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# The Pendulum Swing in Inclusive Tertiary Education - Identifying the Centrifugal Forces and Factors

## Evolution of Inclusive Education

The evolution from special education to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Ireland has been a gradual process. Special education in Ireland has a long history, dating back to the early 1900s when the first special schools were established. In the past, learners with disabilities were often isolated from mainstream education and were taught in separate special schools. However, with the introduction of legislation such as the Education Act 1998, Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 and the Disability Act 2005, the focus has shifted towards a more inclusive approach to education, with an emphasis on meeting the diverse needs of all learners.

According to Flood (2013 p.5), Emeritus Professor of the National University of Ireland Dublin, Desmond Swan, outlined the historical development of special needs education in Ireland through three distinct phases in the Swan Report 2020. These phases included a period of neglect and denial, followed by a focus on special schools, and finally, a shift towards integration and inclusion. Swan's categorisation of the development of special needs education in Ireland into three phases provides a framework for understanding the cultural and attitudinal perspectives towards special needs education during those periods. As a result of the research and reforms implemented during these phases, a separate but equal system of education emerged. This emergence is known as the era of inclusion. The implementation of inclusion in the classroom led to the adoption of differentiation strategies, where learners were not physically separated but instruction was tailored to their individual needs. This ensured equitable learning outcomes, as differences were accounted for through differentiated instruction, but it was still separating the learners and was therefore not truly inclusive.

The delay in Ireland's ratification of the UN Convention of Rights for People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) has resulted in a delay in the implementation of its principles, as demonstrated by the experiences of learners with special educational needs. This delay is indicative of the cultural complexities associated with State parties, and failing to acknowledge these complexities leads to oversimplified interpretations of how the convention should be put into practice. (Hall, E., in Kakoullis and Johnson, 2020). The mishandling of the CRPD ratification by the Irish educational system has had a negative impact on the implementation of special educational needs, resulting in a separate and unequal system. Shevlin and Banks (2021) argue that a complete overhaul of existing policies is necessary to achieve a truly inclusive system in the wake of the CRPD ratification.

Moving on from the era of inclusion, the inclusive pendulum swings forward with the increasing popularity of UDL. The framework which is based on the principles of Universal Design emphasises the importance of designing products and environments that are accessible and usable by everyone, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. UDL has become an increasingly popular approach to teaching and learning in higher education with a focus on creating instructional materials and designing learning environments that are accessible and effective for all learners, regardless of their differences.

## Moving Towards Inclusive Language and Practices

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Another move forward for the inclusive pendulum is the language employed in higher and further education which is changing to become more inclusive and to recognize the diversity of needs and backgrounds of learners. As part of this evolution, the term ‘**tertiary education**’ is being adopted to refer to all learners in the post-secondary sector. This shift is evidenced by the increasing use of language that encompasses learners in both higher education (HE) and further education and training (FET) contexts. In sum, the aim is to be more inclusive in language use and to acknowledge the diverse range of learners within the post-secondary education landscape.

