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STRATEGIC PLAN

2019 - 2023

 **ahead**

creating inclusive environments in education
and employment for people with disabilities

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Foreword from the Board

The Board of AHEAD meet on a regular basis to discuss and oversee the operational plans of AHEAD and monitor progress against strategic goals. It is less than four years since the Board undertook an in-depth look at the strategic position of AHEAD and where it was at in terms of the stated aims and objectives. Out of that process a Strategic Plan was devised to see us through the period 2015-2018 and beyond. While having a plan to work off generated a fresh energy to focus the minds, it became clear as the plan unfolded and was translated from deeds and words into actions that the actual remit of AHEAD was broader than that being reflected in its expressed vision and mission statements.

The Board acknowledges that AHEAD's reputation is well established at this stage, its name well known and held in high regard by those professionals, networks and agencies that it collaborates with on an on-going basis. However, branching out beyond the higher education sector to develop new networks, new partnerships and new relationships, all necessary to the implementation of the Strategic Plan, the tagline to the AHEAD logo was proving restrictive to development plans. The current logo design with its inbuilt subtitle the 'Association for Higher Education, Access and Disability' no longer fully reflects the full picture of what AHEAD is actually doing at the grass roots. Newcomers to AHEAD and the collaborative UDL process struggle to connect the AHEAD tagline with its mission to promote the development of inclusive learning environments in education and employment for all learners.

Therefore, the Board decided to address this contradiction in the strategic process. It proved a very worthwhile exercise generating an overall agreement to retain the name AHEAD, given that over the last thirty years the organisation is widely known as AHEAD throughout the higher education sector. However, it was agreed to retain the AHEAD logo but drop the tagline from 'Association for Higher Education Access & Disability' and replace it with '**creating inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities**' as one that more accurately reflects the work of AHEAD at the grass roots.

The following Strategic Plan is the outcome of the consultation process. The plan was originally built to cover the period from 2019-2022, but with the arrival of Covid-19 and the uncertain environment it created, the board decided to extend the period to run from 2019-2023. The Board of AHEAD extends its thanks and appreciation to all who participated in the planning process.

Creating inclusive
environments in education
and employment for people
with disabilities

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VISION STATEMENT

Shaping an
inclusive future
where students
and learners
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.

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

Theme A To influence national policy to impact positively on the inclusion of students and learners 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.

Note: the terms 'students' and 'learners' are used interchangeably throughout this document.

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

AHEAD will seek to influence national policy

1. By taking the lead at local, national and international levels
2. By promoting and undertaking research that supports its strategic aims
3. By hosting national and international events
4. By advocating the rights of students, learners and graduates with disabilities

Theme A

1. TAKING A LEAD AT LOCAL, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

- Highlight access to education and employment issues for students, learners and graduates with disabilities.
- Advocate for the creation of an inclusive assessment system in education and employment through the promotion of the concept of UDL.

2. RESEARCH

- Promote research that is necessary to the creation of developing inclusive learning environments.
- Undertake research that enhances AHEAD's resources to advance inclusion in access to education and employment for ALL learners with disabilities.
- Showcase best practice at national and international levels from across the education and employment sectors.

3. NATIONAL & INTERNATIONAL EVENTS

- Host national and international conferences and sponsored events on key relevant issues.
- Utilise these platforms to develop and engage with key partners and agencies to ensure the incorporation of the principles of UDL in education and employment.

4. ADVOCATE FOR THE RIGHT TO BE INCLUDED IN ALL ASPECTS OF EDUCATION

- Support the role of the HEA to remove the barriers to progression from further education and training into higher education.
- Support the role of SOLAS in the realisation of its remit under the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy.
- Engage in useful dialogue with other government agencies to champion the rights of learners with disabilities.
- Raise awareness of the needs of learners with disabilities on outgoing mobility programmes, such as Erasmus plus programmes, through the provision of training seminars to upskill and build capacity of relevant staff.

