Building an inclusive mainstream from school to higher education and the workplace

AHEAD has existed for over 30 years and in that time it has both influenced and observed the journey in higher education from exclusion to one where inclusion is becoming the norm.

The journey has been by no means linear and it has been slow with one step forward and one step back. But perhaps the slowness in development of these ideas is not such a bad thing as it allows for the culture to shift its thinking from the medical model to that of human rights at the right speed and in a meaningful way.

There have been many key milestones along this journey. In 1994 on the basis of AHEAD Research showing the participation rate of students with disabilities was less than 1% of the student population in higher education, the Fund for Students with disabilities was established by the Department of Education. This fund served two purposes. **Firstly,** it funded additional supports for students with disabilities, for example computers, interpreters and travel costs.   **Secondly,** it took the burden of funding from the institutions' budgets, thus taking away the argument that students with disabilities were too expensive and ensuring equity.

Other milestones included the HEA Strategic Fund which led to the setting up of disability support offices in the universities; the DARE entry scheme to higher education which was developed by a collaboration between DAWN and AHEAD; equality legislation; technology; the National Access Office and its strategic objectives. Every one of these milestones has helped to change attitudes towards students with disabilities from one of deficit to one where ability can be demonstrated and valued.

We have come a long way. **Students with disabilities now represent over 6% of the student population.** But we are not there yet and many students with disabilities still experience exclusion on professional courses, placements, careers services and on study abroad opportunities. So the biggest challenge now for the sector is to build an inclusive mainstream which means simply that all staff need to have an understanding of inclusion and what this means for their own practice.

It is time to scale up Inclusion in mainstream higher education. The benefits are huge both at a personal and societal level, and are best summed up by Louis Watters, a journalism graduate from DCU, who is blind, and whose Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) placement set him on a career trajectory within the Civil Service. He says,

> On completion of my WAM placement I gained a permanent role as a Clerical Officer with the Department of Agriculture and gradually I have gained promotion to the role of Assistant Principal where I am today.

Ann Heelan

Executive Director, AHEAD

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UniversalDesignforLearning.ie

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.