University College Dublin
University for All

Unlocking Inclusion

Toolkit for Universal Design in Higher Education

Enabling and supporting the implementation of ALTITUDE, the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education, and promoting equitable education for all

Dr Anna M. Kelly, Dr Lisa Padden, & Dr Bairbre Fleming,
UCD Access & Lifelong Learning
2024

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> **I look towards a land both old and young; old in its Christianity, young in the promise of its future... I contemplate a people which has had a long night and will have an inevitable day. I am turning my eyes towards a hundred years to come, and I dimly see the island I am gazing on become the road of passage and union between two hemispheres, and the centre of the world...**
> **John Henry Newman (1891, p. 32)**

Prologue

I am delighted to welcome the publication of this revised edition of the **Unlocking Inclusion: Toolkit for Universal Design in Higher Education.**

There is no such thing as a 'typical' student. We all come to higher education with our own particular set of gifts, talents and abilities, and we all bring our own story. To be worthwhile, third level education must challenge us, but must do so in a manner that draws out and builds on our abilities, rather than placing obstacles in our way.

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has been explicit in its ambition to support the creation of a truly inclusive and diverse higher education sector that can be accessed by every student regardless of where they come from or where they went to school.

The fourth National Access Plan (NAP) was published in August 2022 and is a seven-year plan. The plan aligns with and builds on the wider ambitions of the Programme for Government to provide accessible, affordable education to all citizens. Students with disabilities are still under-represented in higher education. The NAP sets a new participation target of 16% of new entrants by 2028. Currently, the new entrant participation rate for students with disabilities is 13.8% up from 12.4% at the start of the plan. This signifies that we are moving in the right direction but we have much more to do to reach our target.

The ambition of the NAP is that we need to move beyond looking solely at access to higher education – we need to consider inclusive higher education experiences for students as well as a culture of student success and positive outcomes. The student voice and perspective should be to the fore as a critical element in understanding the challenges faced by students with disabilities.

Universal Design is a key vehicle to reduce and remove cultural and physical barriers which, in the past, have resulted in the marginalisation of vulnerable learners. The Department has supported and encouraged the development of Universal Design principles as a key step to providing an inclusive learning environment for all students. The application of universal design principles in our Higher Education Institutions creates the opportunity for full engagement and ultimately leads to success for students.

The Department is fully supportive of ensuring that every student has a positive and inclusive student experience which is underpinned by the principles of universal design to support and foster student success and outcomes, equity and diversity, and are responsive to the needs of students and wider communities.

Unlocking Inclusion: Toolkit for Universal Design in Higher Education is an important resource in making progress on that journey.

Colm O'Reardon,
Secretary General, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Foreword

Universities are transformative places where progression through educational programmes and the advancing and sharing of knowledge change our societies for the better. We have long known of barriers to entry into higher education from underrepresented groups such as those from economically disadvantaged groups and those with a disability. National programmes in Ireland, such as HEAR and DARE, have set down fairly standardised modes to encourage stronger access of entry to higher education from these groups. Successive National Action Plans have identified further priorities, for example to support greater mature student entry and higher participation in higher education for those from the Traveller community. Outreach programmes have sought to reach potential applicants wherever they may be to support them to apply to higher education.

But finding and recruiting underrepresented students into higher education is just the start. As student populations have become more diverse, so have the needs for support with learning and campus facilities. A myriad of measures and structures are required which point in the direction of more inclusive approaches to higher education which enable all applicants to flourish and to thrive and to meet their potential. A more inclusive approach recognises diversity not only through growing numbers of under–represented students but also, reflecting another national and institutional priority, growing numbers of overseas students in exchanges, occasional study, and full degree programmes.

I am delighted to welcome the publication of this second edition of the Toolkit for Inclusive Higher Education, entitled Unlocking Inclusion: University for All has been a rallying cry at UCD to share and to learn about all the steps we can and must take to be more inclusive in how we promote access and support student learning. The first edition of the Toolkit was part of the wider University for All initiative as a whole of institution approach which has brought access from the margins to the mainstream of UCD's educational strategy and activities.

A key aspect of the approach to more inclusive higher education has been the championing of Universal Design for Learning. The focus of Universal Design is on the removal of barriers to inclusion, providing a lens through which to make changes to how we work rather than expecting a change in students to fit a system in which we may have inadvertently created barriers or challenges for students. Universal Design is a framework which will allow us to future proof our educational landscape, taking into account the various target groups emerging over time in our National Access Plans and wider recruitment strategies. I am proud of UCD's achievements in embedding Universal Design principles systemically across our campus, with a great deal done, and always more to do.

