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Róisín Doherty, Ann Heelan, & Thomas J. Tobin The AHEAD UDL for FET Project

ATEND Pathways 15 Conference
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We have two big themes for our conversation today: The first is “inclusion as a community.” The aim of the UDL for FET project was to create a sense of belonging and community for all learners and FET practitioners across programmes, subject areas, and geographic regions.

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The other primary idea for the UDL for FET project was to make accessibility just part of what everyone does in the FET sector, while minimizing the need for individual accommodations, especially the “cookie cutter” ones that became “baked in” to disability-support officers’ routines over time. “Oh, you have ADHD, so your accommodation must be...”

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Not all FET learners fit into the traditional teaching & learning model. Some have learning difficulties, language problems, different abilities, come from different cultures and backgrounds. Educators all want to support them to do their best. UDL gives learners more ways to understand content, more choice in how to demonstrate what they know and more tools to support their learning.

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Video Clip: “20201204 ATEND Pathways - AHEAD - Active Inclusion Network UDL Overview” [1:40]
<https://youtu.be/goZPh0gG2zA>

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Let’s pause for reflection. What is the most common support action that you take for learners today?

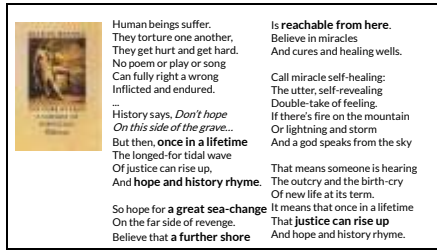
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SOLAS is the authority responsible for the integration, coordination, funding, and monitoring of Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. With over 200,000 FET learners and a budget of €930.5 M, SOLAS co-ordinates, influences, and promotes

- Apprenticeships
- Post School Vocational Courses
- Community Education
- Adult Literacy and Numeracy Education
- Online Courses
- Skills Development Courses for Industry and Employees
- Targeted Course Provision for Priority Learners
 - Persons with a disability
 - Early school leavers

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Before we go into why SOLAS funded AHEAD to develop the UDL for FET project, let us first take some time to reflect. They say that poetry is a snapshot of consciousness. Some weeks ago, when I heard this poem, it reflected my inner thoughts about this UDL project.

For me, UDL is the “once in a lifetime” opportunity to make “hope and history rhyme.” The “hope” that we can move from identifying problems [the longed-for tidal wave of justice] with learners to removing barriers to move to a place where “hope and history rhyme.” Can you make history where you are? The poem says: “So hope for a great sea-change.” What is the “sea change” you hope for in your everyday work?

Do you believe that “A further shore / is reachable from here”? What does this look like for you? For me, a “further shore reachable from here” is where we move to removing barriers. UDL helped us achieve that. This poem helps me to overcome the blockages that one can meet on an inclusion journey. I know now I am not alone, that there is “a further shore . . . reachable from here.”

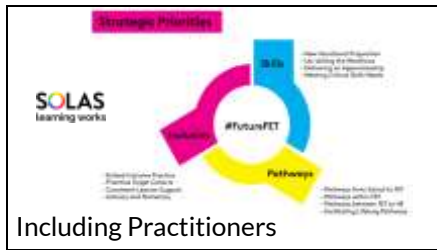
“If there’s fire on the mountain / or lightning and storm.” What would these look like in your everyday work? Do you want to see “a great sea-change?” If so, then reach out, start the change. It is in your hands. Then “justice can rise up / and hope and history rhyme.”

For a long time, I searched for an approach that could move FET in Ireland to a better place. A “Once in [my] lifetime” opportunity landed at my desk. The “sea-change” at SOLAS was caused by multiple separate innovations.

- As Director, I had just taken over an “inclusion” role and was looking for a new approach, having worked in the sector for 20 years.
- AHEAD started conversations with SOLAS. We talked about a holistic approach to inclusion as opposed to identifying problems. Ann talked about UDL, and I felt that “a further shore” was “reachable from here.”
- A number of Education Training Boards, funded by but independent of SOLAS, started inclusion pilots—just one class, just one programme, just one college, just one ETB. And then “hope and history rhymed.”

So, change for Irish FET came from not one single, massive change, but by sharing, talking, planting the seed, and from small actions. In short, change starts with conversations.

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In the UDL for FET project, we purposely included practitioners in the development process, in order to help achieve goals and rights.

Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: The Right To Inclusive Education (Article 24); to be broader in scope. Remoteness, Displacement, Disability, Gender, Religion, Legal Status, Migration, Ethnicity, Age, Sexual Orientation or Language.

Inclusion is a key pillar. I don't need to explain the importance of inclusion to this group, but I would like to talk about how Inclusion as a core pillar came about. It happened because

- We made it simple and easy to understand.
- We set the scene.
- We developed briefing papers.
- We mapped to government Inclusion strategies.
- We kept making "conversations."
- We funded a small project.
- We listened to feedback from all stakeholders.
- We set inclusion-related parameters as part of funding requirements.

UDL became a core enabler of this key pillar of Inclusion. The sector moved from the ground up. Local Education Training Boards, supported by AHEAD, worked their own plans. This year, our Minister for Further and Higher Education has set out his vision for the Department "to be a vehicle for economic and social inclusion."

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To help the full implementation of inclusion, we need to empower people in the system to become agents of change with values, knowledge, and attitudes that permit learners to succeed. We need to focus less on identifying problems with students and move towards identifying barriers to learning. Continuing professional development is key.

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UDL will form part of the FET sector's overall approach via a Learner Access and Support Framework. This framework will embed a whole-of-systems and whole-of-life approach to supporting learners. The UDL project sets out guidance for future supports to students. The UDL conceptual framework will be embedded into our strategic funding agreements with providers. As part of funding cycles, progress will be discussed and impacts noted, such as

- A vision of UDL
- Provide everyday stories of UDL in action, how it is working in practice
- Provide practical tools
- Consistent with assessment instruments
- Coherence and fit with other initiatives (e.g., TEL)
- A whole sector/ ETB approach

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Where do you already "do for" students when you could support their agency, given more time, resources, or a community of support?

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Our initial work with disability support officers in FET recognized the way that UDL could make individual supports less standardized and more meaningful for specific learners. This research led to the publication in March 2020 of "A Conceptual Framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for the Irish Further Education and Training Sector," that reflects the evolution of the theory of inclusion, the progress of legislation around accessibility, the difference between Universal Design in the physical environment and UDL in the design of interactions, and key concepts that need to be considered for FET.

This research helped us to ...

- Adopt the CAST model of UDL based on research in neuroscience and the learning sciences.
- Move from the CAST model to engaging with the FET community and getting the buy-in needed to build UDL professional learning networks.
- Involve a community approach to building inclusive culture that recognises diversity of practitioners & programme types.

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Having the research outcomes is not enough. They will live on a shelf. We had to engage with the FET sector at all levels to bring people with us, to gain buy-in for UDL, to show that UDL is aligned with their innovations and good practices, that it is good for students and staff, and that it lowers barriers and builds a culture of inclusion. In this project, we worked with disability-support officers to share how we are not ditching supports, but moving them into the mainstream for all students.

What is their disability officer role?

- Specialist services,
- Individual supports and accommodations, legislative compliance
- Needs assessments, one on one
- Provision of specialist supports
- Liaison with teaching staff
- Making the argument for inclusion

Feeling OVERWHELMED:

- Increasing number of student clients
- Wide range of disabilities, mental health, new disabilities, Aspergers, dyscalculia, etc. ...
- Little voice, no say in overall policy
- Culture of medical model, segregation
- Not listened to by leadership

<https://www.ahead.ie/roleofdisabilityservice>

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We communicated to the sector, sending out invitations to events on the UDL framework. We listened to all stakeholder views. This took time, and we extended our project with SOLAS. We wanted robust and authentic feedback from the sector, to gauge their feelings, frustrations, and hopes for the future.

We listened to everyone
 Presented to directors
 Held a national world café seminar with disability officers, counsellors, teachers, & principals
 Made 8 site visits
 Talked to individual practitioners

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Two committees of key stakeholders steered and advised the project: the National Advisory Committee on Universal Design for Learning for FET (NAC-UDL, 4 meetings) and the sub-committee of the NAC-UDL (4 meetings). Both ensured input and buy-in from disability-advocacy groups, guidance counsellors, quality assurance experts, and FET practitioners. These groups became co-designers, bringing their expertise to the guidance to craft guidance that was

- a practical approach that highlights tools and examples,
- grounded in real practices across all of the programmes,
- aligned with existing initiatives, and
- based on the CAST model.

