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AHEAD
Annual Report 2020

ahead

creating inclusive environments in education
and employment for people with disabilities

AHEAD
Annual Report
2020

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Foreword

It is my pleasure to introduce the Annual Report of AHEAD but I do so with a sigh of relief looking back on the year that was 2020. The Board, having extended a warm welcome to Dara Ryder as the new CEO, reckoned that he would need some space to settle into his new role, but circumstances did not allow this. By March the Covid-19 pandemic hit this country with such force that before the nation could catch its' breath everything changed and we all had to adjust to a whole new existence. So yes, I am relieved that the organisation has come through and out the other side of this strangest of years and, with a track record of achievements that has exceeded my and the Board's expectations.

I am well aware, from my own work in the higher education sector, the challenges and obstacles staff had to overcome to meet the requirements that the move to remote working demanded and what it took to continue delivery of service provision to key stakeholders at a distance. The commitment and enthusiasm demonstrated by the AHEAD team of staff is very gratifying and I can only applaud their efforts and acknowledge their success in making such a great job of it all.

Strange as the year was, there were positives that emerged from the upheaval created by the imposed lockdown. In particular, the demand by providers, to create access to distance learning environments that would allow the continuation of educational programmes, online, to all students. This involved making it possible for educational staff to shift the delivery of learning off

campus to delivery from their accommodation/home base. Such challenges proved a fertile environment for AHEAD to promote its central mission of *'creating inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities'*. One where students and graduates with disabilities can thrive.

This pandemic has perhaps highlighted the inequalities inherent in our society and thus, given staff across the education and working spheres a greater understanding of issues related to access and disadvantage. These issues are 'on the table' in a way they were not in the past and that appears to be resulting in more openness to matters of accessibility, inclusion and Universal Design in education and employment.

My hope is that the door to environments in education and employment 'where inclusion is everyone's business' is more open now than it was prior to the Covid-19 crisis. I have no doubt that AHEAD will endeavour to rise to the challenge and support the sectors AHEAD serve in walking through that door.

Professor Michael Shevlin
Chairperson of the Board of AHEAD

AHEAD's Year in Numbers 2020

26

online events delivered by our education and employment team in 2020

4,668

participants across our online events in education and employment

76,942

video views on YouTube channel in 2020

132

new videos added to AHEAD's YouTube channel in 2020

1,640

trained through provision of 50 direct tailored training sessions to disabled students, graduates and staff in education/employment

351

meetings with external stakeholders in education and employment engaged in by AHEAD staff

14 — AHEAD Journal articles published featuring best practice in inclusive education and employment

276,217 — website page views in 2020

156 — graduate interviews organised & supported for graduates though WAM

6 — GetAHEAD workshops/webinars delivered to support students and graduates with disabilities learn and job-seek

78 — graduate placements supported through WAM, our paid, mentored work placement programme

169 — facilitators trained to roll out future digital badge courses in their own institution/ETB

582 — digital badges awarded directly by AHEAD as part of our national digital badge for Universal Design in teaching and learning roll out

Introduction and Summary

I took up the role of CEO of AHEAD in January 2020. It proved to be a challenging yet rewarding first year and I am forever grateful to the amazing team of staff in AHEAD for their hard work, resourcefulness and imagination in collectively responding to the Covid-19 crisis.

As the year began there were only small rumblings on the airwaves about Covid-19 and not a single case had yet been identified in Ireland. Almost overnight everything was turned upside down with the arrival of this virus in late February. Schools and college campuses closed and further and higher education staff were pushed into remote delivery of their programmes. Institutions responded with remarkable commitment as they grappled with the emerging situation and tried to ensure that students remained engaged with the remote learning process. Likewise AHEAD's key partners in the employment sector were equally forced to suspend or cancel recruitment and shift employees to work from home. Given that the core work of the organisation is centred on direct engagement with the further and higher education sectors and with employers in the public and private realm, suffice to say that AHEAD found itself having to operate in a very changed environment. Almost all of AHEAD's planned activities for the year had to be reconfigured to sync with the virtual world if it was to continue working with its key stakeholders, all be it from a distance.

The first big event to feel the impact was AHEAD's annual international conference, scheduled to take place March 12th. The suspension of the conference, with two weeks to go before its opening in Dublin, cancelled the arrival of professionals from across the world. The conference, designed to discuss UDL and

disability support in further and higher education, is Europe's largest annual conference on these topics. The conference was reshaped into a 10-week online marathon of weekly webinars attended by 1,200 individuals live from Europe, North and South America, Asia and Australia over the webinar series and, via this format, the conference reached a much wider audience than the original planned face to face format (recordings from the webinars are available on the website). Similarly, the schedule of events we planned for engagement with AHEAD's network of employers were rebranded from direct offerings to a series of online WAMinars (WAM Initiative) and again, using this format also resulted in an increase in engagement with a wider range of participants (viewable here).

To support with the transition to remote learning and working, AHEAD reacted quickly to serve the sector's needs producing targeted Covid-19 resources across our projects for educators, employers, students and graduates with disabilities, on many topics such as accessible online assessment, accessibility in distance teaching, learning from home and preparing for virtual interviews. These digital resources were supplemented with Covid-19 response online events from AHEAD covering topics like the move to inclusive online assessment, creating accessible documents for online teaching, accessibility in PowerPoint, student wellbeing, accessibility in virtual recruitment and the future of the post Covid-19 workplace for people with disabilities. In addition, AHEAD shared its findings and learning to effectively inform the state's educational response to support equity in the measures taken.

AHEAD delivered a total of 26 online events to upskill its stakeholders and AHEAD staff participated in 351 meetings with an estimated 1,917 external stakeholder representatives. AHEAD was proactive in contributing to the governmental Covid-19 response and to the development of national policy more generally. AHEAD's positions on the Department's Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Covid-19 steering group, the National Access Plan steering group and the Irish Universities Association

Access steering group gave it a direct voice at the policy table and a range of written submissions (outlined later in this report) on topics in tertiary education and employment ensured that the concerns of students and graduates with disabilities were understood and considered by state agencies and departments.

A key goal for me in my first year in office as CEO was to create more opportunities for students and graduates with disabilities to directly shape the work and policy platform of AHEAD. I am happy to report that this cohort contributed significantly to key events delivered by AHEAD to the education and employment sectors during the year. Student representation on the board of directors of AHEAD also increased. The creation of the AHEAD/USI Students with Disabilities Advisory Group generated great insight into on-the-ground issues keeping AHEAD informed and leaving it well placed to react quickly to the fast-changing Covid-19 landscape. The Advisory Group have closely curated a number of pieces of valuable work, one of which is the Power of Disability conference (Jan 2021), which more than 400 students with disabilities attended.

Against the backdrop of distance learning, AHEAD's Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Badge Programme proved to be a great tool in responding to the explosion of interest in how to create accessible and inclusive learning environments. For example, there was an increase in take-up by participants of the Programme from 93 in 2019 to more than 550 in 2020, via a new model of delivery that was developed in partnership with the education sector.

Yet and, despite all efforts, the situation for students and graduates with disabilities is far from ideal and they continue to face major challenges. AHEAD research conducted on the impact of the crisis on students with disabilities (2020) shows that more than half of students with disabilities studying in FET and HE disagreed (35%) or strongly disagreed (17%) that they are coping well with learning from home. Many have concerns for the health of themselves and their families, many are juggling

childcare and other family demands with trying to adapt to a new form of learning, and some are struggling with limited or poor access to reliable technology and a reliable internet connection. Many are experiencing high levels of anxiety related to both the wider Covid-19 situation and the new mode of their programmes and some are experiencing challenges with the accessibility of materials provided and disruption to support services. [Another piece of research conducted by AHEAD on the impact of the crisis with FET Practitioners](#) shines a light on the difficulties that practitioners are experiencing in continuing to deliver those supports and their programmes more generally. It highlights key issues including a lack of engagement from a sizeable number of learners, a lack of ability to effectively continue the provision of disability support, difficulties for practitioners in juggling unfamiliar remote delivery with family responsibilities, a lack of practitioner experience with online delivery and the unsuitability of some programmes for online delivery.

There will undoubtedly be challenges ahead, some obvious, some less so. Significant barriers remain in ensuring that both students and staff get the support they need to survive and thrive in a virtual setting. Yet there will also be opportunities, and I hope going forward, that the demand for the development of inclusive learning environments, on and off campus, will turn out to be a real positive driving force on which to build an openness to flexible and sustainable approaches to learning.

I encourage you to read this report on the annual activities undertaken by AHEAD in 2020. It is full of practical information. It contains a wealth of guides useful to staff and students involved in further and higher education and to staff in mainstream employment in their pursuit of building inclusive environments.

Dara Ryder
Chief Executive Officer

creating inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities

VISION STATEMENT

shaping a future where students and leaners with disabilities can succeed

AHEAD VALUES

- A rights-based approach to the inclusion of students, learners and graduates with disabilities in education and employment.

- The relationship of trust with its stakeholders and partners.

- Engagement and collaboration with key external partners.

- The incorporation of the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into all learning environments.

CORE STRATEGIC THEMES

AHEAD seeks to achieve its vision by pursuing the following strategic themes:

Theme A
To influence national policy to impact positively on the inclusion of learners and students with disabilities in all learning environments.

Theme B
To sustain the organisation of AHEAD to promote inclusion in education and employment through the building of networks and collaboration with key strategic partners in all learning environments.

Theme C
To promote the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) by creating an understanding of UDL in all learning environments.

Theme A – National Policy

To influence national policy to impact positively on the inclusion of learners and students with disabilities in all learning environments.

The following section outlines key strategic activities undertaken relating to Theme A of our strategic plan.

KEY STRATEGIC ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN IN 2019📋

Numbers of Students with Disabilities Studying in Higher Education in Ireland 2018/19 (published 2020)

AHEAD conducts annual research on the participation of students with disabilities registered with disability support services in higher education institutions. This research report has been part of a project that scales back over twenty years of examination on this topic to support the work of AHEAD along with key stakeholders by giving insight into key areas for potential targeting to enhance the quality of the experience and overall access of students with disabilities. Full report available here.

Summary of Key Findings 2018/19

A synopsis of the key findings and observations based on the analysis of the data collected from the responding higher education institutions on the participation rates of students with disabilities in higher education for the academic year 2018/19 is included next.

– **AN INCREASE, OF OVER 220% (10,843) IN THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES REGISTERING WITH SUPPORT SERVICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE LAST 10 YEARS (AHEAD, 2009).** The academic year 2018/19 marked another year of continued growth in the participation of students with disabilities registered with support services in higher education and there are now 15,696 students with disabilities representing 6.2% of the total student population in the responding institutions. This figure represents a 7% rise in the number of students with disabilities in higher education year on year and is a 223% increase over the last 10 years of AHEAD's research in this area (AHEAD, 2009).

Legend:
— Total students with disabilites
— Undergraduates with disabilities
— Postgraduates with disabilities

Year	Total %	Total	Undergrad %	Undergrad	Postgrad %	Postgrad
1993/1994	0.7%	990				
1998/1999	1.1%	1,410		1367		42
2005/2006	3.2%	3,608		3330		278
2008/2009	3.4%	4,853	3.8%	4,392	1.8%	461
2009/2010	3.3%	6,321	3.7%	5,243	1.5%	399
2010/2011	3.9%%	6,932	4.8%	6,328	2.1%	604
2011/2012	4.0%	7,957	5.1%	7,247	2.5%	710
2012/2013	4.6%	9,082	5.0%	8,258	2.5%	824
2013/2014	4.7%	9,694	5.2%	8,769	2.5%	925
2014/2015	5.1%	10,773	5.7%	9,777	2.5%	996
2015/2016	5.2%	11,244	5.8%	10,213	2.6%	1,031
2016/2017	5.7%	12,630	6.4%	11,619	2.5%	1,011
2017/2018	6.2%	14,720	7%	13,487	2.8%	1,233
2018/2019	6.2%	15,696	7.1%	14,490	2.4%	1,206

220%

increase in the number of students with disabilities registering with support services in higher education in the last 10 years

- **INCREASE IN NUMBER OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES STUDYING PART-TIME IN HIGHER EDUCATION.** 2018/19 witnessed a 21% increase in the number of students with disabilities studying part time courses compared to the previous year. However, this increase is against the backdrop of an even greater year on year percentage increase in the general part-time student population and students with disabilities represent just 1.3% of the total student population studying part time in 2018/19.

- **A DECREASE IN THE NUMBER OF POST-GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES.** In 2018/19, while there was a 7% (14,490) increase in the number of undergraduate students with disabilities engaging with support services across the responding institutions there was a 2.4% decrease reported in the number of students with disabilities studying at postgraduate level. In 2017/2018 the numbers of post-graduates with disabilities totalled 1,233, representing 2.8% of the total post graduate population and this dropped to 1,203 (2.4%) in 2018/2019. While the actual number of students with disabilities undertaking post graduate studies has increased significantly over the last ten years (AHEAD, 2009), as a percentage of the total post graduate student population they have increased only modestly from 1.8% to 2.4% in that period.

- **THE NUMBER OF NEW REGISTRATIONS TO SUPPORT SERVICES FROM STUDENTS NOT IN THEIR FIRST YEAR OF STUDY CONTINUES TO RISE.** According to the last five years of AHEAD research, there has been an ongoing increase in the number of new registrations with disability support services of students not in their first year of study (AHEAD, 2019; 2018; 2016; 2014). In 2018/19, new registrations of students with disabilities not in their first year of study was 1,524 compared to 1,301 in 2017/18 and this cohort now represent 28% of all new registrations with support services.

— **INCREASE OF 21% IN THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN THE ASPERGER'S/AUTISM CATEGORY IN 2018/19.** The responding institutions reported 1,055 students in the Asperger's/Autism Category registered with their services, representing 6.9% of the total population of students with disabilities in 2018/19, which is a 21% increase in the numbers of students in this category from the previous year, 870 (representing a rate of 5.9%). The numbers in this category have grown enormously in the last ten years from 62 in 2008/09 (AHEAD, 2009) to 1,055 in 2018/19.

— **LOW REPRESENTATION OF STUDENTS WITH SENSORY DISABILITIES IN 2018/19.** The number of students in the Blind/Visually impaired category registered with HE support services in 2018/19 was 273 and the number in the category of Deaf/Hard of Hearing was 396. In the last ten years, the numbers of students with sensory disabilities has grown at less than half the rate of students with disabilities more generally. While numbers of students with disabilities has grown by 223% in that period, numbers in the Blind/Visually Impaired category have grown 104% and numbers in the Deaf/Hard of Hearing category, just 92%.

