



Universal Design in Education and Training – policy landscape in Ireland

Universal Design is an approach to the design of environments, products and services to be usable by the widest range of people. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an extension of, and is underpinned by Universal Design. “UDL is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn, including Students with Disabilities. UDL aims to improve the educational experience of all students by introducing more flexible methods of teaching, assessment and service provision to cater for the diversity of learners in our classrooms.”¹

Universal Design in Education (UDE) focuses on whole system design so that the physical and digital environments, the educational services and the teaching and learning can be easily accessed, understood and used by the widest range of learners and all stakeholders, in a more inclusive environment. A Universal Design approach focusses on accessibility and usability from the earliest possible time and throughout all stages in the life of products and services, and the interoperability of products and services with assistive technology.

Ireland is unique internationally in having Universal Design defined in primary legislation. Where Part 6 of the Irish Disability Act 2005 sets out Universal Design as:

“the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of their age, size, ability or disability”.ⁱ

This includes public places in the built and digital environments, products and services and ICT systems. Universal Design is not a special requirement, for the benefit of a minority of the population. It is a fundamental condition of good design.

¹ <https://ahead.ie/udl>

This definition of Universal Design has found expression in national policies across a wide range of sectors, from education and training to the built and digital environments.² The Act also provides for the establishment of the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, the first statutory centre of its kind in the world.ⁱⁱ This uniquely places Ireland at the forefront of countries worldwide in terms of having a favourable legislative and policy landscape that supports the implementation of Universal Design across a wide range of sectors, including education and training.

Inclusive education and training – from vision to rights

The pursuit of equality and inclusion has been a mainstream concern of Irish education policy since the 1966 “Investment in Education” report.ⁱⁱⁱ Goal 2 of the current (2018-2021) statement of strategy of the Department of Education and Skills highlights inclusive education as a fundamental principle of the Irish education and training system, a system that “welcomes and meaningfully engages all learners, including those with special educational needs and learners impacted by disadvantage.”^{iv}

A key feature of the national policy landscape for education and training is the ambition for all learners to learn in the company of their peers in a fully integrated and inclusive way and within the same educational and training facilities and campuses, underpinned by the provision of graduated supports. This ambition is reflected in policy documents across the educational continuum, from early childhood education^v, to primary^{vi}, secondary^{vii}, higher education^{viii} and further education and training.^{ix} For example, SOLAS in its draft FET strategy (2020-2024) states that the strategic priority “Fostering Inclusion” must be met through:

“Developing and applying good practice guides and toolkits on inclusive practice across the system [and] adopting a universal design for learning (UDL) approach in shaping [the FET sectors] future provision”.^x

Universal Design, UDL and inclusion are key to achieving the right to education and training as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the first legally binding instrument to contain a reference to

² See, for example, “Programme for Government - Our Shared Future”, p55; “Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings” and “Doing more with Digital - National Digital Strategy for Ireland”.

the concept of quality inclusive education and training.^{xi 3} Clearly articulating the importance of Universal Design as the preferred approach to an inclusive society

A systems approach to transforming education and training through Universal Design

Article 24 of the CRPD contains the first explicit legal enunciation of the right to inclusive education and it imposes wide-ranging duties on States Parties to the Convention.^{xii} The CRPD Committee’s General Comment No. 4 provides a framework, through which to consider the transformation required to realise inclusive education.^{xiii} This is a “whole systems approach” which embeds “the necessary changes in institutional culture, policies and practices”. The whole systems approach incorporates the:

- “whole educational environment” - across all levels and all areas of educational institutions and including the local community or wider public
- “whole person” – in which “the capacity of every person to learn, and high expectations are established for all learners, including learners with disabilities” is recognised, and
- “learning-friendly environments” – which are fully accessible and “where everyone feels safe, supported, stimulated and able to express themselves”.