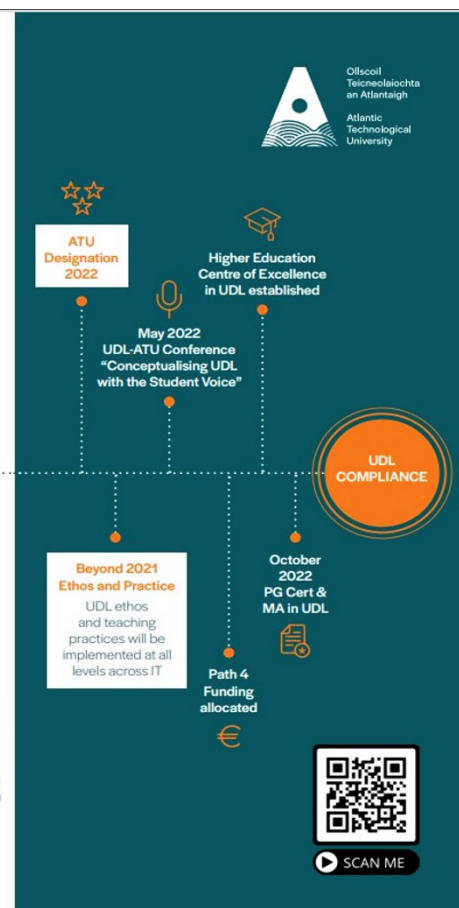
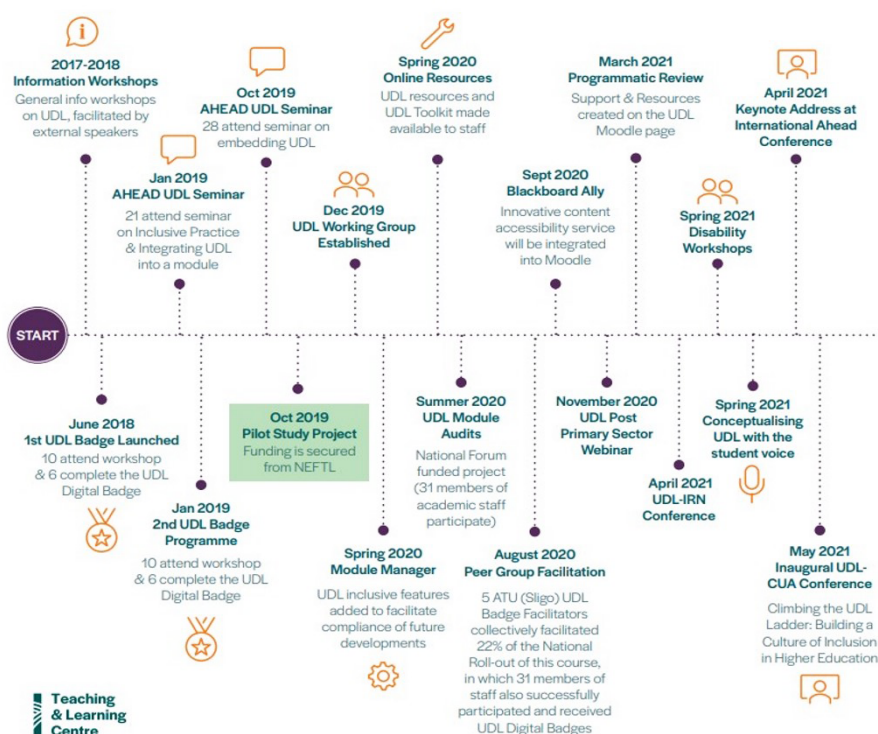
One manifestation of this shared vision of inclusivity is the growing number of staff in both sectors who have undertaken the UDL Digital Badge. The digital badge programme provides educators with training in the UDL principles and practices, enabling them to create learning environments that are accessible and engaging for all learners, regardless of their individual differences. The uptake of the UDL Digital Badge programme is evidence of a broader trend towards a more inclusive approach to teaching and learning in the tertiary sectors and since its inception, over 2500 staff in both sectors have completed the programme and attained a digital badge in UDL facilitated by AHEAD and UCD (AHEAD, UCD 2022). By embracing the UDL principles, educators can create more effective and engaging learning experiences that support the success of all learners (NFETL, 2020). The bottom-up development has been significant in tertiary education; for the first time, educators have recognised good practice and took it upon themselves to undertake a programme of learning specifically on UDL. This approach has contributed to moving forward the inclusive pendulum toward a practice that can both underpin their practice and advance inclusive practice overall.

## How has the pendulum moved?

The force of gravity moving the inclusive pendulum is generated by the professionals within Ireland's tertiary sectors and these professionals highlight the importance of recognising the variability and need for flexibility in education. As educators increasingly see how implementing the UDL Framework is improving the learners' experience and allowing for a more equitable learning environment, the more this bottom-up approach is gaining momentum.

Institutes across the country are at different stages of adopting UDL. In October 2022, ATU were successful in their application and presentation for the John Kelly Collaborative Award based on how we have worked collaboratively to adopt the principles of UDL within our University. The John Kelly Collaborative Award - UDL in Collaboration category is aimed at higher education institutions (HEIs) and education and training boards (ETBs) who have used the UDL Digital Badge to systematically develop UDL capacity in their college/centre, such as the development of communities of practice, institutional projects, and new strategic actions. The ATU has been progressing the framework through various nationally funded initiatives since 2017. Our approach to spreading the adoption of UDL was anchored in the Centre of Teaching & Learning, which allowed for the UDL Working Group team to reach academics from across all programmes. This approach has proven to be key as the Centre for Teaching & Learning supports academic staff in the areas of teaching, learning and assessment.

## UDL Development from 2017 to Present



Some of the projects that furthered UDL in ATU include:

- Workshops with experts.
- Facilitation of the UDL Digital Badge.
- Inclusive module audit programme.
- Inclusive improvements to our programme/modular build software programme.
- Integration of the inclusive digital platform Blackboard Ally into our virtual learning environment Moodle.
- Embedding UDL into all teaching and learning programmes as well as into other education-based programmes.
- Conferences in 2021, 2022 and our upcoming conference for 2023 where best UDL practices are shared widely.
- Validation and roll-out of the new Post Graduate Certificate/Masters in UDL programme.
- Establishment of the Higher Education UDL Centre of Excellence.)
- ATU is leading on 3 national collaboration projects and partnering on one other of the Higher Education Association (HEA) PATH 4 Phase I funded projects in relation to UD/ UDL.
- Establishment of a UDL Regional Hub with ATU, Donegal ETB, Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim ETB and the Galway Roscommon ETB.

