Universal Design: All Things to All People? Creating Collective Agency through Stakeholder Dialogue

Introduction

The diversity of Ireland's tertiary education learner population is rapidly increasing. Universal Design offers an evidence-based approach to respond to this trend. To explore the application of Universal Design in tertiary education we gathered 199 stakeholder participants for a set of dialogues to explore challenges and solutions to its successful implementation. This paper reports on the process and outcomes of this Universal Design Dialogue. Consideration was given to the hybrid nature of this dialogue process and the complex challenges of generating coherence and creating a shared vision among large and remote groups of people. The results presented and discussed will inform the development of a National Charter that considers the concerns and needs of all stakeholders. Central to the Universal Design Dialogue is the recognition that outcomes are achievable only through interdependent efforts and collective agency.

Universal Design in Education

In Ireland, almost 40% of the tertiary education learner population is made up of 'non-traditional' students (Quirke et al., 2020). In particular, there has been a notable increase in the number of students with disabilities enrolling in higher education over the last decade (AHEAD, 2022). These demographic changes have led to an increased focus on the extent to which tertiary education institutions are inclusive (Aranka et al., 2021). Universal design approaches offer us an evidenced-based response to this increasing diversity.

Universal Design (UD) is defined as the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design, (United Nations, 2006). The UD concept originates in the 1970s from the world of architecture. In the late 1990s, an interdisciplinary team of architects, product designers, engineers and environmental design researchers in North Carolina State University broadened the scope of the concept and developed a set of 7 Principles for UD, (National Disability Authority, 2020). These principles help us to understand that if an environment is accessible, easily usable, convenient and a pleasure to use for the wide variety of people in its user base, everyone benefits.

UD is more commonly associated with the built environment, products and services, and information and communications technologies. The literature on Universal Design in Education (UDE) helps us to take a whole systems approach to its application in education by incorporating relevant pedagogical frameworks, (Burgstahler, 2009). Alongside other inclusive pedagogies, the internationally recognised and evidence-based Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework (CAST, 2008) contributes significantly to the UDE approach.

All Things to All People?

The Irish Further Education and Training (FET) and Higher Education (HE) sectors have seen increased engagement with UD practice in recent years (Healy, Ryder, and Banks, forthcoming). The rise in activity has been driven in part by the inclusion of UD as a strategic priority in key FET (SOLAS, 2020) and HE (HEA, 2022a)

strategies, in part by the rise in engagement with professional development in related frameworks like UDL, (Ryder, 2022).

The rapid rise of interest in UD practice is welcome, but success brings its own challenges. The pace of new developments has led to common confusion around the use of terminology. A lack of a coherent sectoral vision for how UD and its related frameworks fit together in harmony is evident. There appears to be a lack of a strategic planning at institutional level on its implementation (Healy, Ryder, and Banks, forthcoming 2023).

This challenge is deepened by the new policy initiative to move towards a more unified tertiary education system forging greater links and connectivity between FET and HE (DFHERIS, 2022), with each sector bringing its own understanding of UD practice to the discourse. The tertiary community appears united in commitment to the UD approach but lacks a coherent, shared understanding of what it means to systematically implement it. This fractured landscape comes with a danger that UD becomes 'all things to all people.'

Responding to the Challenge

That challenge was clear in the mind when AHEAD hosted a Project Building 'Think In' event in the summer of 2022. This event brought institutional stakeholders together to explore how collaborative action could be promoted through the national PATH 4 Universal Design Fund (HEA, 2022b). One project which emerged from the Think In focuses on the development of a National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education. Amongst its aims are to develop a collective tertiary understanding of what UD means and a collective vision for what the implementation of UD looks like.

The project is led by Atlantic Technological University (ATU). Munster Technological University, University College Dublin and University of Galway are official institutional partners, and AHEAD is the lead national collaborator of the project. A huge array of institutional and national stakeholders from the tertiary sector are supporting its development (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. List of collaborators in the Republic of Ireland on the development of the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education.

To support a whole-systems approach to the implementation of UD, the Charter will highlight important actions across four key pillars of our institutions, drawn from the literature on UDE (Burgstahler, 2009):

- Pillar One   Learning and Teaching
- Pillar Two   Supports, Services and Social Engagement
- Pillar Three   The Digital Environment
- Pillar Four   The Physical Environment

Ultimately, the Charter project envisions placing human diversity at the heart of tertiary education design. It is recognised by the project group that this vision can only be realised by meaningfully engaging all stakeholders in a collaborative development process which engenders collective agency.