— **86% OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN 2018/2019 RECEIVE EXAM ACCOMMODATIONS.** 13,129 students with disabilities in 2018/19 received one or more exam accommodations, representing a 7% (873) increase year on year (12,256 in 2017/18). The numbers of students with disabilities receiving exam accommodations has risen more than 70% in the last five years, up from 7,608 in 2013/14 (AHEAD, 2015).

– **37% INCREASE IN NUMBER OF STUDENTS PER DISABILITY SUPPORT STAFF MEMBER IN LAST 7 YEARS.** Across all 27 responding institutions, there was an average of 179 students registered per disability support staff member in 2018/19. Over 7 years of AHEAD research in this area, the number of students with disabilities per disability support staff member has increased by 37%, up from 131 2011/12 (AHEAD, 2012). The number of students per learning support staff member rose 95% in the same period.

– **OVER TWO THIRDS BELIEVE THEY DO NOT HAVE SUFFICIENT RESOURCES IN THEIR DEPARTMENT TO COLLABORATE ON INCLUSIVE PRACTICES ACROSS THEIR INSTITUTIONS.** 72% of disability support staff did not believe that they had enough resources to collaborate with other departments on inclusive practice on campus.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 RESEARCH

In April 2020, AHEAD conducted two significant pieces of research to ascertain the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on both learners with disabilities, and FET practitioners (noted as generally not well represented in national policy COVID-19 response discussions forums).

Research findings informed the sector of issues arising for all students as well as issues which were specific to students with disabilities. It also highlighted issues for teaching practitioners seeking to engage with programme delivery from home and difficulties they experienced with the delivery of disability supports.

Key Statistics from the Learner Research

601 students with disabilities responded to the survey which represented respondents from all categories of disability, living in 25 out of 26 Counties in the Republic of Ireland, and participating in both FET and HE programmes. The survey was carried out between April 9th and April 27th 2020 and the following key statistics were reported:

— More than half of the respondents either **disagreed (35%) or strongly disagreed (17%) with the statement 'I am coping well with learning from home'. One quarter of respondents either agreed (22%) or strongly agreed (3%)** with the statement, while 23% said they neither agreed nor disagreed.

I am coping well with learning from home

3%
Strongly Agree

17%
Strongly disagree

22%
Agree

35%
Disagree

23%
Neither agree nor disagree
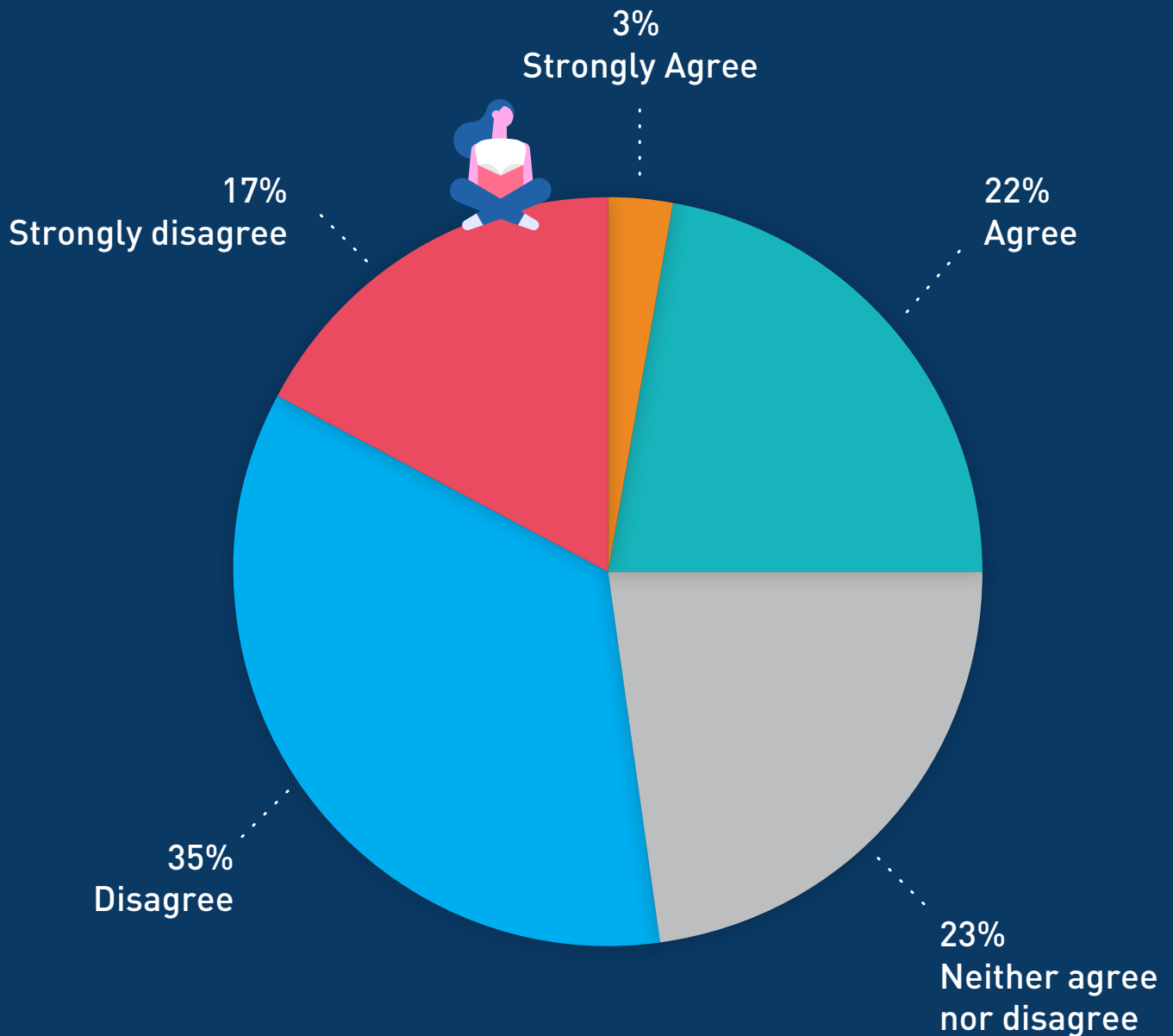
— **Students with disabilities in FET programmes were significantly more likely to agree or strongly agree (37%) that they were coping well with learning from home** when compared to students in higher education undergraduate (18%) or postgraduate (20%) programmes.

— Students who have the highest percentage of negative reaction (disagree or strongly disagree) **to the statement 'I am coping well with learning from home' are those with a Mental Health Condition (67%)**, ADD/ADHD (62%) or a Specific Learning Difficulty (58%).

— **46% of responding students said they agreed** (39%) or strongly agreed (7%) with the statement 'My lecturers/teachers have considered accessibility in the online learning materials they are providing me with' while 27% said they disagreed (20%) or strongly disagreed (7%) with the statement.

— Just **over one quarter of the respondents (26%) said that they used Assistive Technologies (AT)**. Of the students who said they did use AT, **72% said they had no difficulty accessing or using their AT** in their learning from home, while **28% said they had experienced some issues** in this regard.

— The five biggest challenges learning from home reported by the respondents were a 'Lack of structure to my day and motivation to learn' (64%), 'Distractions/other demands at home' (52%), 'Lack of clear communication from the college/centre of how I continue to engage in learning' (26%), the 'Reliability of my internet/internet shared with other members of household' (24%) and 'Disruption to the disability support provided to me by the college/centre' (20%).

— The five biggest challenges or concerns reported by the respondents about taking their upcoming assessments from home were 'worries concerning new type of assessment' (53%), 'distractions/other demands at home' (49%), a 'lack of clarity around whether/how accommodations for exams/assessments will be provided' (30%), the 'reliability of my internet/internet shared with other members of household' (29%) and a 'lack of clarity about how we will be assessed' (28%).

— Of those who said they had access to a laptop, 24% said it was a shared laptop used also by other family members or housemates while 76% said it was solely for their own use. The percentage of students who are learning with a laptop/PC that is shared with another family member/housemate was **notably higher in FET programmes (31%) than in HE undergrad (21%) or postgrad (13%) programmes**.

The full report is available here.

Key Statistics from the FET Practitioner Research

281 practitioners from 25 of the 26 FET programme types, with representation from practitioners in all ETBs, teaching programmes both non-accredited programmes and ones at all QQI levels 1 - 6 responded to this survey. The survey was carried out between April 9th and April 27th 2020 and the following key statistics were reported:

— **23% of respondents said they usually allocated hours for supporting learners with disabilities** (high volume likely due to AHEAD's connections with SEN teachers). **Of this group, 44% said they had been unable to incorporate this role remotely**. Sample comment: "There are a small number of students with disabilities that are not contactable and whose needs would be too high to be able to engage remotely."

— **19% of practitioners said they had not considered how learners with disabilities will interact with materials online** in the move to remote learning and a further **13% said they were unsure**. **68% say they have considered how learners with disabilities will interact with materials online.** Sample comment: "We aim to follow a UDL approach whereby learners are supplied with clear guidelines as to how they should complete their assignments"

— **10% of practitioners said they were not continuing to deliver their course remotely, 17% said they were partially continuing** with a reduced timetable and 5**% said they were in the process** of trying to. **68% are continuing to deliver** their programme remotely.

— **62% of practitioners were aware of learners who were no longer able to continue their learning remotely due to their home set up or situation.** Of those, the top three reasons given were; 'lack of access to a device' (PC/laptop), 'lack of access to broadband/internet' and 'family demands'.

— On average, **practitioners rated the level of continued engagement of their learners in their programmes as 5 out of 10** (10 being highly engaged). Practitioners from the programme types Youthreach (4.1/10), Prison Education (4.5/10) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (4.9/10) recorded the lowest levels of average practitioner rated learner engagement.

— There are significant challenges for practitioners engaging in remote learning delivery. **90% of practitioners said that they had never taught online before** while **10% had previous experience**. 30% of practitioners share the laptop/computer they use at home to deliver coursework with other members of the family/housemates and **2% have no laptop/PC** access at home. **77% of respondents' working time is divided between teaching and other family/social responsibilities**. The report highlights the commitment of FET practitioners in trying to maintain engagement with their learners and the many good practices which are being implemented on the ground.

The full report is available here.

AHEAD ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2020

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Reflecting on Inclusion from the Boardroom to the Classroom

AHEAD Conference 2020 Provisional Programme

ahead

AHEAD ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2020

The Annual AHEAD Conference 2020, - 'Through the Looking Glass: Reflecting on Inclusion from the Board Room to the Classroom'. The design of the conference was to focus on the inputs from practitioners and students about 'whole college' approaches to inclusion in different educational contexts. This international conference asked contributors and participants to reflect on how we can support community approaches to including diverse learners and share good practice solutions from further and higher education across the globe. Videos of all conference sessions are available on the Conference webpage.

The conference, scheduled to take place on the 26th and 27th March 2020 in Croke Park, Dublin, Ireland, had to be cancelled due to government imposed Covid-19 lockdown. However, plans were quickly changed and the conference was successfully transformed into a free 10-week conference webinar series starting on the 26th March, running until the 29th May. The original face to face conference schedule with 55 presentations (97 presenters) listed was transformed into 29 online presentations (36 presenters) over 10 weeks. More than 1,200 participants from 15 different countries and various vocational backgrounds attended over the 10-week period.

Neil McDermott, Higher Education Authority of Ireland (HE sector) and Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS (Further Education & Training (FET) Sector) formally opened the Conference series. Two keynotes speakers followed. Frederic Fovet (Royal Roads University, Canada) proposed a leadership and systemic change model that would enable a more inclusive provision of disability services in higher education.

Dr Etienne Wenger-Trayner (Social learning theorist and consultant) presented on the importance of learning networks/ communities of practice to promote inclusion and key features in establishing one within an education institution. Andrew Brownlee launched The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for FET Conceptual Framework Scoping Document on day two of the conference, the first of a two-part publication series which AHEAD is producing with SOLAS with the aim of introducing UDL guidelines to the FET Sector.

Over the 10 weeks of the series of webinars a wide range of research studies and workshop style presentations were delivered. The key themes that emerged included:

— **UDL**: Research and workshops focussed on UDL as an approach to support educators and students engaging in an authentic way including the adaptation to a remote learning environment during lockdown. The three finalists of The John Kelly Award 2020 were given as an excellent example of how UDL can be applied on a programme and the positive outcomes it can generate.

— **Student Involvement**: A strong case was put forward by both educators and students on the positive impact that derives from involving students in the design and culture of their learning environment. The Student Panel, facilitated by Hannah Kelly (AHEAD), was a strong example of how critically important it is to include students with disabilities in building an inclusive culture across all aspects of campus life.

— **Communities of practice/learning networks**: Here the spotlight was shone on communities of practices/learning networks and the positive influence collaboration has on inclusive practice, within higher and further education sectors. The sessions on responses to COVID-19 by Kinsale College of Further Education (Liz Moynihan's, week 9) and the global response by networks of INCLUDE (Sean Bracken, week 4) were good illustrations of how local and global shared learning can work.

— **Change**: On a broader scale, the context of COVID-19 raised key questions about the learning environment and the need for systemic change by institutions if they are to make learning accessible to all of their students. Trevor Vaugh (Maynooth University/Innovation Lab) spoke about how now "more than ever we should be and are looking at change and innovation in higher education".

Overall, the conference was extremely well received with over 1,200 participants from 15 different countries and various vocational backgrounds attending over the 10-week period. According to Google Analytics, more than 8,000 users visited the conference webpage over the 10-week period assisted by user friendly weekly videos that communicated weekly themes and gave details on how to register. Twitter activity was very high throughout as individual Tweets advertising the weekly event would typically receive approximately 4,000 impressions (views). The social media analytics alongside the Google analytics demonstrate a high level of online engagement which materialised in the high level of attendees throughout the conference.

Videos of all sessions are available on the Conference webpage

10 weeks of webinars

1,200+ participants

15 countries

8,000+ website visitors

Conference Highlight – Art exhibition by students presented in AHEAD's virtual gallery

A photograph from the student exhibition

The Conference hosted the launch of a wonderful student art exhibition on what it means to be a student with a disability. This exhibition was originally intended to be displayed as a physical space but due to remote delivery was re-designed into an online format. The online exhibition featured an excellent guided tour by Dr Marian McCarthy (affiliated with University College Cork (UCC)) and Vivian Rath (PHD student, Trinity College Dublin (TCD)). The event was warmly received by attendees at which a number of the exhibitors were in attendance.

Midway through the ten week conference an evening reception was held at which participants were given time to mix socially, engage and network with each other.

Feedback from Conference Attendees

" AHEAD 2020 was super accessible and intensely inclusive.