The ATU UDL Centre of Excellence and UDL Working Group are greatly honoured to have this work acknowledged by our peers nationally. However, we do recognise our work with further implementing UDL is by no means over and that we have essentially scratched the surface with wholly integrating UDL as a viable teaching and learning framework. While our executive team has been supportive of this culture shift, it is the ambition of the Centre and working group to integrate UDL into the fabric of all facets of the University. The Plus 1 approach introduced by Thomas Tobin (Tobin & Behling 2018) suggests that, when implementing the UDL framework, educators set out to

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make one inclusive change considering the principle of UDL and the plus one approach then asks for just a bit more with the idea that these incremental changes or Plus 1s will add up to make significant improvements for learners. This approach has given educators the momentum to move the inclusive pendulum further along.

## Accelerating the Pendulum - What's Next in Adopting the National UD Charter

This force of gravity has slowly started the swinging motion of the inclusive UD/UDL pendulum. However, this oscillation cannot occur on its own. Establishing systemic policy in higher education is critical to ensuring that every student can access and benefit from education.

The recent criteria for the newly released HEA National Access Plan (2022-2028), particularly under the PATH 4 phase I stream, called for all HEIs to address Universal Design (UD)/ Universal Design for Learning (UDL) within HEA funding applications. Prior to the preparation for individual institution funding application responses to the HEA, AHEAD in collaboration with Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and the Irish University Association (IUA), reached out to all HEIs to initiate a collected response in applications, through joined-up thinking, to respond to the needs of the learners of Ireland. The response to this call by AHEAD for a national 'Think In' was significant. What has been formed as a result is four national work project packages addressing the criteria of PATH 4, Phase I, where various institutes commit to being either leaders, partners, or collaborators on these national projects.

### The four projects

- 1. Developing a National Charter for the Implementation of Universal Design in Tertiary Education.**
- 2. Taking Leadership on the Universal Design Agenda - A Symposium for Higher Education Leaders (Staff Capabilities).**
- 3. Guidelines for the Development of Higher Education Programmes for People with Intellectual Disabilities.**
- 4. Developing a Template Web Accessibility Statement for Tertiary Education Institutions.**

At ATU we are leading on three of these projects and collaborating on the other. It is with great privilege that I am leading the National UD Charter team.

While the rise in discourse about UD and UDL practice in tertiary education has risen markedly in recent years, there are often misconceptions about what UD is (as distinct from UDL) and a lack of national understanding about what areas of higher and further education we can apply UD approaches to, and what this would look like in practice. The National UD Charter project involves utilising the UCD Toolkit for Inclusive Higher Education Institutions (Kelly & Padden, 2018) which is under revision in tandem with this project as the background to this development. The accompanying Toolkit will support HEIs and ETBs to measure their progress against the four pillars and create a reflective action plan for future development in this area.

The pillars in the toolkit address

- teaching & learning
- student services
- physical - built environment

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- IT/ digital accessibility.

The charter/toolkit will also address the systems and policies which underpin these pillars, and the output will clearly demonstrate how the implementation of Universal Design supports HEIs and ETBs to align with other national targets, such as those concerning retention and learner success. Widening the scope from student-centred learning, this charter will explore how a universal design approach can help us to support a diverse learner profile to succeed in Higher and Further Education and Training.

This National Charter group has received much interest and input from colleagues across 15 Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), the Education Training Board Ireland (ETBI), AHEAD, THEA, the IUA, SOLAS and the National Tertiary Office (NTO). An invitation has been extended to the Union of Students Ireland (USI) to join this collaboration. It is envisaged that on completion of the project, institutions would be encouraged to formally adopt the charter as something they are working towards and that organisations like AHEAD could play an important national role in supporting institutions to adopt and work towards it. The project team also envisages this output being important in the future shaping of institutional policies regarding student success and UDL. The accompanying Toolkit will support HEIs and ETBs to measure their progress against the 4 pillars and create a reflective action plan for future development.

Inclusive education has come a long way in Ireland and within the relatively new era of UD/ UDL there is much more work to do to move inclusion in the post-secondary sector further along. It is appreciated that the National UD Charter is a starting point for systemic change and that this collaborative effort will with continued key stakeholder support, move the inclusive pendulum further along toward a large-scale cultural shift shaping inclusivity in Ireland's tertiary education system.

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