Stakeholder Engagement and Collective Agency

The stakeholder engagement process (Freeman, 1984, 2010) gives people the opportunity to comment and input into the development of decisions that affect them, and influence the implementation of such decisions. On the basis that the capacity of a community of stakeholders to implement a plan of action effectively depends strongly on the true engagement of the stakeholders in designing it (Laouris, 2012), our engagement was designed to be proactive, interactive, and inclusive. We adopt the perspective of human agency from Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura,1986, 2006)) in which people bring their influence to bear on events, experiences and their environment (Duffy, 2013).

Central to the idea of **collective agency** (Bandura, 2000) is the importance of people's shared belief in their collective power to produce desired results. Bandura (2006) points out that any group's attainments are not simply the products of shared knowledge and skills of individual members, but also how the group interacts, coordinates, and their synergistic dynamics. For this reason, we recognised at the outset, that the outcomes we seek are achievable only through our interdependent efforts. Therefore, collective agency would require us to move beyond individual autonomy and find fresh and innovative ways of working better together.

The development of the National Charter serves to cultivate collective agency among all stakeholders and the wider community. The AHEAD Unity Conference provided an opportunity to host a large-scale stakeholder consultation to initiate this process. We implemented a collective intelligence method of dialogues from the field of Interactive Management (Christakis, 1987; Christakis and Bausch, 2006; Warfield, 2006). Interactive Management uses technology and sophisticated problem-solving techniques to clarify complex problems and their essential components. The dialogue process is an effective and accessible tool to facilitate the exploration of realistic challenges and potential solutions.

The AHEAD Unity Conference

The AHEAD Unity Conference took place in Croke Park Conference Centre and online over two days in March 2023. The hybrid conference combined 'live' in-person elements with 'virtual' online components. While the UD Dialogues are the focus of this paper, there was a range of topics and other activities related to universal design and inclusive practice in panel discussions, keynote presentations, lightning talks and poster sessions. However, it is the data gathered from the dialogues that will inform the development of the Charter, along with further consultation activities and evidence from the literature on universal design.

The majority of conference attendees were national Irish-based FET and HE professionals, and also included students, policymakers, and international staff. Professionals from a broad variety of roles were present including teaching staff, researchers, librarians, learner support professionals, campus physical accessibility staff, ICT support and senior leaders from both FET and HE.

Pre-Conference Survey

A pre-conference survey was conducted to collect ideas on the biggest systemic challenges to the implementation of universal design in further and higher education. All registered conference delegates were posed a single question: **What do you believe are the biggest challenges to the systemic implementation of universal design in further and higher education?** Delegates were sent the question with a one-week response window allocated, and a reminder was also sent with one day remaining. Each delegate could enter a maximum of three

challenges and 73 responses were received.

The survey responses were organised into six broad themes (see Appendix 1). These themes, affecting systemic UD implementation, were presented back to the conference at the beginning of the dialogues session on Day 1, setting the scene for more nuanced exploration in the Dialogues.

The Universal Design Dialogues

On each of the two conference days, we facilitated a 2-hour hybrid group consultation session that each explored challenges and solutions to the successful implementation of Universal Design in Tertiary Education. Day One dialogues focused on the challenges to implementing UD, and Day Two dialogues explored potential solutions and enablers to the successful implementation of UD in Tertiary Education. A nuanced exploration was facilitated by exploring challenges and solutions specifically under the aforementioned four pillars.

The design principles and facilitation approach were crafted to support a broader set of outcomes related to the National Charter, that is, to:

1. Introduce participants to the development of a National Charter of Universal Design for Tertiary Education (including four pillars and implementation possibilities).
2. Create a coherent conference experience for a hybrid conference that is meaningful, engaging, and enjoyable.
3. Explore the Challenges to implementation of each of the Charter Pillars.
4. Generate Solutions that set strategic direction, increase engagement and improve the probability of successful implementation.
5. Increase identification with and commitment to the National Charter by generating a sense of authorship, shared ownership, and advocacy.
6. Synthesise group insights into practical, actionable strategies that empower participants to embed/implement the Charter in their own institution/organisation.

The hybrid nature of the conference dialogues enabled the participation of people who might be unable to attend in person due to a variety of reasons such as time, cost, or disability. The open and interactive design facilitated the sharing of ideas between live and virtual attendees.