" There was a good variety of presenters, some international theorists and some practitioners - it is not often that you get both perspectives at a conference.

" AHEAD managed to produce a very engaging and high-quality conference despite the last-minute change to an online event. Well done to the team.

" This event opened my eyes to the needs of others and the mechanisms for integrated, seamless inclusion that I had not previously considered. Inclusion should not be an afterthought.

USI 'Power of Disability' Conference

AHEAD partnered with Union of Students in Ireland (USI) to support them in putting together their annual conference for students with disabilities held in January 2020. The target audience were students with disabilities and student union officers. A principle aim of the conference was to gather feedback from students on their educational experiences and to use this feedback to inform USI's policy platform. The conference, usually held in April, was brought forward and held in January in response to feedback from students who felt that an earlier hosting would leave more academic time to act on conference outcomes and recommendations.

In the planning stages AHEAD served as a sounding board for USI on accessibility issues and suggestions for speakers for the programme. AHEAD facilitated two workshops. The first on 'Disclosure' aimed at students with disabilities (how, when and what to disclose either on college placement or seeking employment), legislation and practical information on having a conversation with an employer about accommodations and disability. The second on 'Disability Awareness Training' aimed at Student Union Officers and explored legislation, disability and language, and generally how to support students with disabilities. Attending USI officers worked on case studies as a mechanism to develop practical tools when supporting students with disabilities. Planning and advertising accessible events were also discussed.

[You can find the video USI produced with clips from the conference here.](#)

AHEAD/USI STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES ADVISORY GROUP

In 2020 AHEAD and Union of Students in Ireland (USI) partnered to form a Student Advisory Group, the main aim of which is to collaborate and inform the strategy and policy of both AHEAD and USI concerning the inclusion of students and learners with disabilities in further and higher education and to bring a strong disabled student voice to FET/HE policy discussions.

AHEAD hopes that the engagement with the Advisory Group will further ensure projects undertaken are centred in student needs and will keep projects rooted in the on-the-ground experience of disabled students. The advisory group aims to achieve this by:

— Raising issues experienced by students with disabilities at the grass roots which may need to be addressed through the work of AHEAD and USI.

— Highlighting and sharing areas of good work in inclusive practice being achieved by student bodies or institutions.

— Providing feedback, comment and advice, as requested, on the work of AHEAD and collaboration on shared AHEAD/USI projects.

— Sharing related AHEAD/USI resources through USI's local networks.

Information is available at https://ahead.ie/Students-with-disabilities-advisory-group

LINK – EUROPEAN LEARNING NETWORK

LINK is a learning network, until recently chaired by AHEAD, and is made up of partners from seven EU countries, all of which share knowledge, best practice and experience with the aim of raising the quality of service for third level students with disabilities across Europe. Countries represented include Belgium, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Sweden, and the UK. By learning about what is happening in other countries and how similar organisations are achieving their aims, AHEAD seeks to broaden its understanding and better inform its contributions to policy and practice in Ireland.

This network is very important to the work of AHEAD since it is the only independent network that is looking at inclusion in education and Universal Design for Learning at a European level. In 2020, three meetings took place online between May and November to discuss the following themes:

— **The impact of Covid-19 on students with disabilities** at a pan-European level and challenges and opportunities arising from the crises.

— **Accessible Digital Education** initiatives were shared and discussed and common challenges for inclusion in digital education identified across partner countries.

— **Opportunities for lasting change presented by Covid-19** – partners highlighted the challenges they had to manage over the year and discussed how best to build on these experiences rather than returning to the status quo when the pandemic ends.

A rotational system of 'chair' of the group was agreed bringing to an end a 12 year stint of AHEAD fulfilling this role. NADP (UK) agreed to take on the role of chair for 2020/21 and Dutch partners ECIO will follow in 21/22.

Find out more about the LINK Network.

KEY COLLABORATION AND ENGAGEMENT ON POLICY

Collaboration, engagement and shared learning are values underpinning the work undertaken by AHEAD. The following are the key activities undertaken in 2020 regarding policy relating to the inclusion of people with disabilities.

— **Direct submission to the Department of Education on the Leaving Certificate Calculated Grading Process. AHEAD, in collaboration with the Disability Federation of Ireland, made** [a direct submission to the department on ensuring equity in the leaving certificate calculated grading process.](#) Calculated grading was introduced by the Department of Education during Covid-19 lockdown to replace the traditional state exam as the key mechanism for completion of second level and entry to third level education. In this submission, AHEAD identified a number of issues, in need of address and inclusion, in the guidance provided to teachers by the Department, in order to ensure a fair process for students with disabilities. The guidance, when released by the Department, did not consider any of the issues raised by AHEAD. In response, AHEAD released a statement urging the Department to update the guidance accordingly and raised awareness of the necessity of the Department to do so with key external stakeholders in the media and the wider education community like the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals. Subsequently, the Department released supplementary guidance for teachers which addressed many of the concerns raised by AHEAD.

— **AHEAD submission to the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response concerning the impact of Covid-19 on students with disabilities.** AHEAD made a submission to the Oireachtas Special Committee on 'Covid-19 Response' which shared key results from AHEAD's COVID-19 research and made recommendations for their consideration which were based on AHEAD's research findings.

— **AHEAD submission to HEA consultation on access to higher education for mature learners.** AHEAD submitted a detailed consultation document to the Higher Education Authority which outlined a number of issues concerning access and participation of mature learners with disabilities in higher education.

— **AHEAD submission to SOLAS on FET Funding Model.** AHEAD submitted a detailed response to the FET Funding Model Survey highlighting barriers and enablers to inclusion within the current funding model and recommending changes which would support and promote inclusive practice. Key recommendations include the application of an access weighting in the funding model for students with disabilities and the widening of eligibility for the Fund for Students with Disabilities to all FET learners (currently only available to those at level 5 and 6).

— **AHEAD submission to SOLAS evaluation of Further Education and Training provision at NFQ Levels 3 and 4** (pre Covid-19). AHEAD submitted a consultation document to SOLAS which outlined a number of issues to be considered in order to improve access and participation of students with disabilities in level 3 and 4 programmes. Key issues highlighted were; the lack of consistency in the identification and implementation of supports across programme types and regions, the need for UDL approaches to be incorporated into the mainstream learning environment of these programmes and, areas of staff professional development needed to ensure a more inclusive approach.

— **AHEAD submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on Current Provision of Post School Options for Students with Intellectual Disabilities.** AHEAD's submission, made at the request of the Department, contained AHEAD's informed reflections on the current provision for students with intellectual disabilities in both further and higher education settings, highlighted indicators of good practice and quality, and made recommendations for consideration in the development of any model of future provision.

— **AHEAD submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on their Statement of Strategy Consultation.** This submission, made in response to a public call for consultation on the development of the Department's new statement of strategy, highlighted the need to place a focus on Universal Design, the elimination of financial barriers to tertiary learning and where required, the delivery of high-quality support services.

— **AHEAD submission to the State Examinations Commission review of alternative exam provision (pre Covid-19).** AHEAD submitted a detailed consultation document to the Higher Education Authority which outlined a number of positive aspects of the piloted model of alternative exam provision for students suffering bereavement during the Leaving Certificate and recommending the widening of the eligibility for alternative provision to students with disabilities with medical reasons for being unable to participate in any given exams.

— **AHEAD submission to Public Consultation on Guidance for Remote Working.** AHEAD made a direct submission to the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation in response to the public consultation on Guidance for Remote Working. Prior to its submission AHEAD conducted a survey through its WAMWorks database inviting feedback from people with disabilities on their thoughts regarding remote working. This

feedback was then used to inform AHEAD's submission. Key issues highlighted were; the need for remote working to be fully recognised as a reasonable accommodation, the importance of Needs Assessments in identifying supports for work from home and, a review of the Reasonable Accommodation Fund to ensure it is fit for purpose.

— **AHEAD input to the Quality & Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Report** - The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education. In Aug 2020, QQI released the above referenced wide-ranging report featuring data informed evidence of the teaching and learning experience of learners and educators during Covid-19. QQI invited AHEAD to make a submission to inform their findings based on AHEAD's survey conducted with both learners with disabilities and FET practitioners. AHEAD's research is highlighted in the [full QQI report available here](#).

— **Department of Education National Access Plan Advisory Group. As a member of this advisory group**, AHEAD's aim is to impact the planning and delivery of national access measures by bringing its research and evidence to bear on the Group's decision making, by raising issues that AHEAD is witnessing at the grass roots and conversely by feeding back to the grass roots, Department's proposals. AHEAD's role is to represent the voice of students with disabilities on the committee and ensure that the delivery of the current National Access Plan and the development of the future one is well informed and includes positive measures for students with disabilities. Three meetings of this group took place during 2020.

— **Department of Education Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Covid-19 Tertiary Steering Group.** This steering group was set up by the Department to look at the impact of Covid-19 on disadvantaged learners. Meetings took place initially every week and after a hiatus in the summer, meetings were scheduled to take place every 2-3 weeks. This group developed

themed papers to highlight access issues and these papers then fed into the main Department of Education Tertiary Education Covid-19 group which coordinates the state's response in this sector. The group's impact is evidenced in the introduction, by Minister Simon Harris, of an €8million Mitigating Educational Disadvantage fund in 2020 and its influence on Covid-19 guidance issued by the department. Over the course of 21 total meetings, ten papers were produced by the group: [Digital Learning](#), [Assessment](#), [Learner Engagement](#), [Community Education](#), [Educational Equity and Learner Cohort](#), [Tutors and Practitioners](#), [Financial Barriers](#) and [Mental Health](#), [Progression](#) and [Barriers in the Return to Remote Learning](#). The newly formed AHEAD/USI Students with Disabilities Advisory Group had direct access to the Tertiary Steering Group enabling AHEAD and USI to bring issues raised by students with disabilities quickly to the attention of key stakeholders and profile the work of the Advisory Group.

— **SOLAS – Universal Design for Learning in FET National Advisory Committee.** This committee was established to support and direct the work that AHEAD is undertaking to develop a framework of Universal Design for Learning for FET and the writing of guidance to support the implementation of UDL in FET. Its subcommittee met three times in 2020 to review the latest drafts of the UDL for FET guidance and provide feedback. Three more meetings of the main UDL for FET National Advisory Committee took place to review the guidance, provide feedback and give final approval for the document to progress to the design phase.

— **Irish University Association Access Steering Group. As a member of this steering group,** AHEAD participates in the development of access policy affecting admissions to the university and Institutes of Technology (IoT) sectors (e.g. Disability Access Route to Education policy) and student experience measures. AHEAD's engagement with this group enables it to contribute directly to institution policy and practice across the sectors. Two meetings of this group were held in 2020.

— **National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning** – AHEAD signed a memorandum of understanding with the National Forum which will see the two organisations work together on issues concerning student success and Universal Design for Learning. On its part AHEAD supported the Forum to analyse INDEX survey data on Assistive Technology, will continue to roll out the digital badge for Universal Design for Learning and will seek to encourage institutions to implement UDL to support student success.

— **University College Cork** – AHEAD was invited to participate as a consulting partner in the development of a university wide campaign aimed at encouraging staff to incorporate the principles of Universal Design for Learning in their practice. AHEAD is continuing to engage with UCC as a partner to support them in designing and delivering this campaign.

— **Higher Education Authority** – The HEA calls on AHEAD to occasionally consult and provide data/contextual information in order to ensure policy decisions are informed and support best practice.

— **Disability Advisors Working Network (DAWN)** – Building on its strong collaboration with DAWN in 2019 AHEAD attended two DAWN meetings in 2020 and a number of collaborative projects are planned involving Assistive Technology resources and a re-design of the AHEAD Better Options annual college fair held for students with disabilities considering their pathway to third level education.

— **AHEAD Membership Forum** – AHEAD has a membership system with institutions/education and training boards represented across further and higher education sectors. This gives AHEAD a direct link to member institutions to support them in developing inclusive policy and practice. AHEAD's information line engages with staff from member institutions with queries about best practice or policy in a variety of areas relating to the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Consultation often takes place via scheduled video calls. For example in 2020, AHEAD took part in a one-to-one interview with staff from Marino Institute of Education to inform the development of their new strategic plan and ensure inclusion is embedded in the plan.

— **AHEAD Employer Network** – Through the WAM Initiative AHEAD partners with a host of major national employers. The strong relationships, built over time with the employer network, enables AHEAD to disability proof their diversity, recruitment and progression policies and practices.

— **Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and Public Appointment Service** – Discussions are under way with Civil Service representatives to consider the proposed idea of creating a career pathway for WAM participants who had successfully completed a WAM internship with them. Such a development would give these graduates with disabilities the opportunity to apply for available permanent roles in the Civil Service via a closed competition framework.

— **Union of Students in Ireland** – AHEAD engages with USI on an ongoing basis offering its expertise and making available its resources on how to support and engage with students with disabilities e.g. AHEAD provides annual training to Student's Union Officers. In 2020, the partnership with USI was strengthened with the establishment of a shared Disabled Student Advisory Group.

— **DEPTH Study** - AHEAD is a contributing partner to Designing for Enhanced Participation through Technology in Higher Education (DEPTH Study). This ongoing research project aims to explore the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland and in particular, the role of technology in promoting inclusive university campus environments. It is expected that research findings will improve our understanding of how technology supports students with disabilities accessing, progressing through and fully participating in higher education in Ireland and what enhances and/or inhibits the provision and use of technology in higher education. The outcomes of this research will help to identify key guiding principles and features of a technology-friendly inclusive university campus and to make recommendations for future action to realise these principles.

— **FIT – the ICT talent helpline** – Choose Tech Steering Group FIT (Fastrack to Information Technology) is a representative organisation of the technology sector committed to growing Ireland's tech talent pipeline. Their Choose Tech initiative aims to address the structural under representation of disadvantaged young people and increase diversity in the newly launched pre–tech & tech apprenticeships and the tech sector. The initial pilot is in Dublin for 2 years and if successful will be extended nationwide. AHEAD sit on FIT's Coalition for Tech Apprenticeship Access and Inclusion steering group to advise how the 'Choose Tech programme' could be more inclusive of learners with disabilities.

Theme B – Promoting Inclusion, Networks & Collaboration

To sustain the organisation of AHEAD to promote inclusion in education and employment through the building of networks and collaboration with key strategic partners in all learning environments

The following section outlines key strategic activities undertaken relating to Theme B of our strategic plan.

KEY STRATEGIC ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN IN 2020

AHEAD seeks to promote the employment opportunities of graduates with disabilities by focusing on the transition of students with disabilities to, within and from higher education to employment through the following initiatives:

Better Options College Fair – Pathways to third level education – learner/student connect

The AHEAD/DAWN Better Options 2020 national college fair for students with disabilities took place on Saturday 28th November 2020 via a fully online format for the first time in its history.