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.

AHEAD sets out to **strengthen** its existing partnerships

1. By maximising its impact through working with its Membership Forum
2. By working with and supporting students and graduates with disabilities currently making the transition from third-level education to employment - Student Connect
3. By working with and supporting employers to create a more inclusive workplace - Graduate Connect

Theme B

1. MEMBERSHIP – A FORUM FOR MUTUAL LEARNING & KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

- Consult and collaborate with its members to undertake collaborative research and disseminate findings.
- Promote an understanding of the requirements of operational staff and students alike to foster inclusion in the further and higher education system.

2. STUDENT CONNECT – A FORUM FOR STUDENTS/ GRADUATES WITH DISABILITIES

- Target students and graduates with disabilities through the **'GetAHEAD'** initiative.
- Improve employment opportunities for students of ALL disabilities by providing information workshops and training on skills needed for the workplace.
- Provide a safe space in which students and graduates can openly chat about their disability-related issues including online media engagement.
- Provide a direct face-to-face access link to employers where students and graduates with disabilities can explore the world of work.

3. GRADUATE CONNECT – CREATING A MORE INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE

- Act as a conduit of learning between further and higher education and the world of work in relation to the transitioning of graduates with disabilities through the **‘Willing Able Mentoring’ (WAM)** work placement initiative.
- Create direct engagement platforms which complement the GetAHEAD initiative and which promote direct engagement between employers and graduates with disabilities.
- Build employer networks that examine and generate practical work-orientated solutions to operational issues, with a focus on ‘inclusive work practices’.
- Develop and deliver the WAM Programme that engages with and supports on-the-ground staff from companies participating in the WAM initiative.

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

AHEAD aims to embed UDL in **all** learning environments

1. By establishing AHEAD as a resource for UDL
2. By proactively communicating AHEAD as a resource for UDL with expertise across further and higher education
3. By promoting the understanding of the principles of UDL, by enhancing and sharing knowledge of UDL, by showcasing best practice and mutual learning across further and higher education

Theme C

1. ESTABLISH AHEAD AS A RESOURCE FOR UDL

- Develop AHEAD’s capacity to build go-to resources on the principles of UDL in education and employment, and share this knowledge with its partners and stakeholders.
- Build expertise in and knowledge of UDL through the development of, and engagement with, national and international partnerships.

2. DEVELOP KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND MUTUAL LEARNING

- Create forums to exchange knowledge and learning with occupational and operational staff and with national and international networks.
- Collaborate with key players and policy makers in further and higher education sectors to advocate for the adoption of a policy of UDL.
- Consolidate the collective learning and outcomes from AHEAD’s strategic alliances and partners and proactively publicise and share its knowledge, resources and expertise with its members, network of partners and other professionals working in the field of access to education and employment for students and learners with disabilities.

3. PROMOTE UDL THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE MULTIMEDIA PRESENCE

- Build awareness and know-how on ‘inclusivity’ in education and employment through the delivery of practical and tailor-made training, with an emphasis on developing online learning and engagement.
- Provide appropriate high quality material through its online journals, web and social media to wider audiences.
- Share our knowledge and expertise to build staff capacity in the Further Education and Training sector to cater for students and learners with disabilities.
- Support Educational and Training Boards (ETBs) to build capacity to create inclusive learning environments for all their learners.
- Increase engagement with a wider public through the development of innovative products and tools across its online multi-media channels.

AHEAD

Context

This AHEAD Strategic Plan sets out to identify the focus of the work of AHEAD for the coming period 2019-2023. Core to fulfilling its Vision statement is the building of a shared vision around the disability agenda with key partnerships and external agencies. The symbiotic relationship between AHEAD and the Higher Education Authority (HEA), has been instrumental to its development and success. Increasing support from SOLAS is empowering AHEAD to have a greater impact in the area of further education and training. Equally, the support of the Department of Social Protection has enabled AHEAD to highlight the gap between higher education and employment for graduates with disabilities and to work with employers on bridging that gap. As we plan for future engagement across the education and employment spectrums, we do so with their backing as expressed within the consultation process of strategic planning.

