
Impressions from the AHEAD conference ‘Journey to Oz’ at Croke Park, Dublin in March 2019

As the Journal Editor, I attended the latest AHEAD conference and am delighted to share my impressions of the event.

Spring in Dublin – it was great to be in Dublin with some mild weather which meant everyone was out and about. It was a pleasure to explore Dublin’s fair city!

We were back in Croke Park, a highly accessible venue for all which made participation easy and comfortable, with plenty of social space as well as spacious meeting rooms. This included space to meet providers of support services working with students with disabilities.

The conference itself

The theme of ‘**Journey to Oz**’ offered lots of opportunities to explore our collective journeys towards inclusion and to showcase a wealth of creativity amongst the delegates and their organisations.

Highlights of the programme - I am not going into all the content as this will be available on the AHEAD website in full. However I have to say the programme was rich in content and variety.

Paul O’Toole, Chief Executive Officer of the Higher Education Authority was given a warm welcome in his opening session, together with post-grad student, now film maker, Alannah Murray talking about life experiences and current work on disability representation in film. It was a welcome back to Frederic Fovet from Canada helping us on the way on defining inclusion - ‘**on the yellow brick road we are all different with different goals**’. On day 2 Mary Liz Trant from SOLAS shared her vision for inclusive further education, including more opportunities for CPD, and greater investment in further education and training.

As well as more formal presentations, I also particularly liked the opportunity to chill out and attend some of the informal discussion tables. The input from current and past students gave a very strong lead in these informal sessions, and personally I attended a discussion with blind and visually impaired students on the difficulties they still face in getting day to day access to teaching and study materials.

The Delegates!

With a wide representation of Irish delegates, the conference seems to have really come of age. The wide range of staff from HEIs, further education, technical institutes and support services took the opportunity to share practice and meet up with colleagues across Ireland.

It also seems to be the case internationally, with a continuing wide range of countries represented at the conference. Some gave formal presentations on their work, whilst others held poster sessions on what was happening in their countries. We shouldn’t forget how difficult it is for many international delegates to organise

funding to attend and we welcome them with open arms and they reward us with insights and experiences that are inspirational. Some even rewarded us with chocolate!

At the social evening, there was plenty of opportunity to make new friends and meet up with old ones, and to meet the authors of the book '**Transforming Higher Education through Universal Design for Learning**' launched at the conference.

The conference ended with the excitement of the final for the John Kelly Award with the three finalist making their presentations and the declaration of the winner (see Dara Ryder's article in this edition of the Journal). The finale from Dr Terry Maguire (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning) embraced the theme of Journey to Oz, and how we can play our part. She even brought Toto to help us, fulfilling the brief to send us home with energy, brio and even a song on our lips!

Would I recommend the conference – yes I would. Would I go again, yes there is always something new to explore and friendships and networks to consolidate. Feeling isolated, a lone voice, or stuck in a rut at work? Feeling proud of a project or implementing inclusion and bursting to share it? Then the AHEAD conference is the place for you!

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