This event is ideal for students with disabilities considering their post leaving cert educational options, adults with disabilities returning to education, parents and guidance counsellors. This one-day event was structured into a series of online seminars with live Q&A facility.

Attendees explored: access routes open to those with disabilities and specific learning difficulties including how to make an application to DARE- Disability Access Route to Education, the provision of college support services and how best to make the most of one's time in college. Information was provided on both further education and training (FET) and higher education (HE) routes.

Offered to all registrants was a one to one information session – a video call slot with a participating advisor – at which individuals could seek advice and tips about accessing college and receiving disability support. Attendees at this online event came from a wider pool than in previous years with students/parents represented from 22 of the 26 counties of Ireland.

Overall, moving the event online was well received and feedback from the event was excellent:

"I loved that it was online. I would not have gone to a real-life event for a day..."

"Very comfortable - sitting at home in my own environment and also, discussions were not overwhelming. Practical explanations. Very easy to ask questions. I'm delighted it was recorded as now I can share with son & daughter (5th year students), especially pieces relevant to them. THANK YOU ALL"

"Very user friendly and well organised"

For further information, please visit the Better Options webpage.

Better Options College Fair
For secondary
school students

GetAHEAD Initiative
Pathways to employment

for college students

Willing Able Mentoring (WAM)
A work placement initiative

for college graduates

GetAHEAD Initiative – Pathways to employment - learner/student/ graduate connect

AHEAD engages with students with disabilities through its GetAHEAD Initiative with the aim of supporting them with the transition from education into mainstream employment. Throughout the year GetAHEAD runs frequent events and training sessions with students and graduates to upskill them in areas such as:

— Interview Preparation
— Disclosing Your Disability
— Resilience in the Workplace

GetAHEAD engages and partners with student bodies (USI, local students' unions) to build inclusion across all college activities to ensure that students with disabilities in further and higher education, have equal opportunity to engage in extracurricular activities, such as clubs and societies. Research has shown that such engagement improves employability outcomes. How to run accessible events and ensuring clubs/societies are inclusive are examples of training topics covered.

Building the Future Careers

Building the Future is a unique, annual careers event for students and graduates with disabilities and specific learning difficulties. This event typically takes place at the end of May, kindly hosted on location by Citi and everything was organised, commitments secured from participating employers to host the event as per usual. By late March the event was postponed till end of August.

However, the idea of an indoor event of up to 300 people was abandoned as the Covid-19 situation worsened and a government lockdown was imposed. As with most other AHEAD activities at that time, the event was redesigned for an online platform involving Zoom online video meeting and webinar platform. The online engagement proved to be a very interesting experience. Instead of a two day in-door event it became a full week, 24th to 28th August 2020, of online engagement. The following is an overview of those activities:

Participating employers received disability awareness training prior to the career event going live.

	Monday 24th	Tuesday 25th	Wednesday 26th	Thursday 27th	Friday 28th
10 am to 2:30 pm	Mock Interviews	CV Clinics	Mock Interviews	CV Clinics	Mock Interviews
	Employer Drop In Sessions				
3pm to 4pm	Civil Service Departments	Bank of Ireland ESB Salesforce	Beckman Coulter Central Bank Dell Technologies	Accenture NTMA Bank of America	
	Workshops				
4.15pm to 5pm	Employer Panel Discussion	Disclosing your Disability	Networking: Skills for Your Job Search	Storytelling in an Interview Setting	What is The WAM Programme?

Promotional Videos

A series of promotional videos was put together in order to help students/graduates get the most out of the week.

Video 1 - Virtual Building The Future Promotional Video

Video 2 – How to Register
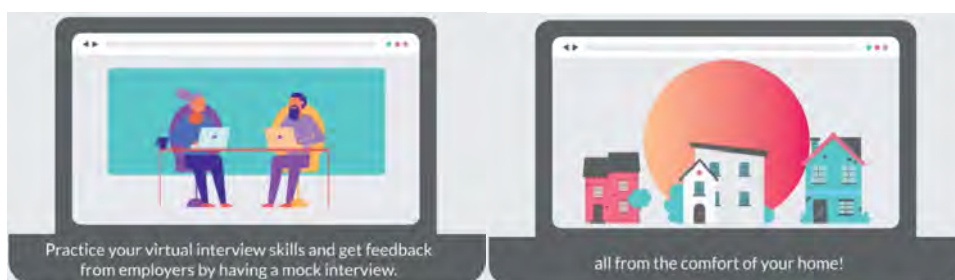
Video 3 – Mock Interviews, CV Clinics and Employer Drop in – How it Works

Mock Interviews & CV Clinics

39 — Mock interviews took place

9 — Participating employers

19 — Staff members were involved

9 — Staff members were involved

48 — CV sessions

6 — Participating employers

Mock Interviews & CV Clinics

Mock interviews were delivered on three days of the week from 10am – 2.30pm and on each of these days, staff from a variety of participating companies delivered mock interviews to student attendees in breakout rooms in Zoom.

39 mock interviews took place

involving **19** staff members

from **9** participating employers

CV Clinics were conducted on the two intervening days from 10am – 2.30pm. CVs were collected in advance of zoom slot and forwarded to participating employers.

48 CV sessions

involving **9** staff members

from **6** participating employers

Employer Drop-in Sessions

The design of the event usually had a designated exhibition space for participating employers but on line this was reimagined by creating and providing daily drop-in sessions throughout the week where graduates could engage directly with participating employers. Employers were formed into different groups and attendees got to choose which group they wanted to sign up to. A maximum of 45 attendees' slots were allocated per drop-in day with a maximum of 15 attendees allotted to each of the 3 breakout rooms while employers were switched from room to room periodically so that all attendees got an opportunity to meet with the range of participating employers.

Schedule of Employers

- Accenture
- Bank of America
- Bank of Ireland
- Beckman Coulter
- Central Bank
- Dell Technologies
- ESB
- Dept. of Foreign Affairs
- Dept. of Rural and Community Development
- Office of the Revenue Commissioners
- Public Appointment Service
- Salesforce
- NTMA

**174 attendees registered for Employer Drop-in Sessions over the week.**

Each day was wrapped up with a closing 45 minute webinar. Citi and their Citi Disability Network, Enabling Diverse Abilities Dublin, kindly sponsored the accessibility cost of these webinars, which were captioned and ISL interpreted.

423 attendees registered for all five online workshops.

Looking back – evaluation of the Event

Moving the event online came with some challenges, however, in many ways it enabled the event reach a wider audience. Some attendees, who for reasons were not in a position to attend the indoor event, were able to attend the online event. Likewise, the online nature of the event made it possible for AHEAD to expand the seating capacity for workshops from 120 attendees to over 400.

One of the unique challenges that going virtual posed, was the query from participating employers around security of using an external platform, in this instance zoom. Some employers had to initially withdraw their support because their in-house security software blocked the use of external software. For the most part we overcame this hurdle with the cooperation of participating staff who each agreed to use their personal devices for their individual input.
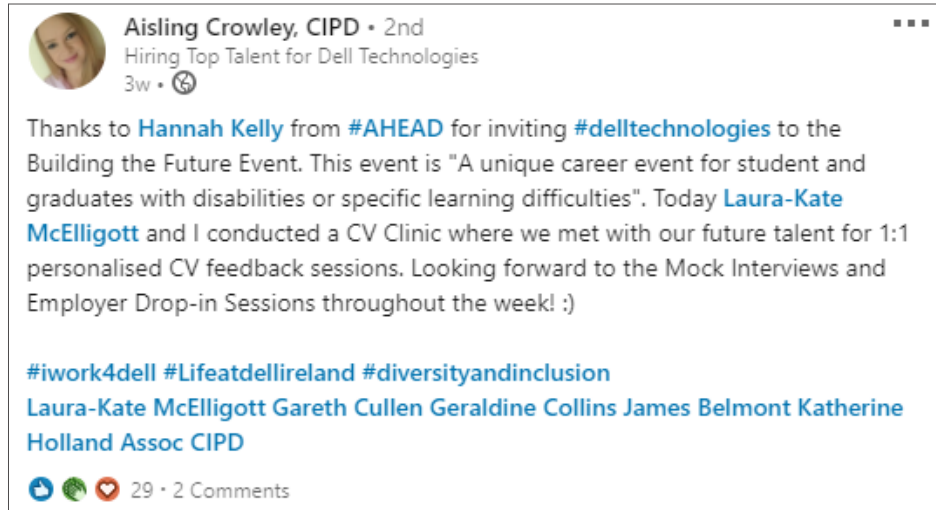
100% of employers felt the communication and organisation of the event was either good or excellent. Participating employers felt that moving the event to a virtual platform was worthwhile. Going forward no preferences for the in-door Vs the virtual format were expressed.

Alannah Murray
@AlannahEMurray

Congratulations to everyone at @aheadireland for their amazing #BTFAhead events over the past week, cannot praise them enough and I've gotten so much out of this week from CV help, mock interviews to engaging with companies across various industries about work & disability!

5:08 PM · Aug 27, 2020 · Twitter Web App

2 Quote Tweets   **15** Likes

100% of attendees (students/graduates) felt they benefited from the event and that the event was fully accessible.

Almost 50% felt going forward the event should take a blended approach with 40% preferring the event to remain online going forward.

Online 'Think Twice' Workshops

Throughout 2020, GetAHEAD hosted six online think twice workshops for students and graduates with disabilities on a range of topics from disclosure to online interview preparation and student mental health and resilience. https://www.ahead.ie/blog-virtualinterviewprep

Willing Able Mentoring (WAM)
– A work placement initiative –
graduate/employer connect

Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) is a work placement programme which aims to promote access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities and build the capacity of employers to integrate disability into the mainstream workplace. Participating employers (WAM Leaders) collaborate with WAM to offer mentored, paid, work placements for graduates with disabilities. This partnership brings graduates with disabilities and employers together so that both can benefit from each other - ensuring genuine learning opportunities for all.

WAM is unique in that it seeks to engage and support employers in order to develop their potential to be inclusive, while simultaneously offering graduates with disabilities fantastic career opportunities in a supportive environment.

Since 2005, The WAM Programme has provided 497 work placements for graduates with disabilities (December 2020).

Key Placement Statistics

As WAM funding year runs from April – March, the next section is spilt into two parts to highlight the numbers for the period 1st January – 31st December 2020. WAM secured 32 new placements and supported a total of 78 placements in this period.

Funding Year 2019/2020
Figures from 1st January 2020 – 31st March 2020

— **6** New placements
— **52** Placements supported
— **26** Interviews organised and supported
— **12** Employees trained pre placement

WAM secured 6 new work placements in the three month period Jan-Mar 2020 while continuing to support those placements that rolled over from the previous year giving a total of 52 supported placements during the first quarter of 2020.

Funding Year 2020/2021
Figures 1st April 2020 to 11th December 2020

— **26** New placements
— **130** Interviews organised and supported
— **50** Employees trained pre placement

From the 1st April 2020 – 31st December, WAM initiative secured 26 new placements.

Recruitment Figures

— **65** Placements Advertised
— **372** Applications Received

WAM advertised 65 WAM work positions ring-fenced for graduates with disabilities and received a total of 372 individual applications.

Funding year 2019/2020

Figures from 1st January 2020 – 31st March 2020

6 New placements

52 Placements supported

12 Employees trained pre placement

26 Interviews organised and supported

Funding year 2020/2021

Figures 1st April 2020 to 11th December 2020

26

New Placements

50

Employees trained pre placement

130

Interviews organised and supported

Recruitment figures

65

Placements advertised

372

Applications received
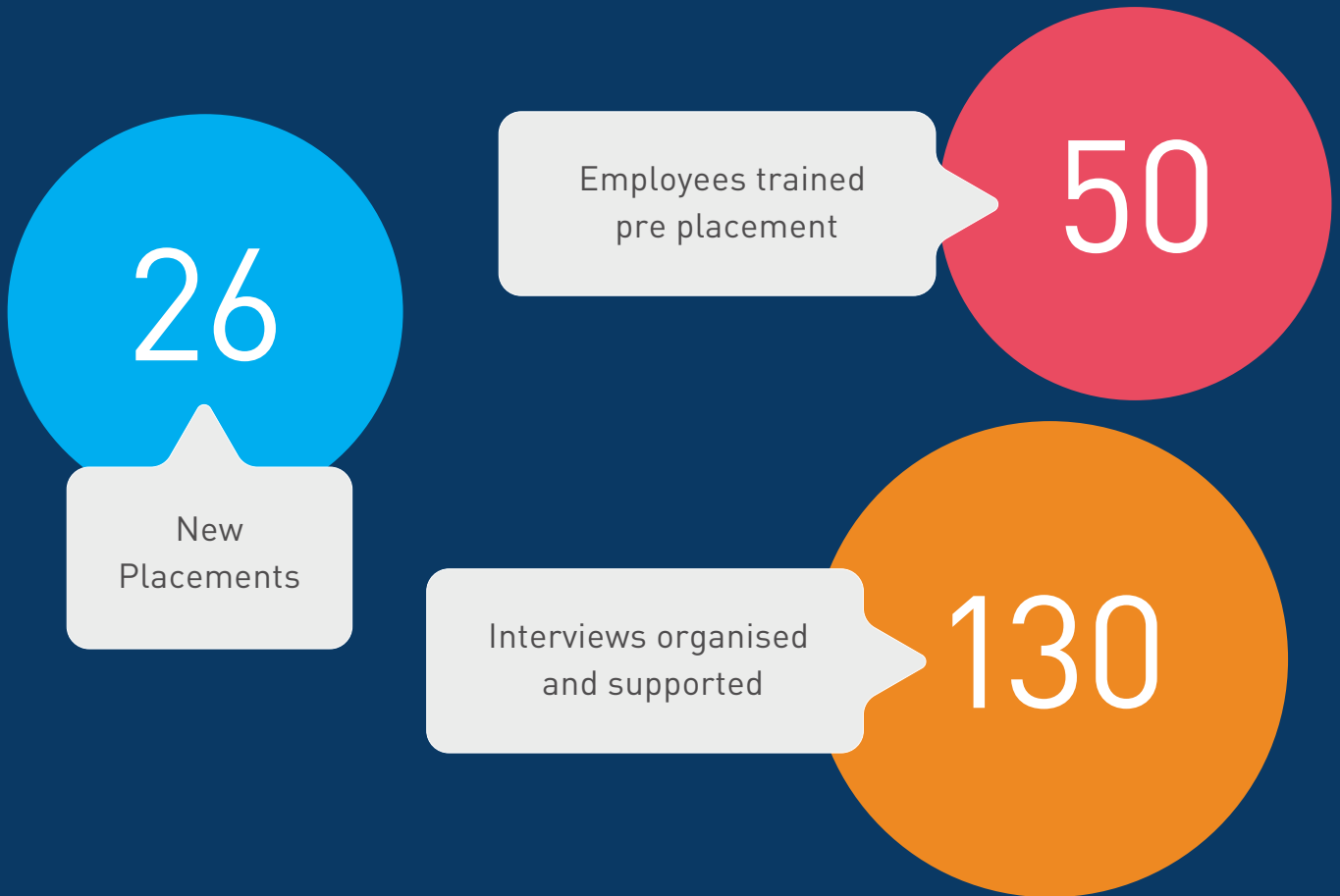
Needs Assessments and WAM Mentoring Model

All WAM work placements are needs assessed. The implementation of the WAM Needs Assessment and Mentoring Model involve the participating manager, graduate, mentor and, on occasion, other related staff. These processes are usually carried out on-site in the relevant place of work where the graduate will be based. However, with the onset of the pandemic and public health restrictions, both the WAM Needs Assessment process and Mentoring Model training were re-developed and adapted to suit remote-working and to ensure all parties continued to be supported.

