busy'', or just 'aren't interested'. That, we are happy to say, was not our experience. This is our story, and we want to take you on a journey and share what we learned one step at a time.

Step 1 – Identify who you want to engage – and how to engage them

We put out an open call to students with disabilities in universities in Ireland, Norway and Belgium. We wanted to hear their thoughts, learn about their experiences and collect their feedback at focus group sessions. In return, we invited them for 3 days to Dublin with all expenses paid. This was significant. We wanted to show them that although they were students, their opinions and time was just as valued as the other contributors we engaged with over the lifetime of the project (policy makers, university support staff, etc.) To apply, students simply had to fill out an online application with basic personal information. But to make them feel they had something to contribute we asked:

> 'What advice would they give to their younger selves before they started university?'

The application process was simple. It was easy and quick for students to complete, so they were not deterred by a

complicated application. Furthermore, the single question application made it simple to filter responses and find passionate people with unique insights.

We had 81 applicants, with some great advice, and from this we chose 9 students to come on board as our student ambassadors.

Make it attractive –let them know at an early stage that they have something of value to offer!

Step 2 – Be clear about what you expect

Prior to the students coming together, we provided very clear information on what to expect not just at the focus group but also what to expect in Dublin in terms of accomodation and entertainment. The AHEAD national conference was running simultanously and so it was important that their voice was not lost in the proceedings. The surrounding was the beautiful Dublin Castle confence centre and this contributed to the work that we did. There was a very clear agenda with facilitation planned for the 2 days. We expected to explore their knowledge about Universal Design of Learning and to realise a plan as to how we could convince all students about the merits of the concept and practices. Very quickly we came to realise that while they were impressed with Universal Design of Learning – they were more interested in sharing their experiences of teaching, learning and assessment. In fact they wanted to know more about being valued as students!

We quickly realised that this was also part of our learning and moved with it. The results were inspiring.

Listen - even when you don't want to.

Step 3 - And expect it to change!

We also were reminded very quickly that we were working with students! They took the opportunity to check out the Dublin night scene and were a little tardy the second morning! While this was a little frustrating for some initially – it also contributed to the relationship building. Some long lasting friendships were made and this meant for good working relationships on the project.

Respect their time – both at work and outside of work.

Step 4 - 100 Heads are Greater than One

In the second round of student engagement we partnered with first year Creative Digital Media students at the Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown. These were a diverse group of almost 100 students willing to take part in a half day focus group. The challenge was to develop an online toolkit for students that students could identify with. In the spirit of student empowerment (and UDL principles), we supported the initial group of nine European student ambassadors to facilitate these focus groups. After all – students will understand students.

And what they had to say

As well as directing us in terms of content, some of the main feedback from the student focus groups was:

- It should be useful. Give me the information I need - I'm not interested in a sales pitch.
- It needs to be efficient and straight to the point. I want the information I need quickly.
- It should be simple and easy to use. If the website is confusing or hard to use, I just give up.
- It should be a mobile friendly website. I want to be able to access it anywhere, even on the go.
- I don't see myself as disabled so when I see that word, I assume the information isn't aimed at me.

Step 5 – Let them lead the way… peer leadership

With the student leaders at the helm, the ITB students felt comfortable in having open and honest discussions as to how they'd imagine this toolkit could be. They discussed possible content, style, ideal platforms etc. They discussed what they were in need of, as well as what they would have zero interest in. We simply observed, and listened with open minds. We left with a clearer idea of what we should do, and what we shouldn't do. Again, our plans had to be recalibrated, but leaving these focus groups we knew we were on the right track to produce something that students both wanted and needed.

Trust them and their ideas.

Step 6 - Credit where credit is due

At the close of the project, we felt it was important to acknowledge the students' contribution. The end result would not have been possible without them. Moreover the journey and learning would have been so much less.

