
What are the ingredients of Mainstreaming?

30 years ago young people with disabilities were expected to make baskets and were rarely seen on the campuses of higher education. Today, there has been a revolution and young people with disabilities in Ireland are studying on all courses across higher education, gaining qualifications and good jobs. Equality legislation, government policy, additional funding, deeper understanding of disability, disability support services, the ever increasing use of technology, have made this huge change possible.

AHEAD over the last 30 years has also played its part in leading this change. Its research led policy changes and to the Fund for Students with Disabilities; to the setting up of disability support services, and the alternative entry scheme that has become DARE. Collaboration with the disability and access officers has led to a community of practice across the sector which has supported staff and students alike and brought about greater standardisation and reliability of provision for students.

Institutions through their disability and access support services have developed a significant body of new knowledge about disability which has in turn improved the experience of all students with disabilities.

In looking ahead to the future it is vital to celebrate this success but to also realise that further progress needs to be made. The current model is not an inclusive one but an Add – On model of disability supports, which is unable to cope with the increasing numbers of students with disabilities year on year, now 6% of the student population. Changing the curriculum, the pedagogy and the relationship with students is a key requirement of mainstreaming inclusive practice and it is everyone's job.

Inclusion is not just about disability, it is about the diversity of students in higher education. It is clear to me that there are opportunities now to meet this diversity challenge and for institutions to invest in mainstreaming inclusion. The benefits are significant as inclusion improves the experience of all students, reduces dropout rates, introduces more creative pedagogy, problem solving and enhances the reputation of the institution. Recent research carried out in Canada identifies collaboration amongst staff as a key ingredient for inclusion. Bringing academic and other staff together to explore different perspectives and ideas will spark creativity and build communities to implement inclusive practice. So we ask the leaders of our higher institutions to encourage and foster collaboration for mainstreaming inclusion by giving it the time and space it deserves.



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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.