AHEAD WAM Graduates Resilience Meetings

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the WAM Team set up online check-in meetings with placed graduates on a regular basis in light of the fact they were now working alone without the support of their work colleagues. The purpose of these meetings was twofold: to create a space to allow graduates interact with each other, and to provide them with an opportunity to air any issues they were having in relation to working from home. These meeting ran from April to year end and remain in operation. This arrangement has proved to be particularly important for WAM graduates who commenced their work placements during lockdown. Participating managers were informed of these meetings and while we ask that participating graduates be allowed to attend these meetings, it was left optional to the graduates whether to attend or not. The meetings were facilitated by members of the WAM team, ran every three weeks and on average, 10 graduates were in attendance. Some of the key learnings from these meetings were;

— Time management and adhering to deadlines in a remote-work environment. Issues with regards to home set-up, i.e. in shared accommodation or managing childcare and home-schooling were raised.

— Starting a new internship remotely was challenging, particularly in the first few weeks where all of the training was conducted via sharing screens etc. Graduates shared experiences with each other of how they stayed connected with colleagues on a remote basis and tips for managing workloads when initially starting.

— Technical issues were prevalent for a lot of our graduates in terms of learning new software and accessing certain elements of their work.

A reassuring and rewarding development that evolved from these organised regular meetings was the move by participating graduates to take on the role of acting as peer support to each other. This most welcomed outcome allowed the WAM team step back from leading the meetings, a practice that WAM will try to replicate on a permanent basis going forward.

AHEAD WAMinars

In response to the ban on indoor face to face events, WAM hosted monthly online WAMinars throughout 2020, covering various aspects of inclusion at work with a strong focus on Covid-19 related accessibility/inclusion issues. The move online enabled WAM to offer many more events than anticipated, thereby spreading its reach and engagement with more individuals and organisations than ever before. Topics covered by the WAMinars are as follows:

Building Inclusion – in the public and private employment sectors
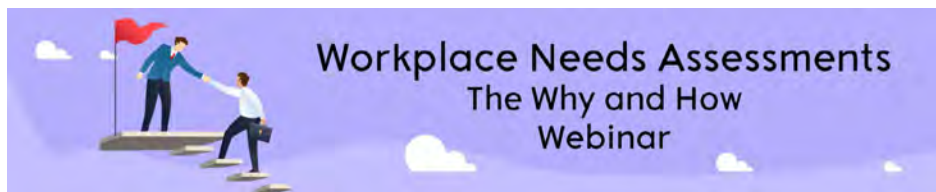
What is a Needs Assessment and what does the law say? Addressing these questions were the central focus of this WAMinar along with tips on how to conduct a Needs Assessment. Sharing their experience and perspective on how a Needs Assessment benefited them in the workplace were current participating WAM employer (Enterprise Rent-a-Car) and their participating WAM graduate. http://www.ahead.ie/wamwebinar0420

'It was a great session, very informative and looking forward to the next one! Thank you.'

How to Ensure Accessibility in Virtual Recruitment
Webinar

With companies' recruitment strategies shifting to virtual platforms amid the Covid-19 outbreak, WAM focused on ensuring accessibility in the recruitment process. Guest speakers included Sight and Sound Technologies, Sign Language Interpreting Service and Salesforce who gave an overview of accessibility of various platforms and presented Top 10 Tips for Inclusive Recruitment. http://www.ahead.ie/wamwebinar0520

'We are all grappling with the new ways of working, so it's really made me look and consider whether these ways are accessible and if not, some tips to help improve'.

WAM Top 10 Tips Page for Accessible Recruitment

The Future of the Workplace post Covid

WAM Webinar

What the future of the workplace post Covid-19 may look like for people with disabilities? Presenters included James Northridge (UrAbility), Dr. Patricia McCarthy, Fiona Coyle (Mental Health Reform). Topics discussed included; how best to utilise the technology we all have become accustomed to for training in the future; remote working policies and why it is good for business in the promotion and retention of a diverse workforce and the impact of the pandemic on mental health of employees. http://www.ahead.ie/wamwebinar1006

"I thought the webinar was extremely well structured...... Thank you for the great work you put out there."

WAMinar: How to Combat
Unconscious Bias
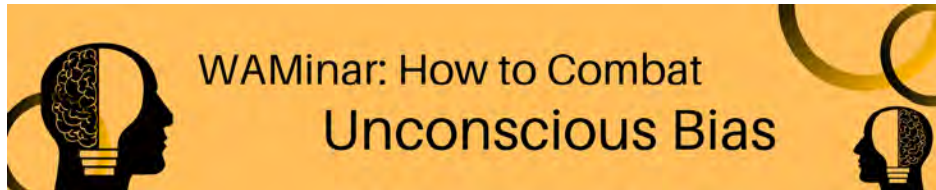
This webinar discussed how to combat unconscious bias; unconscious biases are social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside of their conscious awareness. Speakers included Dr. Ashely O'Donoghue (Technological University Dublin) and Seónaid Ó Murchadha (Disability Consultant). The topics discussed included defining unconscious bias such as affinity and implicit bias. It discussed some of biases surrounding disability and how this can affect employers in the recruitment process. Top 10 Takeaways were also shared with attendees at the end of the webinar. http://www.ahead.ie/wamwebinar1006

"I wanted to let you know we have had very positive ... actually brimming feedback about the earlier session in terms of making people think differently"

Assistive Technology Webinar

Assistive Technology (AT) has changed the face of both employment and education for many employees and students. Speakers included Siobhan Long (Enable Ireland), Trevor Boland (AHEAD) and Áine Lennon (WAM Graduate). Topics discussed were defining Assistive Technology and describing the different types of Assistive Technology that we may see in everyday life. A former WAM graduate shared their experience of using AT in the workplace and how it enabled them to reach a level playing field. Top 10 Tips were also shared with attendees which included examples of free Assistive Technology and apps. http://www.ahead.ie/wamwebinar0820

"A deeper understanding from all different points of view and how a holistic approach is more effective."

Remote On-Boarding
WAM Webinar

Some employers continued to recruit while working remotely. This webinar took the form of a panel discussion of employers who discussed their experiences of remote-onboarding with a particular focus on accessibility. Topics covered were remote onboarding strategies, GDPR concerns, the training of new hires, the induction process and management of employees while working remotely. Also shared were how to include new employees into an existing team and the concept of 'bringing one's whole self to work'. Panellists included Laura Flynn (Bank of Ireland), Zoe Fitzpatrick (Salesforce), Áine Gould (Dell Technologies), Siobhan O'Farrell (NTMA) and Caroline McGrotty (AHEAD). http://www.ahead.ie/wamwebinar0920

"Gained a much greater insight into the trials and tribulations around not only remote on-boarding for WAM graduates but also for employees as a whole. Better understanding of how to address issues that may arise."

Mental Health and Returning to Work
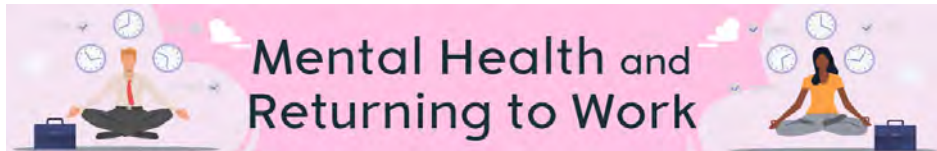
This session was a follow up to the June WAMinar on 'the Future of the Workplace post Covid'. With employers considering strategies for return to the office base in 2021, the main topic discussed was how best employers can support workers and their mental health in the current lockdown scenario but also the return post-Covid-19. Speakers included Fiona Coyle (CEO Mental Health Reform) and Barbara Brennan (See Change Coordinator).

http://www.ahead.ie/wamwebinar1020

"Today's topic on mental health and looking after yourself and staff was the best topic so far. Very well done! Having speakers with real life experiences makes it easier to visualise how to implement practices into the workplace"

Disclosure
Bringing Your Whole Self to Work

'Disclosure of disability' is frequently cited as one of the most challenging aspects of having a disability. The WAMinar delved into 'disclosure', a complex issue that is influenced by a number of factors such as self-identity, personality, type of disability, context, and previous experience. AHEAD staff delivered the key presentations given AHEAD's experience and expertise in this area. Information was shared on the experience of students and graduates with disabilities in relation to disclosure, and how employers can encourage disclosure during both the recruitment process and amongst current employees. http://www.ahead.ie/wamwebinar1120

"Thank you for all the great webinars you have undertaken this year. Never has staying connected, and creating ways of engaging with each other been more important. Learning how to ensure that we include everyone in our new way of being has been a great asset to me. "

WAM Leaders Awards 2020 – January 2021

The AHEAD WAM Leader Awards is an annual event. Awards are given to employers in recognition of their contribution to promoting the employment of graduates with disabilities. This year's event, scheduled to take place in June 2020, was postponed and re-designed in a virtual format and delivered remotely in January 21. The virtual format featured a video that was made up from the montage of the short videos submitted by nominated employers along with selected photos. WAM Leaders Awards Video Montage. Award plaques were delivered to employers in advance of the ceremony. Minister for Social Protection, Rural Community and the Islands, Heather Humphreys made a formal address to attendees and two WAM graduates spoke of their WAM placement experiences WAM Graduate Story – Síne Breslin and WAM Graduate Story – Gerard Mulvihill . In addition there was a networking facility created for the 65 people who registered through the use of breakout rooms on the Zoom platform. *"A lovely event, positive and reaffirming. Thank you for making it all happen"*
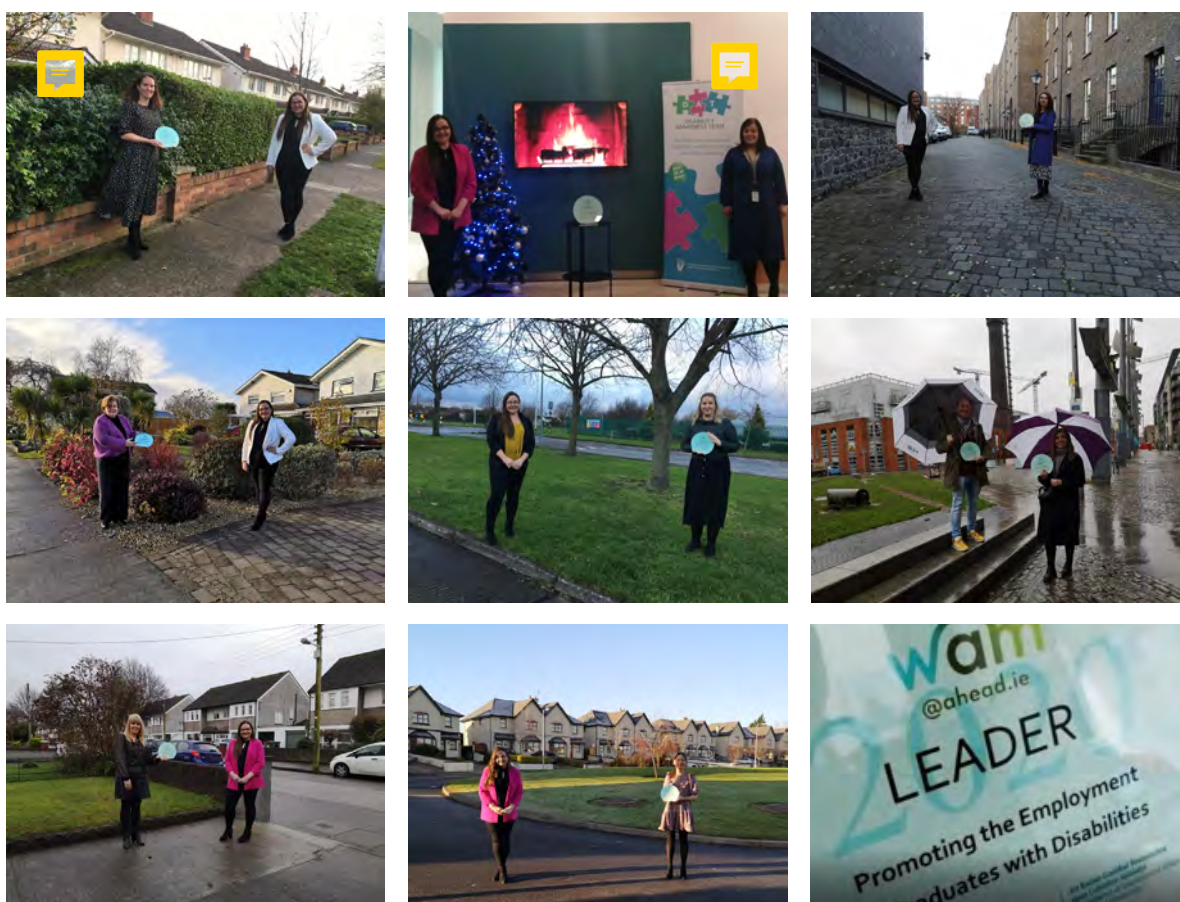
Civil Service Career Pathway for WAM Participating Graduates

The Civil Service has participated in the AHEAD WAM programme since its foundation. In 2020, as part of developing the engagement with the Civil Service, WAM proposed to the Civil Service the idea of creating career pathways for graduates with disabilities who had successfully completed their WAM internships with them. It is a proposal that if accepted, would open up career opportunities for graduates with disabilities permitting them to apply for available roles at Executive Office (EO) grade via closed competitions. In consideration of the proposal several internal discussions took place from which a plan was produced listing all that needs to be completed for a commencement date in 2022. Presentations on the proposal were also made to the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment Equality and Disability Forum. In 2021, work will begin with various stakeholders to develop and secure this vital pathway to permanency for WAM graduates in 2022.