A toolkit of this kind is a resource that can be widely shared to underpin enhanced practices for all professional and academic staff involved in supporting student learning and wider participation in the higher education experience. This publication highlights the means through which other Universities and those working in the broader tertiary sector can embed Universal Design. The national Commitment to Universal Design in Ireland is clear through the take up of the Digital Badges in Universal Design for Teaching in Learning and Universal Design Beyond the Classroom. Commitment to Universal Design is also evident in the PATH 4 funding offered by the Higher Education Authority through which this development was accomplished. UCD has the highest uptake of the badge of any university in Ireland – not least due to the work of our University for All partnership programmes which have shown how collaboration works to embed a sense of ownership of Universal Design. The original Toolkit has shaped the recently published ALTITUDE charter, a cross–sector collaboration to advance Universal Design in higher education.

The new edition of this Toolkit is a key guide through which other higher education institutions, as well as those working in other educational sectors, can look to enact the commitment to Universal Design. Ideally the Toolkit will be used not only by individuals but also within institutional management and governance arrangements, such as UCD's Widening Participation Committee, where leaders work to make access and inclusion everyone's business.

On a personal note, I have learnt virtually all I know about access to higher education and inclusive approaches to learning through working with colleagues in UCD Access & Lifelong Learning, and across UCD, over more than a decade in earlier roles as Dean and as Vice–President for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. I take great pride in the work of UCD Access & Lifelong Learning, and their many partners across the University, nationally and internationally. I am delighted to be able to support the work UCD Access & Lifelong Learning as a key team within my new responsibilities in UCD Academic Affairs.

I wish to congratulate Anna Kelly, Lisa Padden, and Bairbre Fleming on their work in completing and publishing this second edition of the Toolkit. Their expertise in the area developed through research, time, practice, and implementation in collaboration with colleagues across UCD and the wider sector. Their 2023 book Making Inclusive Higher Education a Reality: Creating a University for All outlines the remarkable impact of the Toolkit's implementation at UCD. I trust and hope that this revised edition of the Toolkit will be a guide and inspiration for more inclusive higher education everywhere.

Professor Colin Scott
Registrar, Deputy President, and Vice–President for Academic Affairs,
University College Dublin

Biographical Details

Dr Anna M. Kelly is Adjunct Associate Professor & Co–Director of the Inclusive Design Research Centre of Ireland (IDRC) at UCD, and coordinates research themes and leaders across disciplines, sectors, and universities in that regard, as well as co–supervising PhDs in the areas of Inclusive Learning, Inclusion and Diversity Policy, and Access. Previously, she served for over a decade as UCD's Director of Access & Lifelong Learning, creating and overseeing the development of UCD's [University for All](#) initiative, an organisational programme of institutional transformation and culture change to develop an inclusive educational experience for all students.

Anna conducted her own practice–based PhD through the IDRC and wrote up a groundbreaking study of the understandings of university leadership with regard to the inclusion and access agendas, making key recommendations for the Irish government, which are now in motion. Her research interests are in the areas of organisational change in the fields of access, widening participation, mainstreaming, and inclusion.

She is a member of the Editorial Board and the Innovative Practice Editor of the [Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning Journal](#), The Open University.

Dr Lisa Padden has worked in University College Dublin (UCD) since 2012, having joined the university from a role in the University of Galway. Lisa's current role is Deputy Director of UCD Access & Lifelong Learning. Lisa oversees the Disability Support Service and the University for All initiative working with academic and professional colleagues across the university to implement UCD's whole–institution approach to student inclusion, encompassing strategy and policy, teaching, learning, and assessment, student supports and services, the built environment, as well as technological infrastructure. Lisa has particular expertise in capacity building in the areas of Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning, working with colleagues across the Higher Education and Further Education and Training sector in Ireland through development and joint coordination of the Digital Badge for Universal Design in Teaching & Learning, now with more than 3,000 awardees in Ireland. Lisa has been lead editor on four collections of Universal Design for Learning Case Studies and co–wrote the Toolkit for Inclusive Higher Education Institutions (2018). Lisa's research interests include Universal Design for Learning, widening participation, equitable access to higher education, and student inclusion.

Dr Bairbre Fleming is Director of UCD Access & Lifelong Learning. She has extensive experience working with underrepresented students through the UCD Access programmes, with particular emphasis on mature students and part-time programmes. