
CEO's Corner: Meeting the Moment – It's time to be brave and bold

We are at a crossroads – there is little doubt about that. The pandemic has caused untold damage to our lives and brought about some deep reflection for everybody on the nature of our society. It has forced us to reimagine how we live, work and learn. The ugly nature of the deep inequities in our nation were laid bare for all to see in ways which they have never been before.

In many respects, the consequences of the pandemic for students and graduates with disabilities have been challenging, and for some, quite damaging. But it's fair to say that the great innovation, adaptability and ingenuity shown by many learners, educators and employers in a time of crises has also given us hope. Many of these innovations at the national and organisational level showed us what is possible when our collective will is harmonious and strong.

A student at the recent AHEAD/USI Power of Disability student conference shared their feelings on the response to the pandemic by their institution and it really stuck with me:

'I feel my college has sleepwalked into accessibility'

Many things which this particular student had been told were previously not possible – often simple things like receiving a digital copy of lecture slides, being able to access lectures from home and being able to watch back a recording of their lecture – were made available overnight and this had transformed their learning experience. Similar examples on both an individual and systemic level were evident across our education system, as many seemingly immovable objects, suddenly moved very quickly indeed. The Leaving Cert is a monumental example of something embedded deep in our culture which was fundamentally reshaped in response to offer students a choice of assessment mode, something previously unimaginable.

Equally, in employment, remote work became the norm overnight, reducing barriers for a whole cohort of graduates with disabilities previously excluded from the workplace – this despite long-held calls from the disabled community for remote work being previously branded unreasonable in many quarters.

For those of us seeking to create more inclusive environments in education and employment, we must learn from this moment and remember it. Remember that inclusion or exclusion doesn't just happen – it is a choice we make every day as a society, as organisations and as individuals. But most of all, we must remember how much changed when we collectively decided that it needed to - that anything is possible if the collective will exists, and no mountain is too big to move in the right conditions.

I firmly believe that now is the moment to move mountains, a unique opportunity to fundamentally change our educational and employment landscape and build a better, more inclusive future. And I say this not just because of

the impact of Covid-19. I believe there is a rare confluence of events, external levers and policy activities that present us with an opportunity like never before in the coming 18 months to place inclusion firmly on the map in Ireland. Some of the other happenings of the last year and upcoming 18 months which mean that many national conversations around inclusion are taking place, offering opportunities for influence for change, include:

- **Financially speaking**, a new cycle of the European Social Fund (2021-27) comes in to play this year and the EU has committed to a huge expansion in the fund beginning in 2021. The latest figures voted for by the European Commission's Employment Committee (yet to be agreed by parliament) propose an ESF budget of €120 billion, of which 27% will be earmarked for social inclusion measures. On top of this, it has been well publicised that the European Central Bank has made money available for state borrowing at zero and minus interest rates, which means the government has access to no/low-cost money now to invest in inclusion, which will pay economic dividends in the future.
- **Ireland's first state and shadow reports on the implementation of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCPRD)** will be submitted to the UN's Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2021. This process allows for a genuine national examination of the state of inclusion in Ireland through conversation between the government, disabled people's organisations (DPOs) and the UN, with scrutiny from international experts and recommendations made for the government to implement. [Consultations on the state report are open now for submissions.](#)
- **The EU Web Accessibility Directive was transposed into Irish law in September 2020**, placing new responsibilities on public sector bodies, including colleges, to support digital inclusion. [The European Accessibility Act](#) which places responsibilities and standards on businesses to build accessibility into the design of many products and services has a transposition deadline of 2025. Both directives will bring a greater level of accessibility into the daily interactions between people with disabilities and the products, services and learning materials they interact with every day and offer levers for champions to push for better accessibility in their own organisations.
- **The launch last year of the FET Strategy 2020-24**, which places inclusion as a central pillar, makes commitments to universal design and universal design for learning, and highlights people with disabilities as a priority cohort. This strategic shift for SOLAS, placing universal design at the forefront of its strategy, paves the way for real action to transform the mainstream learning environment and build inclusion into the fabric of further education and training.
- **The 2021 national review of SUSI** – the student grant scheme – brings the possibility of bolstering the available funding to ensure finance is no barrier to accessing further and higher education, and that the added cost of learning with a disability is considered in the grants awarded.
- **The development in 2021 of the new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education** gives us an opportunity to shift the focus of the sector from just getting through the door in higher education, to ensuring that everybody can actively participate in all aspects of college life from study abroad to social activities, to professional placements and postgraduate study.