The CRPD Committee further elaborates particular aspects of the system that must be transformed, made inclusive and more accessible to all learners. These include “buildings, information and communications tools, the curriculum, educational materials, teaching methods, assessments and language and support services.”⁴

Within the current educational system, a paradigm shift is needed to achieve this ambition. This paradigm shift necessitates moving beyond minimal compliance with accessibility standards, which provide basic access and usability of facilities, products, and services for persons with disabilities, to a Universal Design approach.

A Universal Design approach enables independence and social participation for all through continual improvement in all contexts.^{xiv} By continuing to adopt and implement a Universal Design approach, as defined in our primary legislation and as introduced into education as Universal Design for Learning through the work

³ Ireland ratified the UN Convention in 2018 and is due to submit its first State party report in mid-2020

⁴ Other aspects of the environment include school transportation, water and sanitation facilities (including hygiene and toilet facilities), school cafeterias and recreational spaces

of Rose and Meyer, the whole of the education and training system can be made more inclusive.^{xv}

The role of Ireland’s statutory Centre for Excellence in Universal Design

The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design promulgates and hosts a range of resources which are useful for implementing Universal Design and UDL in a design thinking, whole systems approach.⁵ The Centre works collaboratively with national and international partners to conduct research and establish guidelines and standards that inform a Universal Design approach across a range of educational levels. International conferences hosted by the Centre have brought together a unique mix of educators, trainers, designers, architects, engineers and policy makers who, for the first time, focused on the transformative potential of taking a design-led approach to whole of the educational and training environment.^{xvi}

A number of key statements emerged from the conferences that continue to inform the work of the Centre. These cover how Universal Design and UDL are transformative agents which are progressively realisable, processes that are learner centred and result in benefits for all learners. For a fully inclusive educational and social environment, practitioners need an emotional response to fully engage with and understand the barriers that exist and the facilitators that are needed to bring about the necessary change: “our response must be emotional – we must feel the need for change and challenge our own values, beliefs, and assumptions.”^{xvii}

Universal Design is the “highest expression of a person-centred planning philosophy... ‘to the greatest extent possible’ acknowledges the real world complexity and points to a process, not to a size idealised ‘one size fits all’ solution”.^{xviii} This approach can “enable the transformation of education from an inequitable learning environment for many students to a more holistic, student-centric experience.”^{xix}

As such, “inclusive education models require learner-centred approaches to education and environments that maximally support learners with diverse physical, linguistic, cognitive and learning styles, while at the same time meeting national education standards.”^{xx}

⁵ Design thinking is an iterative process for creative problem solving comprised of phases to understand users, challenge assumptions, redefine problems and create innovative solutions to implement and test.

In this way “many of the resources and adaptations needed for students with disabilities would benefit all students.”^{xxi}

The Centre considers Universal Design from a human ecological systems perspective, in line with the CRPD Committee’s General Comment No. 4 as stated above. A Universal Design system recognises the multiple layers within the human ecological framework that affect human development. Within the educational ecosystem these are:

- **Macro level** – establishing directives, legislative acts, developing standards, promoting awareness and ensuring the diffusion of Universal Design and its adoption at national and regional educational levels.
- **Meso level** – institution level – covering governance, policies and procedures as well as linking families and the community-based initiatives, which is now known to be critical for growing and sustaining innovative learning.
- **Micro level** – individual needs and abilities catered for through teaching practices; classroom design and layout; technologies including assistive technologies; learning resources and spaces, shifting the focus of education from institutional to individual learners, re-orientating the education towards the user; and user involvement in the co-design of their own education.

This whole systems framework based on a human ecological systems perspective proposes a transformation of the whole of the education and training ecosystem.

The Centre has produced a range of design guidelines and standards as resources that can be applied in progressing this transformation.