We added a section on the website entitled **About the Students.** This gives users the opportunity to see that the student voice was heard and was valued. We of course had included the logos of the partner organisations and
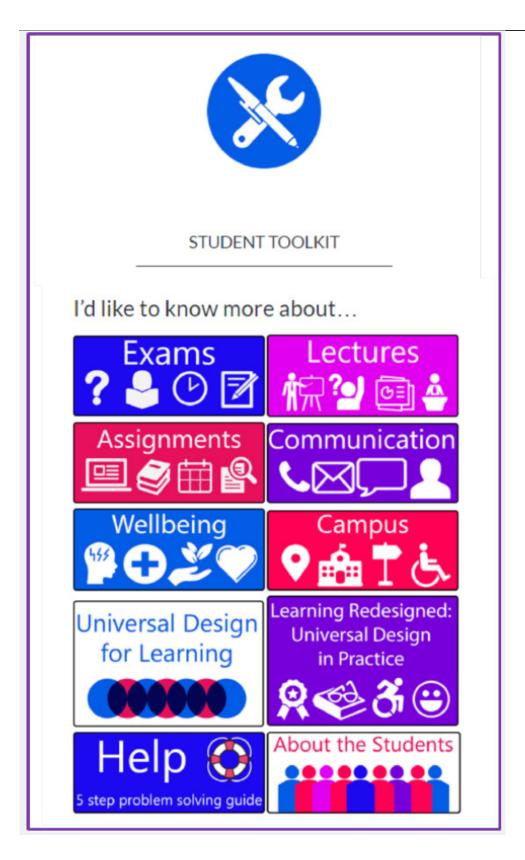
funders as is the normal practice, so why not identify with the student contributors? In a sense, by putting their names to it, we were indicating to other student users that this product was student approved!

Acknowledge their work.

Lessons learned

- Be open to new ideas and willing to adapt your plans - Don't force your own agenda.
- Students' time is valuable, so respect that.
- Trust students and how they want to do things – even if it's a little different!
- Use language they will understand.
- Be appreciative.
- Collaborate with students in a manner they can identify with – be flexible, be open, be a student!

So – what was the result?

STUDENT TOOLKIT

I'd like to know more about…

Exams

Lectures

Assignments

Communication

Wellbeing

Campus

Universal Design for Learning

Learning Redesigned: Universal Design in Practice

Help
5 step problem solving guide

About the Students

The student toolkit is an online resource for students. It aims to be universally designed and driven by the advice and experience of students. It includes articles and videos about a range of different topics:

- Taking notes to writing an academic essay.
- How to write an email to a lecturer asking what you can do when you're going through a tough time.

The mobile-friendly website will adapt to a desktop, tablet or phone, meaning the information can be accessed anywhere, even on the go.

The Student Toolkit

The articles also have links to videos, articles, podcasts and apps, so it doesn't matter how you like to learn - it's covered.

Disability or not, all students have questions. The website is focused on common problems and solutions, rather than prescribing a set list of fixes for different types of disabilities. After all, it's not just students with autism who have difficulties making friends, and it's not just students with dyslexia who have problems with how to structure an essay. That being said, students with disabilities do face some additional issues that other students do not, so that is covered too!

Simple, intuitive and easy to use, get from the home page to the information you need within 3 clicks. Straight-to-the-point information students have asked for. When you start at university, nobody sits you down and teaches you how to become a good student so now here's a resource full of the stuff that today's students have said they need.

Look at it now at https://studenttoolkit.eu/ and spread the word far and wide!

We also made a video about moving on to higher education and the nine students who participated in the project tell you about themselves. Meet the students here
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8325nC0nH3s&feature=youtu.be

They really want you to hear about their lives and what they have to say!

Mary Quirke

Assistant Director, AHEAD

Mary Quirke, Assistant Director, AHEAD has a keen interest in mentoring and empowering people to attain their personal goals. Mary works with employers on the WAM mentoring placement programme for graduates with a disability, delivery of training and consultative work with employers on disability and inclusion in the workplace.

Stephen Lehane

Staffing Services Co-Coordinator, Google

Stephen Lehane is a recent graduate of Deaf Studies at Trinity College Dublin. In his time as a Project Worker at AHEAD, Stephen worked on a number of different projects promoting access for students and graduates with disabilities, including the "Universal Design for Learning: Licence to Learn" project. Stephen was also responsible for the development of the online resource, StudentToolkit.eu. He is currently working as a Staffing Services Co-Coordinator at Google.