The Higher Education Authority – Championing the Rights of Students with Disabilities

AHEAD is an independent non-profit organisation working to promote full access to, and participation in, further and higher education for students with disabilities and to enhance their employment prospects on graduation. One of the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) core strategic objectives is the achievement of greater equality of access to higher education and the HEA and AHEAD have worked in partnership since the early 1990s in pursuing this objective for people with disabilities. AHEAD complements, supports and advises the HEA and the higher education sector in developing and implementing policies and practices to advance equity of access and participation in higher education by people with disabilities.

Recent initiatives that have been supported by AHEAD include the development and implementation of three national access plans by the HEA and the higher education sector. AHEAD has also advised work by institutions on the development of admission routes to higher education, in particular the **Disability Access Route to Higher Education (DARE)**. The organisation has co-ordinated the publication of good practice guidelines for providers of supports and services for students with disabilities as well as the development of a Charter for Inclusive Teaching and Learning and the promotion of national and international best practice for Universal Design.

During 2018 the HEA supported AHEAD with the development of an online resource for disability officers in higher education institutions and also supported a joint AHEAD/USI national conference of students living with disability.

In December 2018 the Minister of State for Higher Education launched the Progress Review of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-19. Among its findings the Review noted increases in participation rates across a number of target groups, particularly for students with disabilities. However, clearly there is still a lot more that can be done to improve access to higher education for students with disabilities. With the National Access Plan extended to 2021 and a new plan expected in 2022, the HEA looks forward to continuing its valuable partnership and collaboration with AHEAD in order to achieve this goal.

The Department of Social Protection - Supporting Employment Progression for Graduates with Disabilities

The mission of the Department of Social Protection is **‘To promote active participation and inclusion in society through the provision of income supports, employment services and other services’**. To this end, the Department focuses on maximising employability by providing among other support, targeted activation and training referral and employment services. The Department strategies in this regard are reflected in the supports that it provides to AHEAD through two interacting programmes: Willing Able Mentoring and Get AHEAD. Both of these programmes focus on and provide supports to students and graduates with disabilities.

Thanks to deliberate Government policy of mainstream education and support, students with disabilities now have the expectation of further and higher education and careers. However, it is acknowledged that young adults with disabilities have less straightforward access to employment and have a greater risk of long term unemployment. The activities that these programmes provide, such as job fairs and supports for graduates with a disability seeking employment, work placements for graduates with disabilities and employer engagement, provide a tailored approach to assisting graduates with a disability transition into employment. The programmes also complement the work of the Department of Social Protection’s new integrated employment and supports service INTREO, which is currently being rolled out across the country.

AHEAD

Challenges Ahead

There are a number of external factors, the outcomes of which are as yet unknown, but that may impact on the implementation of this plan. The key issues for AHEAD in the coming years are:

- To plan over the longer term given that the nature of its funding is on an annual basis. Consequently, all AHEAD activities are contingent on its ability to secure matching funds.
- To build on its collaboration with the HEA to influence the development of national policy on the progression of students with disabilities in higher education.
- To support Educational Training Boards (ETBs) in achieving their active inclusion goals.
- To move the current model of ‘add-on’ as a system of supporting students and learners with disabilities in the education system to a more mainstreaming UDL model so that all students can have a good quality educational experience.
- To develop further its role as a consensus builder with key groups and agencies in the education and employment sectors. Given its limited resources AHEAD cannot, on its own, bring about certain changes.
- To adopt a more structured approach to meet the demands for training and information from its membership base and wider community. This will involve the development of:
 - Mechanisms such as ‘community of learners’ and ‘train the trainers’ programs.
 - Online training.
 - Design of a calendar of events that would limit the number of training events delivered in a given year and host them in designated geographical locations.

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