Guided by UD, the dialogue sessions needed to be useable to the greatest extent possible, by all individuals, without the need for adaptation. We identified six core principles that guided our design and facilitation of the UD dialogue process:

1. Design a simple and intuitive process for hosts and dialogue participants to use.
2. Equally evaluate all ideas and voices from both 'live' in-person and 'virtual' online contributors.
3. Ensure the contribution process is inclusive and democratic whether participants are introverted or extroverted inclined, are subject-matter experts, or have social or political power.
4. Encourage deep listening as much as talking and increase the amount of time in reflective mode.
5. Create space and time for all ideas, but use the 'group mind' to surface those that are most vital.
6. Move beyond individual autonomy and develop a shared belief in our collective power and agency.

Dialogues Method and Approach

The dialogues were facilitated by a psychologist from the main stage, and at various steps by breakout room and table hosts who supported the facilitation process. 18 hosts volunteered from the Charter Project Group and were briefed in a one-hour training in advance of the conference. The training outlined the dialogue process, clarified their role, and alerted them to various interruptions that frequently emerge during the process. Their role was to keep the process on track, on time, and to organise and support access and use of the technology application.

A web-based audience interaction platform, Slido, was used in conjunction with Zoom to create interactive moments and real-time sharing of ideas and voting. This ensured that data produced in the dialogues were centralised and that everything happened in one place. The aim of the design was to ensure that many dialogues could take place with a single goal. We used the Zoom breakout room feature as our online discussion forum. Participants accessed the Slido feature on the web through our event QR code directly on their mobile devices without any need to download software.

Conference participants were randomly assigned to groups of 6-8 people with a host in each group. Groups were designated to work on one of the four pillars. Several groups worked independently on the same pillar initially, before sharing their work between groups within their appointed pillars. Two dialogues were conducted over two days:

On Day One, the groups focused on the challenges to implementing UD.

On Day Two the dialogues centered on solutions to the challenges identified on Day One. The same format and steps were followed on both days.

The UD dialogue process involves eight steps:

1. Idea Generation - individuals write in silence inputting ideas into Slido in response to trigger questions (see Appendix 2), with simultaneous live display of all comments within their pillar.
2. Idea Assimilation - individuals silently review and reflect on ideas within their pillar.
3. Group Sense-Making - host-led group discussions in online breakout rooms and at venue tables to discuss observations and share opinions.
4. Idea Filtering - groups sort ideas and propose three pre-eminent challenges/solutions, with descriptive statements, in Slido.
5. Idea Sharing - groups share ideas with other groups working within the same pillar.
6. Group Discussion - host-led group discussions on other groups' statements within the same pillar.
7. Whole-Conference Voting - conference participants vote on most important ideas in each pillar, to establish a rank order.
8. Statement Creation - post-session, interpretive content analysis was used by facilitators to sort voting results into categories. Weighting statement votes produced four rank-ordered statements of challenges and solutions within each pillar.

Results - So, what did we find?

On Day One dialogue participants generated 788 statements related to the challenges to implementing UD, which were condensed into 49 statements following group discussions. 1176 votes were cast in the process of rank-

ordering those statements for facilitators to later refine the Challenge Statements.

On Day Two dialogue participants generated 551 statements that presented solutions to address the previously identified challenges. These solutions were condensed into 37 statements following group discussions. 618 votes were cast in the process of rank-ordering those statements for facilitators, again to refine statements, this time for solutions.

Table 1 below summarises this data, and thereafter, Tables 2-5 present the Challenge and Solution Statements developed within each pillar.

Number of:	Day One: Challenges	Day 2: Solutions	Total
Individual statements returned in Step 1: Idea Generation	788	551	1139
Statements shared by groups in Step 4: Idea Filtering	49	37	86
Votes cast by the conference participants in Step 7: Whole-Conference Voting	1176	618	1794
Statements developed by facilitators following voting, with the final step, Step 8: Statement Creation	16	16	32

Table 1. Number of different data elements developed and collected as part of the dialogues process.

Below are the synthesised Challenge and Solution Statements developed in Step 8 Statement Creation in response to votes cast. They are listed under each pillar and presented as rank-ordered by conference participants.

Pillar One: Learning and Teaching

Table 2 below outlines in rank order the challenge and solution statements under pillar one.