AHEAD Manager e-Course

The WAM Team have developed a brand new e-course for managers who are responsible for managing a WAM graduate on placement. The course is divided into five sections covering; an overview of WAM and AHEAD, the WAM Mentoring Model, the WAM Needs Assessment Process, information regarding related employment equality legalisation, disclosure of disability, how to deal with performance issues during a work placement and how to resolve them. Bringing a placement to a close, the importance of evaluating the placement and disseminating the learning within the wider organisation are also included in the course.

Building Inclusion – in Further & Higher Education

'AHEAD Start' Training Course

AHEAD Start is a blended online training course on supporting students with disabilities aimed at staff responsible for delivering supports in further and higher education. The course is typically run twice yearly (beginning of Semester 1 & 2) and takes a blended learning approach, which includes a full day (optional) pre-term seminar, coupled with a 20-25 hour online course completed over an 8-week term.

Topics covered at the face to face event for participants included:

— An introduction to AHEAD Start, including the online player and the Needs Assessment process
— Understanding Legal Obligations for educational establishments
— Demystifying educational psychologists' reports
— Assistive Technology solutions in tertiary education and a speed date style try out session
— Participants also get to network with each other as part of the blended learning day

The interactive online part of the course is broken into four modules:

— Disability, Attitudes, Policy and Legislation – A History
— Understanding Disability and Its Educational Impact
— Supports and Reasonable Accommodations
— Needs Assessment and Funding

In the first half of 2020 (Semester 1) 46 members of staff from across the further and higher education sectors undertook the course and completed a mock Needs Assessment as their final course assignment.

This course remains one of our key resources for the professional development of staff involved in delivering supports to students with disabilities in further and higher education.

[For more insight on the course, watch this promotional video.](#)

The AHEAD Journal - A Review of Inclusive Education & Employment Practices

The online AHEAD Journal is a space in which professionals and students/graduates can share experiences and good practice, air ideas, raise concerns and explore what is going on in the world of inclusive education and employment.

The Journal has become a key method of dissemination and sharing of good practice from AHEAD and an important space to discuss issues arising in the sector. It also offers us another great opportunity to collaborate with key stakeholders in education and employment and offer them a platform to highlight their good work.

Issue 11 of the AHEAD Journal was published in June 2020. Only one edition, rather than the usual two, was produced this year due to delays caused by the upheaval of the pandemic. However, it is a bumper edition with 14 articles published on a range of topics including the pandemic and its impact on operating in shared environments.

The full list of articles published was:

1. [CEO's Corner - Covid-19 - Our Response and What Lies AHEAD?](#)

2. [On the road to the John Kelly Award - Universal Design for Learning](#)

3. [The development of good practice principles for supporting students with autism to work with their peers](#)

4. [No room at the Inn??](#)

5. [Mental Health and Disability at Third Level: Findings from a national study on student mental health](#)

6. [Can students with an intellectual disability join in? Training university teachers to pursue inclusive higher education](#)

7. [WAM Wonderland Sparkled with Inclusion Gems! Recommendations for the creation of more diverse and inclusive working environments and recruitment methods](#)

8. ['CoP ON!' Developing Communities of Inclusive Practice (CoPs) at University College Cork (UCC), Cork, Ireland](#)

9. ['Don't do this for Law students!' - embedding disability and wellbeing support within curriculum programmes](#)

Previous editions are available at
https://www.ahead.ie/journal/index

Enhanced Participation through Technology in Higher Education

AT Hive – An Assistive Technology Resource

In partnership with the Disability Advisors Working Network (DAWN), AHEAD developed AT Hive, an Assistive Technology resource for people with disabilities to help them to find technologies which support them to work and learn more effectively. The resource has been designed so that staff in further and higher education can invite their students to explore Hive technologies and discover how they may benefit from them.

Over 50 technologies have already been added to this resource and uniquely, it has been created and curated with the community, with contributions from AHEAD staff, Assistive Technology officers in higher education, further education practitioners, students and graduates. Anybody can submit a technology for consideration and if approved internally, will be added to the AT Hive keeping it current and up-to-date.

Each technology page includes an indication of cost, details of the platforms the technology runs on (if applicable), a tip on what it is most useful for, a simple guide to its key features and a video demonstration of the technology in action.

Technologies are simply categorised by the working/learning challenges it helps users to overcome for example reading, collaboration, organisation, note-taking etc.

Since its launch in November at the Better Options College Fair, AT Hive is the most visited webpage on the ahead website with more than 3,000 views and has proved a huge hit with students, graduates and staff alike. Visit AT Hive.

Members Winter Webinar Series 2020

In 2019, AHEAD begun a new online venture by hosting its first Webinar Series. Webinars offer us a new and flexible way to engage and collaborate with the further and higher education sector, delivering knowledge and best practice to them where and when it suits them. The Digital Accessibility Webinar series detailed above was prioritised and expanded due to demand resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent move to online learning. But AHEAD also ran a winter webinar series focussing on other topics outside of the sphere of digital accessibility. It is AHEAD's intention to run a webinar series every autumn/winter going forward. Members Webinars scheduled/ completed for the Winter Webinar Series 2020 included:

1. **Assistive Technology and Support - October**
    This session explored Office 365 tools for inclusive teaching and learning – featuring Trevor Boland (AHEAD) and Holly Murray (Donegal ETB).

2. **Inclusive Online Assessments – November**
    This session explored Inclusive assessment in online settings through the lens of UDL - featuring Ann Heelan (AHEAD) and Karen Buckley (DCU).

3. **Mental Health and Covid-19 – December**
    This session explored the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of students and highlighted good practice in providing support – featuring Joe Donoghue (TU Dublin) and Declan O' Reilly (TCD).

More details including videos of completed webinars are available here.

Remote Working Resources for Employers
With the impact of Covid-19 changing recruitment onboarding practices, WAM devised a new resource page on the AHEAD website, detailing different elements relating to all aspects of remote working including, accessibility, video-calling platforms, interviewing, onboarding and mental health etc.

You can access the full resource page here.

WAM Programme - Statistics 2020

AHEAD launched a report on the number and type of paid internships provided under the WAM Initiative since it was launched in 2005. Included in the report is an analysis of applications submitted to the programme by students/graduates with disabilities and the nature of workplace Needs Assessments conducted and provided. The report also details findings from a survey conducted with previous WAM graduate participants on their career progression following completion of their WAM placement and what they benefited from participation. The full report is available at: https://www.ahead.ie/wam-stats-2020

80%

of WAM graduates secured employment as a direct result of their WAM placement

Theme C – Promoting UDL

To promote the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) by creating an understanding of UDL across all learning environments

The following section outlines key strategic activities undertaken relating to Theme C of our strategic plan.

# KEY STRATEGIC ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN IN 2019

Digital Badge for Universal Design in Teaching and Learning

In 2017, AHEAD and UCD Access & Lifelong Learning, as part of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning's open access digital badge initiative, teamed up to create the digital badge for Universal Design in Teaching & Learning. The Digital Badge is a 25 hour introductory course that covers an introduction to UDL (Universal Design for Learning) and supports staff to make their first UDL implementation. Staff in the further and higher education sectors, can undertake the course directly with AHEAD through its national roll outs of the badge, and can also participate in training to become course facilitators themselves to enable them to roll out the badge locally in their own institutions using the facilitators pack provided.

In 2020, AHEAD ran two roll outs of the Digital Badge for Universal Design in Teaching and Learning with our partners in UCD Access & Lifelong Learning. The first roll out took place in February, prior to the arrival of the pandemic and consisted of 35 participants, the maximum number that could be facilitated in terms of resourcing at that time. By the delivery of the Semester 2 (Oct-Dec) and with the move to online delivery, the number of participants facilitated totaled approx. 700.

In the intervening period between Semester 1 and 2 AHEAD developed a new partnership model of delivery of the UDL badge, primarily in response to the surge in interest in UDL approaches by educational staff as they grappled with the impact of the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent restrictions that brought about the shift to learning and working remotely.

This new model of delivery of the UDL Badge enabled AHEAD to hugely extend the reach of its UDL CPD across further and higher education.
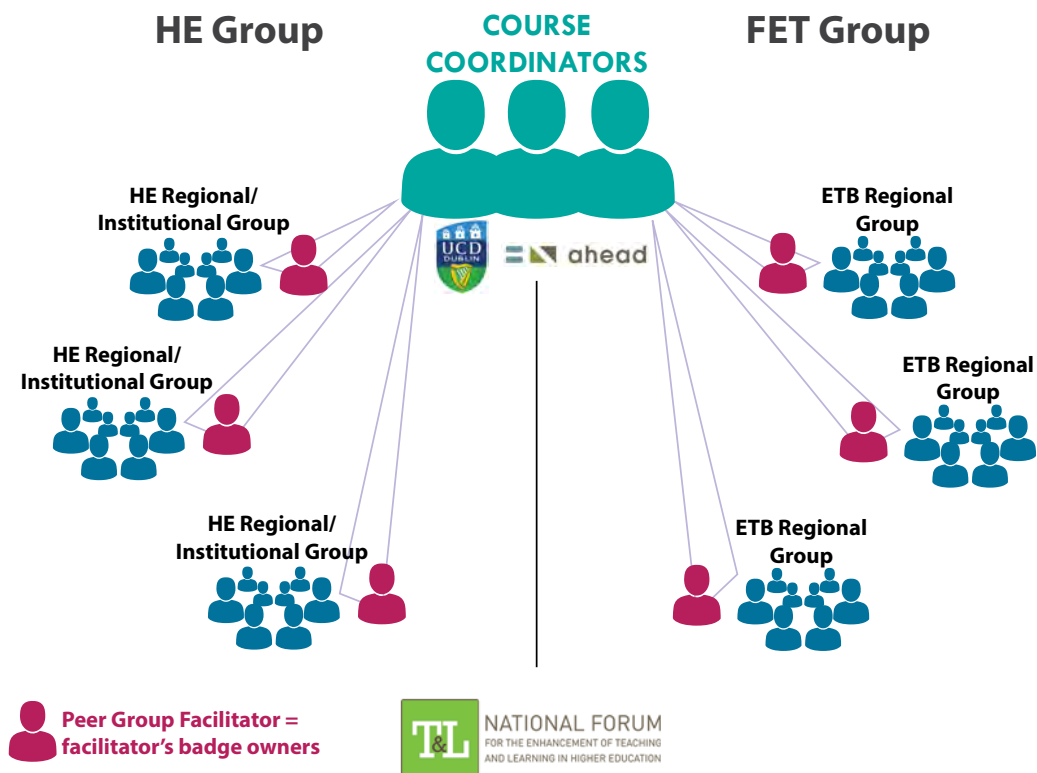
New Model of UDL Badge Delivery

The increased capacity was achieved by teaming up with 21 previously trained UDL badge facilitators to deliver the course to approximately 700 participants simultaneously in FET and Higher Education (HE) - the largest national roll out of UDL CPD ever undertaken in Ireland (and we believe, internationally). We also offered this group the opportunity to participate in the add-on facilitators' badge which equips future facilitators with the skills they need to roll out the course in their own institutions or partner with us in our national roll-outs.

In the new model, AHEAD and UCD manage the central course delivery and main course communications, while the Peer Group Facilitators manage local peer groups, ensuring they are moving through the course together and that the groups are functioning well.

COURSE COORDINATORS

LOCAL PEER GROUPS FACILITATOR

Liaising on Queries
Collaboratively Solving Non-Functioning Group Issues

Main Course Communications
Course Content Delivery
Course 'Drop In' Function

Answering Queries
Regular Checkins
Problem Solving
Identifying Non-Functioning Groups
Hosting 1 'Drop In' session
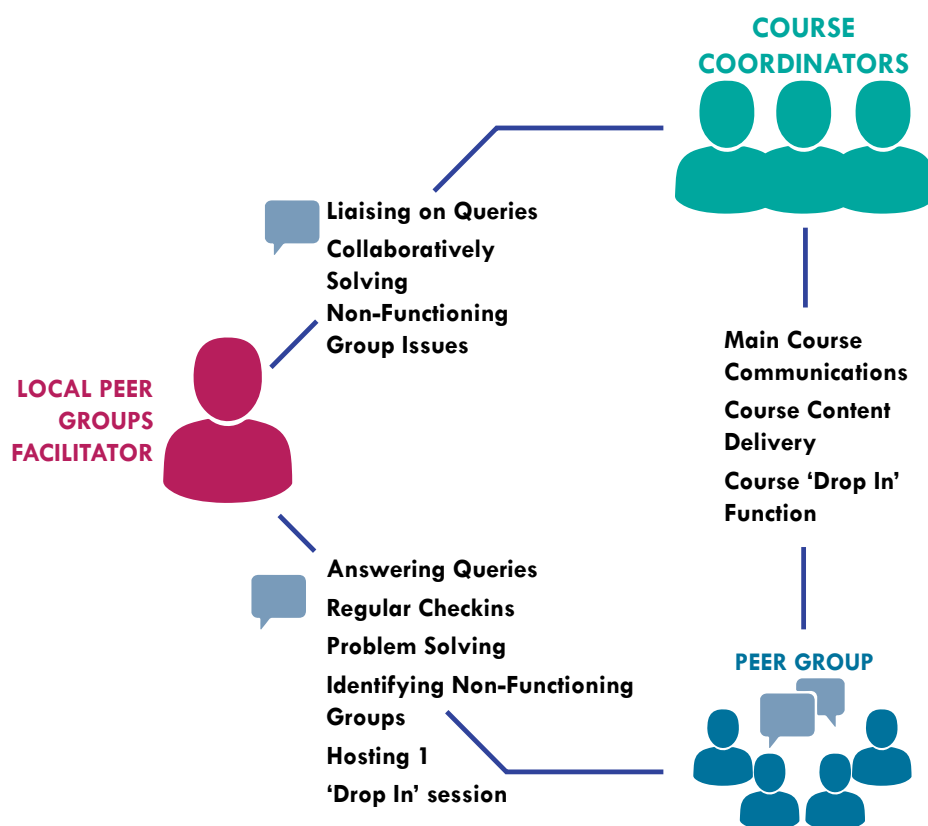
PEER GROUP

Image: Roles of UDL Badge Coordinators and Peer Group Facilitators

The 10-week, 25-hour course began on the 1st of October and participants involved undertook:

— 3 course information webinars
— 5 self-paced online multimedia modules
— 4 Peer Group Meetings
— 1 UDL Redesign Activity - real time UDL implementation

The 21 Peer Group Facilitators from Further and Higher Education that assisted with the rollout of the UDL course are based in ETBs/Institutions/FET colleges around the country including City of Dublin ETB, Cork ETB, Donegal ETB, Limerick ETB and Limerick and Clare ETB, Marino College FE, Waterford Wexford ETB, Carlow Institute of Further Education and Training, NLN, Griffith College, IT Sligo, GMIT, UCD and DCU.