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At our world café event, participants were asked to consider what a mainstream inclusive college would look like and what their role in it would be. Would their role change? Would it involve new skills? Would it make what they do to support students with disabilities easier to reach their goals?

What's one goal for which you want ATEND to advocate?

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In collaboration with FET colleagues and AHEAD Ireland, we created a practical how-to guide for FET practitioners. Here is a brief peek into how we created it, and how you can use the ideas from it to advocate with your classroom-based colleagues.

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We took a problem-based learning approach, structuring the document around several real-world stories from FET practitioners who shared challenges that they addressed through the application of various UDL principles, such as a maths instructor who use a community-garden project to create multiple ways for her students to engage with, encounter, and demonstrate their mastery of everyday calculation needs.

Practitioners who read the early drafts of the guidance were thankful that it wasn't just another list of "must do" items, but that the learning came through stories of people whom they actually knew.

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Starting Small

Put together a list of materials and information that you want learners to experience in just one of the learning interactions that you have with them, whether it's an individual activity, a module, or an entire course. Then, brainstorm ways to create plus-one format alternatives for that information.

The goal is to lower barriers for being able to access, understand, and use information you share with learners.

Then, take action: share your list with a colleague and commit to implementing one alternative—share results with each other.

The concepts in UDL are, if we apply them fully, a lot of a work. To help practitioners, the principles of UDL are introduced in the guide only after examples of how to “start small” are shared, and an incremental, iterative approach is consistently shown in all of the examples, problems, and narratives throughout the guidance.

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The guidance also pauses after every story, segment of information, and how-to section in order to ask readers to reflect on their own practices; make a plan to start, try, or strengthen UDL practices; and expand beyond their own individual efforts by reaching out to colleagues in various ways. This gets us back to the two themes for this presentation: inclusion as community and broadening accessibility for everyone without removing needed supports.

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A key part of this project is the creation of a resource hub, with examples, references, and ideas to go beyond the guidance document. Because the guidance document purposely simplifies UDL to allow practitioners to take a “step zero,” the resource hub becomes a natural next step to help FET practitioners to expand their work, networks, and interactions. The resource hub also expands practitioners’ community, placing them in touch with people from around the globe (perhaps you, one day).

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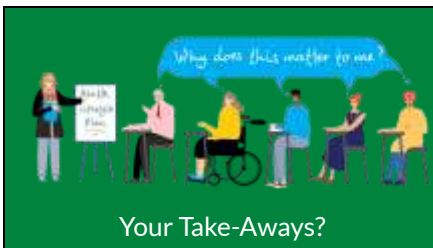


The Active Inclusion Networks brought staff with passion and commitment together to connect up and learn from each other about UDL.

It was led by members, their agenda led to a structure of talks by external experts on identified topics such as UDL, mental health, and executive functioning. It had an informal series of bi-monthly meetings which were about sharing information, practices, and problem solving.

Led to a different power balance, giving practitioners a voice in the future and the education they wanted, giving values of inclusion importance in the broader scheme of things. They advocated for UDL for their students and brought their leaders on board.

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Now that you’ve heard more about the model we created, we’d love to hear what you will take away from our time together. What is one thing you want to try, one thing you are already doing that we have shown is important, or one question you still have?

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A call to action: whether you have an official seat in leaderships meetings, your voice matters. It may sound counter-intuitive, but when we advocate for how to lower barriers for everyone, we clear the way for us to be able to spend more of our energy on individual supports where they will do the most good, and get out of the way of those who would rather we didn’t “do for” them in the first place. We also make it more likely that our colleagues will come to us when they encounter barriers themselves, and that’s the goal of adopting a UDL approach.

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A final call to action is to think of inclusion as a means of creating connections and community. In your roles as disability-support professionals, you are best positioned to help your colleagues identify and lower barriers—not only for their students, but also for themselves. Help them to see how a more inclusive environment helps us just as much as it helps students.

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solas.ie / ahead.ie / thomasjtobin.com

A horizontal line with a rainbow gradient separates the text from the image below. The image contains three headshots of people: a woman on the left, a woman in the middle, and a man on the right. To the right of the portraits is the ATEND logo, which consists of the word "ATEND" in a stylized font with colorful lines radiating from the letters, and the text "Association of Teachers in Education Network of Disability" below it.

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Thank you all for inviting us to be part of the ATEND conference this year, and we wish you continued success with your work and advocacy.

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