Rank	Day One: Challenges Identified	Day Two: Solutions Developed
1	Failure to implement a strategic institutional approach, including budget infrastructure and resources to universal design of teaching and learning.	Nurture a culture of shared responsibility for inclusion by utilising universal design as a key framing for strategic plans and teaching and learning strategies.
2	Lack of awareness and understanding amongst staff and students that accessibility is a community responsibility, and a lack of motivation to improve.	Develop shared understanding of and commitment to a universal design approach through the provision of tailored training in inclusive pedagogies for all teaching staff.
3	Emotional and attitudinal resistance to inclusion and universal design as a teaching responsibility and concerns over academic integrity.	Embed the value of engagement with inclusive teaching pedagogies in recruitment and promotion processes for teaching staff across the organisation.
4	Lack of incentives to do the work of inclusion at the educator and student	Support good practice sharing through the development of

Rank	Day One: Challenges Identified	Day Two: Solutions Developed
	level.	communities of practice around universal design in teaching and learning.

Table 2. Challenge and solution statements developed under the Learning and Teaching pillar.

Pillar Two: Supports, Services and Social Engagement

Table 3 below outlines in rank order the challenge and solution statements under pillar two.

Rank	Day One: Challenges Identified	Day Two: Solutions Developed
1	Failure to communicate and implement a whole college approach to universal supports and services.	Develop 'learners as partners' approach to reviewing barriers and implementing universally designed solutions which improve access and usability of services.
2	Lack of awareness among management, staff and students of human diversity, the impact of disability and the need to provide financial and training resources to address it.	Embed universal design in institutional policies, procedures and quality assurance mechanisms.
3	Reliance on a reactive support approach rather than proactive universal design.	Develop shared commitment to a universal design approach through the inclusion of universal design in all role descriptions and performance reviews.
4	Nature of national funding, promoting competition rather than joined-up thinking.	Support good practice sharing through the development of communities of practice around universal design in supports and services.

Table 3. Challenge and solution statements developed under the Supports, Services and Social Engagement pillar.

Pillar Three: Digital Environment

Table 4 below outlines in rank order the challenge and solution statements under Pillar three.

Rank	Day One: Challenges Identified	Day Two: Solutions Developed
1	Failure to provide training and support for staff and students to effectively use digital tools and implement accessibility practices.	Embed universal design of the digital environment as a core strategic value, sustained and supported by committed leaders.
2	Lack of leadership, accountability and a strategic approach to digital accessibility as a collective responsibility.	Develop resourced centres of expertise and sustainable national funding streams to provide tools, training and guidance in universal design across institutions.
3	Lack of awareness of diversity of learners in the design of digital materials and platforms and resistance to change.	Promote a culture of awareness and inclusion by incentivising, recognising and celebrating inclusive practice.
4	Lack of enforcement/incentives to adhere to accessibility standards.	Nurture partnerships with diverse learners which guide the development, procurement and evaluation of digital platforms.

Table 4 Challenge and solution statements developed under the Digital Environment pillar.

Table 5 below outlines in rank order the challenge and solution statements under pillar four.

Rank	Day One: Challenges Identified	Day Two: Solutions Developed
1	Lack of universal design as a core part of curriculum and training in design, engineering and architecture.	Re-evaluate how the physical environment is used and prioritised in partnership with a diverse range of staff and students, and develop easy methods to report barriers.
2	Competition for physical space on campus and failure to prioritise financial resources for physical accessibility.	Invest in and incentivise capital accessibility works which support the organisation to meet and go beyond national and international accessibility standards.
3	Lack of consultation/involvement of people with disabilities at all stages of the design process.	Establish a cross-functional working group empowered to take a system-wide approach to delivering accessibility and UD in the physical environment, supported with training and resources.
4	Failure to enforce universal design related building laws and standards.	Support good practice sharing through the development of communities of practice around universal design in the physical environment and the provision of training for relevant staff.

Table 5. Challenge and solution statements developed under the Physical Environment pillar.

Discussion and Next Steps

While the conference dialogues were conducted within a strong design, our findings have to be seen in light of some limitations. **The first** is a practical issue of managing attendance at conferences. Some were constrained by time and availability, and as such, were only available for one session on either day. Therefore, some may have had input into solutions without the benefit of the full group discussions on the challenges. However, considering our approach leverages the collective intelligence of the group this factor does not present significant concern. In addition, we had a good sample size and representation from a broad range of key stakeholders to ensure that all perspectives were considered.

The second limitation concerns consideration of the subjectivity of the facilitators' interpretations in the refinement of the Solution and Challenge Statements. This tendency was mitigated to some extent by how conscious the facilitators were of these biases and the extent of their training in modern methods of assembling and classifying data. The important thing about working with qualitative data in a case like this is that the statements maintain a high level of face validity. This will be accounted for as we progress into the next phases of the Charter development.