Buy-in to the process from previously trained Peer Group Facilitators was secured by guaranteeing them 25 free places on the course, advertised internally to co staff members in return for their agreement to act as Peer Group Facilitators to staff in other institutions with no participating facilitator.

After 889 initial registrations of interest garnered over the summer, 691 participants entered week 1 of the course in Oct. After ten weeks of learning, interacting with peers and undertaking a UDL redesign, **547 staff members across further and higher education were awarded the UDL Badge and 169 participants were awarded the optional facilitators badge**, enabling them to partner with AHEAD to deliver future national roll outs. The HE/FET breakdown of badges awarded in the Oct – Dec roll out is as follows:

— The UDL Badge – 197 HE Professionals and 349 FET Practitioners
— The Facilitators Badge – 59 HE Professionals and 110 FET Practitioners

On the opening day of the course, interest was so high its hashtag #UDLbadge was trending in Ireland on twitter. A diverse group of staff roles from tertiary education participated including Lecturers, Tutors, Principals and Managers, Occupational Therapists, Career Advisors, Technology enhanced Learning staff, Youth Reach staff, Adult literacy tutors, Project Managers and Disability Support Staff.

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning are very excited by the development of this new model and in liaison with AHEAD, are independently evaluating its success, with the hope of applying it to the delivery of other courses, if results are positive. This evaluation will explore the success of the model from the participant and facilitator perspectives, but also the impact on engagement with UDL on the course participants.

Previously trained UDL badge facilitators from institutions such as UCC and NUI Galway also rolled out the UDL badge for their own staff independently of AHEAD's national roll out in 2020, resulting in a minimum of 86 further badges being issued.

This online course and the associated new model, which immensely widens its reach, is key to our strategy of promoting the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) by creating an understanding of UDL in all learning environments.

In 2021, AHEAD will move to a model of offering one larger roll out of each of its flagship training courses bookending the year, instead of offering two much smaller roll outs of each, with AHEAD Start running Jan - Mar 2021 and the UDL badge running Oct – Dec 2021.

[For more info on the digital badge, visit the webpage.](#)

The John Kelly Award for UDL in Further & Higher Education 2020

The John Kelly Award for Universal Design for Learning recognises the innovative practice of teaching staff in further and higher education engaging with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework to deliver a more inclusive learning experience for their students. **It is targeted at practitioners who have demonstrated their emergent commitment to UDL by undertaking the Digital Badge for Universal Design in Teaching & Learning** and making exciting changes to their practice as a result of their participation in the badge. The aim of the award is to garner inclusive/UDL practice existing in the higher educational setting throughout the country, acknowledge the commitment to develop inclusion in the learning environment and showcase this work to the wider educational base to encourage cross institutional policy change to support UDL measures.

This year, the John Kelly Award final was delivered online, to a broader audience than usual, of 265 attendees. Participants form a range of roles in higher education and FET were represented – academic staff, disability/access staff, project coordinators, occupational therapists, university vice presidents, ETB principals and vocational coaches.

The 3 finalists were spread across the further and higher education sectors. The three 3 educators shortlisted for the final were (link of videos of final below):

— [Catherine Deegan (Technological University Dublin)](#)
— [Laura Hegarty (Galway Mayo Institute of Technology)](#)
— [Jennifer Lynch (Marino College of Further Education)](#).

The winner of the John Kelly Award for Universal Design for Learning 2020 was Jennifer Lynch, selected live by a panel of expert judges at the closing assembly of the zoomed AHEAD Annual Conference. The judging panel comprised Dr Terry Maguire (Director of National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning), Mark Glynn (Head of Teaching Enhancement, DCU) and Michelle Mitchell (Student, NUIG).

UDL for FET – A Conceptual Framework

The Irish Further Education and Training (FET) sector provides community-based education and training opportunities in hundreds of different facilities using a variety of settings, programmes and approaches. SOLAS commissioned AHEAD to conduct research and develop guidance on inclusive learning environments using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a framework for the Irish FET Sector. The research, which commenced in 2018 and completed in 2019 proposed a conceptual framework for Irish FET.

The Conceptual Framework of UDL for the Irish FET Sector

The UDL conceptual framework that this publication proposes for the Irish FET sector has implementation of the CAST Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework (Meyer & Rose, 1998) at its heart. UDL seeks to ensure that the learning and training environment is inclusive of the greatest diversity of learners from the get-go. It does not, however, negate the need for add-on supports, or minimise quality, and is continuously evolving to reflect the needs of all learners. The Conceptual Framework of UDL for FET identifies 3 key stages:

STAGE 1 - Understand that both the philosophy and practice is one of inclusion

The Inclusive Education Pyramid reminds us that a UDL approach is for all learners - not just those who have a disability, and that learners require differing levels of support.

LEVEL 4
Personal Assistant

LEVEL 3
Individual accommodation

LEVEL 2
Students with similar needs

LEVEL 1
Universal Design for the majority of students
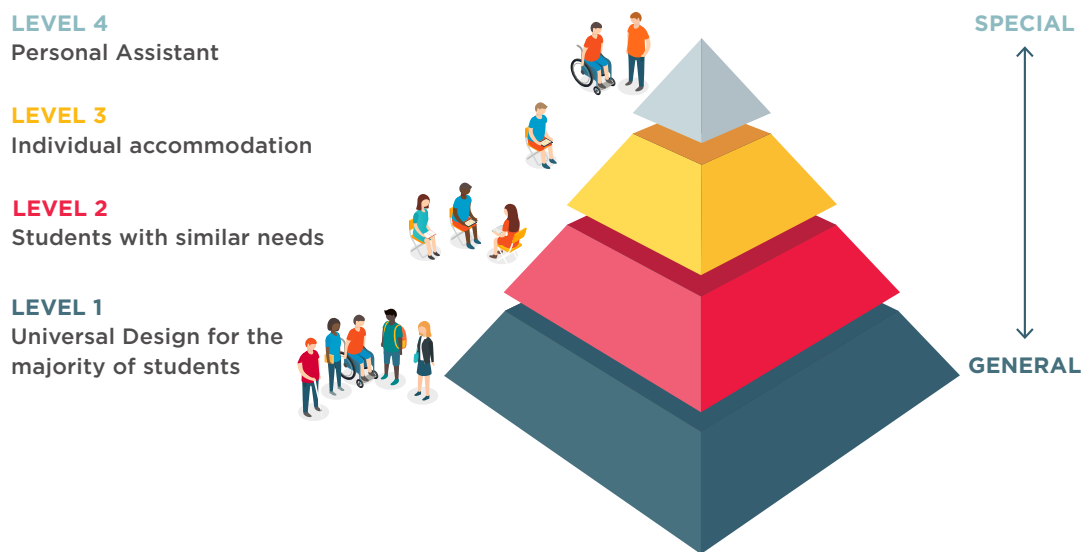
SPECIAL

GENERAL

Figure 1. Inclusive Education Pyramid (adapted from Basham, Israel, Graden, Poth, & Winston, 2010; Robinson & Hutchinson, 2014; UDLL/NTNU, 2016, p. 63).

From a UDL perspective, it is evident that most attention should be focused on the mainstream learning environment (Level 1 of the Inclusive Education Pyramid) as it is this space that seeks to be inclusive of most learners.

STAGE 2 - Appreciate the application of UDL

When designing or redesigning learning and using the CAST's model of UDL, this stage encourages practitioners to examine:

— The 'Why' of Learning – Provide Multiple Means of Engagement
— The 'What' of Learning – Provide Multiple Means of Representation
— The 'How' of Learning – Provide Multiple Means of Action and Expression

STAGE 3 - Identify 'who' needs to be involved

Within the FET sector in Ireland, the practitioner leads the learning process and is central to the experience of the learner. The key aim of this UDL conceptual framework is to recognise the multidisciplinary and collaborative environment in FET and the diversity of provision within it; where UDL will be every practitioner's approach. That is to make UDL intentional in the design and implementation of all practice and to strive to incorporate the principles of UDL into FET 'where inclusion is everyone's business'.

Four values are adopted as a foundation for continued development of high-quality, relevant, and inclusive courses that encompass a UDL approach. This is with the intention of ensuring engagement from all practitioners, a greater awareness of UDL, and a preparedness to explore inclusive methods whereby everyone contributes to a sustainable UDL conceptual framework for FET. The four values that are identified here are:

— Inclusion
— Intentionality
— Appreciation
— Acceptance

In essence, what the UDL framework sets out to achieve, is to support the inclusion of every learner in the Irish FET sector, as well as the inclusive engagement of all its practitioners.

Following final sign off from SOLAS, [this document was launched in March 2020](#) at the AHEAD conference 2020 by Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS. Linking up to the key stage of the framework relating to the 'who' of learning and the importance of collaboration in creating inclusive environments, the launch was coupled with a [keynote presentation by international expert of social learning Dr. Etienne Wenger Traynor](#).

UDL for FET Practitioners – Guidance on Implementing UDL in Irish FET

Having launched the conceptual framework document in March 2020, work is well advanced on the next phase of the project which is to produce guidance for practitioners on implementing UDL in FET. AHEAD teamed up with USA UDL expert, Dr Thomas Tobin, to co-author the guidance for AHEAD.

The development of both the conceptual framework document and the draft handbook was and is informed by an extensive consultation process which amongst more informal engagement included:

— Formation of and continued engagement with the National Advisory Committee for Universal Design for Learning Guidelines for FET (NAC UDL) and it's subcommittee. This committee is made up of key stakeholders in the FET sector and representatives from both disability groups and the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design.

— Conducting of eight FET centre site visits to garner ideas and feedback from centre managers. The aim was to ensure AHEAD had a full understanding of the diversity of programme types and settings in FET where the UDL guidance in the handbook would be practically applied.

— Presentation and discussion at a meeting with the Association of FET Practitioners.

— Presentation and discussion at a national FET Directors Meeting.

— Opportunities for ETBs to provide direct response and comment to drafts.

— Hosting of a national world café seminar with ETBs nationwide. Each ETB was invited to send appropriate representatives to feed into the discussion on what the sector wanted and needed from the handbook.

— Hosting a range of individual practitioner interviews to gather good inclusive/UDL practice existing in the sector and to better understand the needs of practitioners.

— Sector engagement at the online launch of the Conceptual Framework of Universal Design for Learning for the Further Education and Training Sector in Ireland.

— 3 meetings with the NAC UDL subcommittee and the incorporation of their extensive feedback into the proposed publications.

— Final 3 meetings and feedback round with the main NAC UDL committee.

The latest phase of the project saw AHEAD add an online resource hub and a suite of reflective tools to accompany the guidance, and commission 20 images for inclusion in the document such as the example below.

Case study sample image from UDL for FET Practitioners Guidance

The final draft was completed and committee approved and has now progressed to the design phase for publication in 2021.

AHEAD Summer School on UDL for Further Education and Training (FET)

The UDL for FET Summer School was a two-week event organised to support the UDL for FET project which took place in July 2020. AHEAD developed and delivered this event with support from USA UDL expert Dr Tom Tobin, co-author of UDL for FET Practitioners. The event was funded by SOLAS and ETBI as part of the UDL for FET project.

644 FET Practitioners registered for the event, the prime focus of which was to give FET Practitioners a general introduction to the three principles of the CAST's model of Universal Design for Learning with guest speakers from the FET sector giving examples of how they applied one or more of the UDL principles in their teaching practice.

The importance of learning networks (communities of practice) in building a sustainable culture of inclusion was also covered as part of The FET Summer School and practitioners were left with tips and advice on how to implement UDL in their own teaching approaches.

The four live sessions featured in the Summer School were made available for attendees to follow along synchronously and asynchronously as they were recorded and circulated over the two-week period. These live interactive sessions were supplemented by a suite of resources and 'homework' exercises.

At the end of each live session AHEAD staff members spotlighted key aspects of its work highlighting its relevance to FET practitioners.

The UDL for FET Summer School proved a useful platform to generate interest in signing up for the FET Group UDL Badge national roll-out that took place later in the year.

View the FET Summer School Webpage and Videos>>

Digital Accessibility Webinar Series

In 2019, AHEAD begun a new online venture by hosting its' first Webinar Series. Webinars offer AHEAD a new and flexible way to engage and collaborate, share knowledge and best practice with the further and higher education sectors.

With the new EU Web Accessibility Directive coming down the track, this AHEAD webinar series, that spanned the academic year 2019/20, examined different areas of digital accessibility. In particular, the needs of college staff working in different roles across campus and the advice and information required to improve the accessibility of the digital environment students learn in – including everything from books, to the main web infrastructure to the documents shared everyday by teaching staff.

[You can view videos from the whole series here](). No 1 in this series was delivered late 2019.

#2 - Modern Digital Reading – Flexible and Accessible

Jan/20 - 54 registered participants. This webinar examined the evolution of digital publishing and its potential to revolutionise the reading experience for our learners. This follow-on webinar asked the question – what does modern digital reading actually look like in practice and how does it support a learner's ability to read, navigate and comprehend their course materials?

Richard Orme (Chief Executive Officer, DAISY Consortium) provided an in-depth demonstration of the possibilities offered to learners when well-designed digital books meet accessible platforms and technologies.

James Northridge (UrAbility) looked back on his experience of being a student with dyslexia at university and gave insight into how digital reading was an enabling game changer for him.

#3 – Web Accessibility Statements - using a legal requirement as a lever for cultural change

Feb/20 – 76 registered participants. The EU Web Accessibility Directive (currently awaiting transposition into Irish Law) has two key tenets: (i) online content will be required to meet accessibility standards and (ii) the extent to which one succeeds or fails will need to be communicated in a transparent way via an Accessibility Statement. This applies to all publicly funded bodies and to any of their digital systems accessed through a browser. It includes websites, VLEs, library systems, Intranets, Apps etc.

Alistair McNaught (Alistair McNaught, Accessibility Consultant) and Abi James (AbilityNet) have significant experience supporting UK institutions in:

– Understanding how to move towards technical compliance

– Using the legislation as an opportunity for institution-wide culture change

Alistair and Abi introduced the scope of the directive and explored what a good Accessibility Statement looks like. They demonstrated how a good Accessibility Statement can be used strategically as a planning and prioritising tool to change institutional practice around digital accessibility.