Resources

- Building for Everyone: A Universal Design Approach: <http://universaldesign.ie/Built-Environment/Building-for-Everyone/>
- Research on Universal Design of Shared Educational Campuses in Ireland: <http://universaldesign.ie/Built-Environment/Shared-Education-Campuses/>
- Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings: <https://aim.gov.ie/universal-design-guidelines-for-elc-settings/>
- Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service - A Universal Design Approach: <http://universaldesign.ie/Products-Services/Customer-Communications-Toolkit-for-the-Public-Service-A-Universal-Design-Approach/>
- Web accessibility techniques: <http://universaldesign.ie/Technology-ICT/Web-accessibility-techniques/>

- "Education Across the Continuum: Innovating through Universal Design" 2015 conference: <http://education.universaldesign.ie/>
- Universal Design and Higher Education in Transformation Congress (UDHEIT2018): <https://www.udheit2018.com/>
- Resources for education: <http://universaldesign.ie/Awards/Education/>
- Universal Design Grand Challenge Student Awards: <http://universaldesign.ie/Awards/Student-Awards/>

References

ⁱ Part 6, Disability Act 2005.

<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2005/act/14/enacted/en/html>

ⁱⁱ Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. <http://universaldesign.ie/About-Us/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Department of Education. “National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030.” <https://www.education.ie/en/publications/policy-reports/national-strategy-for-higher-education-2030.pdf>

^{iv} Department of Education and Skills. “Statement of Strategy 2019-2021” Goal 2 <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/c07af3-department-of-education-and-skills-statement-of-strategy-2019-2021/>

^v See <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Early-Childhood/>; Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) <https://aim.gov.ie/>

^{vi} See <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/9bf5d3-inclusive-education/>

^{vii} See NCSE “Inclusive Education Framework” https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/InclusiveEducationFramework_InteractiveVersion.pdf

^{viii} See the HEA’s “National Action plan and review”, and funding schemes such as the “PATH” and “Fund for Students with Disabilities”. <https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/>

^{ix} See: Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019 <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Further-Education-and-Training-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf> and the SOLAS Corporate Plan. <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/0e99a88016/solascorporateplan.pdf> <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Further-Education-and-Training-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf>

^x SOLAS FET strategy. On file.

^{xi} <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

^{xii} Broderick, A. “The Right to Inclusive Education: Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Irish Experience”. 2018. Irish Yearbook of International Law.

^{xiii} Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. “General comment No. 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education”. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/crpd/pages/gc.aspx>

^{xiv} Craddock, G., McNutt, L. “Rethinking the Educational Ecosystem - A Universal Design Approach”. Ireland’s Yearbook of Education 2019 2020. <https://irelandyearbookofeducation.ie/irelands-yearbook-of-education-2019-2020/>

^{xv} Rose, D and Meyer, A as referenced in “Transforming our World Through Design, Diversity and Education - Proceedings of Universal Design and Higher Education in Transformation Congress 2018”. <http://ebooks.iospress.nl/volume/transforming-our-world-through-design-diversity-and-education-proceedings-of-universal-design-and-higher-education-in-transformation-congress-2018>

^{xvi} Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. 2015: "Education Across the Continuum: Innovating through Universal Design" <http://education.universaldesign.ie/> 2018: Universal Design and Higher Education in Transformation Congress <https://www.udheit2018.com/>

^{xvii} Craddock, G., Dolan, McNutt, L., Rice, D. eds. “Transforming our World Through Design, Diversity and Education - Proceedings of Universal Design and Higher Education in Transformation Congress 2018”. <http://ebooks.iospress.nl/volume/transforming-our-world-through-design-diversity-and-education-proceedings-of-universal-design-and-higher-education-in-transformation-congress-2018>

^{xviii} Garafolo, I., Arengi, A., Bencini, G. ‘Implementing Universal Design and the ICF in Higher Education: Towards a Model That Achieves Quality Higher Education for All’ in “Transforming our World Through Design, Diversity and Education - Proceedings of Universal Design and Higher Education in Transformation Congress 2018”.

^{xix} Craddock, G., McNutt, L. “Rethinking the Educational Ecosystem - A Universal Design Approach”. Ireland’s Yearbook of Education 2019 2020.

^{xx} Transforming our World Through Design, Diversity and Education Proceedings of Universal Design and Higher Education in Transformation Congress 2018. “G.M.L. Bencini et al. / Implementing Universal Design and the ICF in Higher Education.” 468

^{xxi} Craddock, G., McNutt, L.