So, there are lots of conversations right now (these are just some of them) which we can influence and participate in, lots of levers to push and pull for staff both working on the ground and in senior positions, to push for fundamental change at a national and organisational level and build a more inclusive environment.

The history of the aftermath of pandemics, however, tells us that our society is far more likely to forget the valuable things learned and return to the status quo than it is to reshape our society with equity and inclusion as a central

pillar. The window of opportunity for a big change in direction towards a more egalitarian and universally designed society is rare and narrow. It must be grasped right now and we all have a part to play in having this conversation and moving the dial for inclusion in education and employment.

Sometimes, it's easy for us to pass the buck and point the finger at others, but all of us who are seeking to work towards a fairer and more inclusive society need to recognise that our voice in this conversation is important, and the things we do every day in our work affects the big picture. It doesn't matter what role you are in and where you sit within the hierarchy of your organisation. There are things you can do to contribute.

At the 'on-the-ground' staff level, you can commit to being more accessible and inclusive in your daily practices in your classroom or workspace and applying yourself to build your knowledge and skills to follow through on this commitment. Reflect on your own prejudices (even the most inclusive of us have them) and seek to understand how you can mitigate against them. Learn the technical skills of digital accessibility, gain an understanding of universal design practices and seek to practice these skills every day in your personal and professional life. Reach out to your colleagues to learn from their good work and seek to influence colleagues resistant to taking onboard accessibility or inclusive practices. Reach out to students or staff members with disabilities to get their thoughts on how a more inclusive environment can be created. Every conversation you have about these topics can help to shift the dial. When you see something which you believe is an organisational or institutional barrier to inclusion, raise it with senior staff and offer potential solutions for them to explore.

At the senior and middle management level, create spaces and forums for organisational dialogue about inclusion. Build a cross-organisational working group to look at universal design, accessibility and inclusion from a holistic perspective, examining what these concepts mean for different departments and staff roles and develop action plans to sustainably build inclusion into the everyday culture and practice. Ensure that people with disabilities (including students in educational contexts) have strong voices as part of this dialogue. Reflect as an organisation on how you can offer more flexibility for your staff and your students/customers and what targets and key performance indicators could be put in place to track the organisation's journey towards a more inclusive future. Where specialist flexible arrangements or supports are being offered to staff or students with disabilities, ask yourself whether all would benefit from access to this flexibility and support in line with a universal design approach, and seek to build it into the everyday offerings of the organisation. Where you see gaps or barriers to inclusion in national policies and procedures, commit to being an active voice in the national conversation, raising issues, facilitating the voice of people with disabilities at the table, and being an ally for all who are impacted by exclusionary practices.

At the national level, whether you are reading this as the minister of a government department, a staff member working on national strategy, or one of the many voices like AHEAD's that have a voice in various policy forums, now is the time to be big and bold. Listen to people with disabilities and representative organisations and do everything in your power to ensure that national policy and infrastructure supports universal design and inclusion and that we invest what is needed now for a better and more inclusive tomorrow.

It's time to be brave and bold. Let's all play our part and grasp this opportunity together.



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Dara Ryder is Chief Executive Officer of AHEAD, having previously managed AHEAD's digital presence and developed a suite of online CPD programmes relating to inclusive practice in his role as Digital Media and eLearning Manager there.

After graduating from Queens University in 2005, Dara joined Dun Laoghaire College of Further Education as a lecturer, where he became interested in inclusive education when working first-hand with students with disabilities in his classroom. When the opportunity arose in 2008, he joined AHEAD where he has been working ever since on creating inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities.

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