#4 – Special Covid Response Webinar - Moving Inclusively to Online Assessment and Teaching

April/20 – 411 registered participants. This webinar explored the challenges for students and educators as they tried to consider equity and accessibility in their move to online assessment and teaching and discussed solutions to some common issues raised.

It featured a range of contributor voices including student representation, the view from the disability office, teaching and learning expertise and a contribution from an accessibility expert. TCD SU Disability Officer shared the results of a Student Survey they conducted.

The aim was to provide some answers to the following questions:

— What are the real-world challenges facing students, including students with disabilities, in participating in online learning and undertaking assessments?

— What are the major concerns for disability and access officers in ensuring access and equity for students with disabilities?

— How can we provide pedagogical solutions to some of the challenges faced by the sector in moving online and ensure both flexibility and integrity?

— What practical tips can educators take on board to ensure their assessment and teaching is accessible and equitable?

The roles of these attendees ranged from Assistant Principals from ETBs to Data Analysts, ICT Instructors, PD Coordinators, Online Learning Developers as well as AT Officers, Educators, Disability and Access Officers and students themselves. The wide representation conveyed the widespread concerns of the move to teaching online for all types of stakeholders in teaching and learning environments. To date the webinar has 410 additional views in YouTube.

#5 – Creating Accessible Word Documents Webinar

May/20 – 126 registered participants. The first Webinar of this series was titled 'Creating Accessible Word Documents'. The target group was teaching and general support staff working in tertiary education and employment. The focus was on making easy changes to Word documents to make them accessible to all people with disabilities thereby embedding inclusive mainstream practice in education and employment.

The benefits of creating accessible word documents are that users can convert or manipulate the information displayed into the most accessible format for their needs. For example, to navigate and read a document using voice output software or convert text into an MP3 file. These accessibility practices can support people with a range of disabilities and literacy needs, including students for whom English is their second language.

Other noteworthy observations were the high level of engagement throughout the webinar regarding this topic. Two polls revealed that most attendees had little or no knowledge about document accessibility and the majority expressed a particular interest in accessibility for PowerPoint- this feedback informed the topic of the next webinar.

#6 - Creating and Delivering Accessible PowerPoint Presentations

June/20 – 459 registered participants. This webinar focused on raising awareness and imparting accessibility skills to attendees about the creation and delivery of PowerPoint presentations. This session, like the previous one, targeted academic and non-academic staff in tertiary education as well as staff in workplaces that utilise PowerPoint.
As well as addressing the technical practices required to make PowerPoint accessible, the webinar highlighted other accessibility issues with regard to presentation delivery e.g. not overloading slides, offering different and frequent ways to promote students engagement, offering recording of the session for re-watch, providing slides in advance, ensuring each section of one's presentation is not too long and is broken up where possible. All these considerations combined make for a presentation experience more accessible to students.

There was fantastic interaction at this webinar with a variety of professionals from higher education and FET - disability support staff, academic staff, researchers, librarians, nurses and students attended.

#7 - Converting PowerPoint into Captioned Video and Uploading to YouTube

June/20 – 491 registered participants. This online session, facilitated via Zoom, was a live demonstration of the steps needed to prepare a PowerPoint presentation, convert it into video format and with accessibility in mind how to upload it to YouTube with the possibility of creating a transcript and captions to accompany the video.

View videos of every session in the Digital Accessibility Webinar Series here.

EU Projects

Erasmus+ - Enhancing a Thought-Out Policy and Framework on Inclusive Mobility across Europe

AHEAD is a partner to EPFIME (Establishing a thought-out Policy Framework for Inclusive Mobility across Europe) an Erasmus+ co-funded project. The aim of the project is to promote the participation of students with disabilities in mobility programmes. A key activity undertaken by AHEAD in 2019 was to conduct a literature review of already existing research on students with disabilities and study abroad. Additionally, AHEAD supported the dissemination of three large scale surveys to three key stakeholders in the sector including:

— A survey targeting students with disabilities and looking at barriers to study abroad and past experiences of students on study abroad

— A survey of institutions looking at their current practices on hosting study-abroad students with disabilities

— A survey of government ministries looking at study abroad from a policy perspective

In November 2020, the EPIFME project released its first major outputs – the Research Report detailing the key findings from the aforementioned surveys and the Policy booklet highlighting good practices and recommendations arising from the research.

The outcomes have informed the development of a framework for Inclusive Mobility for ministries, national agencies and institutions.

AHEAD are tasked with writing guidelines on the implementation of this framework to encourage higher education institutions to implement a sustainable inclusive mobility strategy.

As part of this process, AHEAD carried out case study interviews with disability and international office staff across the summer 2020 to gather examples of best practice in relation to mobility for students with disabilities to be included in the guidelines. Participating institutions included University College Dublin, KU Leuven and the University of Heidelberg.

The next phase of the project will see the completion and publication of the framework for inclusive mobility, a self-assessment tool for institutions to measure their progress against the framework, guidelines for institutions on how to implement the framework and a student-facing platform for interested students to explore the accessibility services and local area information for institutions across Europe.

The completed guidelines will be launched alongside the remaining other key outputs in 2021.

Visit the project website here.

Erasmus KA2 – Inclusive Mobility with Disabilities

International Mobility with Disabilities is a 2-year project funded by the Erasmus+ Youth and Sports Agency. AHEAD is one of 6 project partners. ESN France Co-ordinates the project, and other partners include SVB from Germany, Udruga Zamisli from Croatia, Droit Au Savoir from France and Jugend Infos from Austria. The main aim of the project is to create an online accessible platform providing information for youth with disabilities about mobility opportunities, and youth workers with tools to support young people with disabilities on international mobility opportunities.

In February 2020, AHEAD attended a week-long training opportunity in Zagreb as part of the project. The training was an opportunity to bring together project partners, youth with disabilities and youth workers to share experiences and discuss project outcomes and further plans. AHEAD attended this training with a nominated student and facilitated one of the sessions. You can find a report from this training here.

AHEAD are now tasked with contributing to the development of a toolkit for youth workers which will be released in 2021. This output of the project will present a list of resources for youth workers who work with young people with disabilities on international mobility programmes. AHEAD are producing 4 pieces of guidance for the toolkit: a guide to reasonable accommodations, a guide to cultural attitudes of disability, and a list of accessible icebreakers which youth workers can use and a series of templates for youth workers to complete to support them build their inclusion agenda.

CAPACITY BUILDING ACROSS EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT

Engagement with Stakeholders

A strong ethos of collaboration and constructive engagement with stakeholders underpins the work of AHEAD and that is driven by building effective relationships with key external stakeholders. The shift to remote working actually enabled AHEAD to engage in stakeholder meetings more than ever before.

In 2020, AHEAD staff participated in 351 meetings with external stakeholders, involving engagement with an estimated 1917 stakeholder representatives.

In total AHEAD staff delivered

26

events in 2020
at which a total of

4,668

people participated

Building Inclusion - AHEAD key events - summary

In total AHEAD staff delivered 26 events in 2020 at which a total of 4,668 people participated. These events were designed to assist AHEAD meet its strategic aims and objectives with regard to the building of inclusive learning environments in education and employment. The move to online delivery enabled AHEAD to reach a far wider audience than in 2019 (up from 1,300). Examples of key events, as highlighted in this report, include the AHEAD Annual International Conference (11 online sessions delivered over 10 weeks), the Better Options college fair for students with disabilities, the Building the Future careers fair for students and graduates with disabilities (10 online sessions delivered over 1 week) and the WAM Programme's employer WAMinars.

Tailored Training

50 tailored training sessions were delivered to approximately 1,640 participants across the FET, higher education and public/ private employment sectors. Key themes of the training undertaken include the implementation of the Universal Design for Learning framework, excellence in supporting students with disabilities, supporting students and graduates with the transition to employment and inclusive recruitment and retention.

Our tailored training activities can be summarised as follows:

— 12 tailored training activities were organised and delivered to 563 students, student bodies and student union officers e.g. interview skills for graduates contemplating their future career paths.

— 18 tailored training sessions were delivered to 712 staff in further and higher education.

— 20 tailored training sessions were delivered to 365 employer representatives on topics relating to the inclusion of graduates with disabilities in employment.

Please note these figures only include tailored training sessions delivered by AHEAD in 2020. They do not include participation in our regular training programmes such as AHEAD Start, the Digital Badge for Universal Design in Teaching and Learning and the training that is an integral part of participation in the AHEAD WAM Initiative.

Contributions to External Events

Collaboration and shared learning is central to all of AHEAD's undertakings. AHEAD is committed to networking with and sharing the experiences of learners/students/graduates with disabilities and staff across education and employment.

A sample of the 26 external events that AHEAD staff directly contributed to via presentations or as exhibitors are:

— Plenary Presentation at the QQI conference sharing the learning from the AHEAD UDL Badge programme

— Keynote presentation at the ATEND Australian disability coordinators network conference sharing the story of the AHEAD UDL for FET project

— Panel contribution at the Irish Universities Association Inclusive University event

— Presentation at the UK's National Association of Disability Practitioners Conference on the changing role of the disability officer on a UDL infused campus

— Panel contribution at the International Conference on 'Neurodiversity: A Paradigm Shift In Higher Education & Employment'

— Presentation at the Salesforce 'Abilityforce' Virtual Birthday Celebrations

— Exhibited at the Intreo Jobs Fair to highlight the opportunities for graduates with disabilities through the AHEAD WAM Work Placement Initiative

— Exhibited at the gradIreland virtual careers fair

Additionally, AHEAD staff participated actively in 46 external events such as:

— The National Access Plan Forum

— CAST International UDL Symposium – UDL Rising

— National Disability Authority's Universal Design Grand Challenge

— Future Forward: Investing in Education in a Post-Covid-19 World

— Making accessibility accessible: the secret to engaging your workforce- Ability Net event

— Mental Health Reform: The Employment Context: Mental Health Initiatives in Ireland

— National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals FET Symposium

— Cork ETB Inclusion Network - Webinar series

ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

AHEAD's website and social media channels remain a key tool in supporting AHEAD to deliver information to and share its resources with key stakeholders in raising awareness of our work.

The website features information for students on accessing college and getting the most from their college experience, for graduates on looking for work, for staff in education on best practice in supporting students and for employers on inclusive recruitment.

Key stats relating to our online presence and our stakeholder engagement with it include:

— **276,217 page views** on our website in 2020 – up 19% from 2019

— **76,942 views** on our YouTube channel in 2020 – up 78% from 2019

— **132 new videos created** for our website and eCourses. Highlights include:

   » [Captioned recordings of our WAMinar series on inclusive employment practices](#)

   » [3 John Kelly Award finalists showcase their UDL work](#)

   » [Conference 2020 Presentation Videos](#)

   » [Captioned recordings of our Digital Accessibility Webinar Series](#)

» Animated UDL Badge videos on [How the Course Works](#) and [How the Peer Group system works](#)

— **5,329 total followers** on our Twitter Account – 1,005 new followers added in 2020 with 17,021 twitter profile views

— **6,835 total likes** on our Facebook page – 141 new likes added in 2020

Organisational Matters

Dara Ryder (left) was appointed the new CEO with effect from January 2020.

The AGM of AHEAD was held online on December 8th 2020

The 2020 Board of Directors were:

— Professor Michael Shevlin (Trinity College Dublin), Chairperson

— Ms Tina Lowe (University College Dublin), Secretary

— Mr Andrew Blair (HSBC), Treasurer

— Ms Marie Lyons (Union of Students in Ireland)

— Ms Courtney McGrath (Student, Trinity College Dublin)

— Ms Bernie O'Connor (Electricity Supply Board)

— Ms Barbara Nolan (European Commission)

— Mr Rory O'Sullivan (Killester College of Further Education)

— Mr Blake Hodkinson (City of Dublin ETB)

— Dr Larry McNutt (Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown)

— Ms Valerie Moore (Institute of Technology, Tralee)

— Ms Laura Coleman (Cork Institute of Technology)

Board of Directors Appointments and Retirees during the year

— Ms Megan Reilly Union of Students in Ireland (USI) retired and was replaced by Ms Marie Lyons of USI in July 2020.

— Ms Barbara Nolan was appointed in February 2020.

— Mr Blake Hodkinson was appointed in February 2020.

— Ms Courtney McGrath was appointed in February 2020.

AHEAD Membership

AHEAD recognises the importance of support from, and collaboration with, its' member organisations, which are predominantly made up of higher education institutions, education and training boards (ETBs) and private colleges. The funding that membership fees generate and the positive engagement that results from AHEAD's relationship with its' members is vital to AHEAD in working on its mission to create inclusive environments in education and employment.

The income from membership fees supplements and supports the grants provided to AHEAD by its funders in education and employment and enables AHEAD achieve more than would otherwise be possible.

Overview of Energy Usage in 2020

Energy Consumption

— **Grid Electricity:**   1,582 kWh TFC

— **Fossil:**   3,056 kWh TFC

— **Renewable:**   0 kWh TFC

Energy Savings

— **EnPI:**   29.4% better than 2019

— **EnPI:**   54.9% better than baseline

— **Consumption (TPER):**   29.4% less than 2019

— **Consumption (TPER):**   54.9% less than baseline

Our Team

AHEAD wishes to recognise the huge contribution of its team of staff in delivering on its strategic goals and in undertaking a huge body of work throughout the most difficult of years. Their commitment to quality outcomes for students and graduates with disabilities underpins all of our activities.

Above, the AHEAD Team meeting in a socially distant fashion for the only time since the pandemic began during August 2020.

AHEAD

Financial Statement

AHEAD
Financial Statement

INCOME	2019€	2020 €
Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection -GetAHEAD	82,200	80,000
Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection -WAM Project	200,000	245,166
Higher Education Authority	275,000	228,000
Erasmus ESN	11,939	11,939
Erasmus SIHO	15,396	9,237
SOLAS	74,379	136,000
AHEAD Training/Research	4,690	225
AHEAD Digital Badge	12,436	-
AHEAD Start	20,200	13,572
Membership	36,580	39,400
AHEAD conference	27,046	4,820
Publications	6,530	10,593
TOTAL INCOME	**766,396**	**778,952**

EXPENDITURE	2019 €	2020 €
Wages and salaries	516,040	516,699
Training Costs	2,428	3,177
Conferences and meetings	92,724	39,759
Printing and stationery	31,798	16,249
Travel and subsistence	34,693	6,331
Office expenses	24,442	11,230
Professional fees	11,478	67,232
Web development	18,319	28,727
Other expenses	22,129	15,718
Depreciation	3,508	7,811
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	**757,559**	**712,933**

Thank you

ahead

creating inclusive environments in education
and employment for people with disabilities

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