Lastly, this conference took place in the Republic of Ireland and was attended by a minority of international participants which likely presents a strong regional focus. Making a case for generalisability of the findings to other regions across the European Union we must exercise caution and ensure that the findings are comparable.

The UD dialogues have given us valuable insights into how we can support the systemic implementation of UD

across tertiary education institutions. Reflecting on the challenge and solution statements produced across the four pillars, some strong themes emerge. Amongst the most important that are alluded to in every theme are to:

- Embed accessibility and universal design as a key framing in all areas of organisational values, strategy and policy. It was considered vital that this encompassed the full learner lifecycle from pre-entry to completion.
- Nurture a culture of shared responsibility for/understanding of universal design and inclusion across the organisation. It was considered important that this is embedded in organisational structures, modelled by leaders and reflected in recruitment and promotion practices.
- Enhance shared learning and collaboration opportunities locally and nationally to further develop universal design understanding. This can be achieved in part by leveraging communities of practice, national training programmes and support from centres of expertise.
- Include students as partners in the design/delivery of programmes, services, strategy and policy. Within this, it was considered important to target input from disadvantaged or under-represented learner cohorts.

National Charter - Future Plans

The project team developing the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education has now developed an early draft of the Charter. This draft draws upon:

- the data arising from the UD Dialogues.
- engagement with the literature on UD in educational contexts.
- input from the significant expertise within the project group.

The project team is shifting to **Phase 2 of the consultation**, involving structured feedback sessions with smaller staff and learner groups in FET/HE institutions across the country. Following analysis of feedback, a final draft of the Charter will be developed. The next step is to share this final draft with national stakeholders, such as policymakers, national steering groups and representative bodies, to establish wide support for the adoption of the Charter.

Following this, **the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education** will be launched in Spring 2024. The package released will include a toolkit for tertiary education institutions to support implementation of the Charter, and a position paper proposing how the sector can effectively utilise it. Institutions will be invited to adopt the National Charter and commit to working towards its implementation. All outputs will be made available under a creative commons license, with international adaptation for different territories encouraged.

The hope of the project team is that this National Charter will place human diversity at the centre of tertiary education design, and set UD as a common goal 'for all people' in the sector.

Thanks

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the UD Dialogues at the conference.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Themes Arising from Pre-Conference Survey

Figure A. Pre-conference survey results highlight perceived systemic challenges to implementation of UD in Tertiary Education in Ireland.

The survey responses were organised into six broad themes (see Figure A). Six key themes emerged as systemic challenges included a lack of:

1. Time and resources to implement UD.
2. Professional support such as training opportunities and direct professional guidance.
3. Formal and informal recognition for staff who incorporate a UD approach, leading to low motivation to implement it, and poor attitudes towards UD initiatives.
4. Senior buy-in and support for the systemic implementation of UD.
5. A strategic/whole systems approach to implementation across the institution.
6. Student understanding of the approach, leading to fewer opportunities for student partnership.

Appendix 2 - Trigger Questions Posed to Support Idea Generation

To support the generation of ideas, the facilitators crafted key questions under each pillar to be posed at the beginning of the Dialogues on each day (see Table A).

Pillar	Day 1 Idea Generation Questions	Day 2 Idea Generation Questions
One: Learning and Teaching	What are the big **challenges** to designing and delivering more flexible and accessible Teaching and Learning experiences?	What are the big **solutions/enablers** to designing and delivering more flexible and accessible Teaching and Learning experiences?
Two: Supports, Services and Social Engagement	What are the big **challenges** to providing supports and services that are flexible and accessible to all students?	What are the big **solutions/enablers** to providing supports and services that are flexible and accessible to all students?
Three: The Digital Environment	What are the big **challenges** to offering digital platforms and learning materials that are accessible, easily navigated and understood by all?	What are the big **solutions/enablers** to offering digital platforms and learning materials that are accessible, easily navigated and understood by all?
Four:	What are the big **challenges** to	What are the big

Pillar	Day 1 Idea Generation Questions	Day 2 Idea Generation Questions
The Physical Environment	providing physical environments that are accessible, welcoming, sensory-aware spaces?	**solutions/enablers** to providing physical environments that are accessible, welcoming, sensory-aware spaces?

Table A. Trigger questions posed to each pillar working groups to support idea generation.

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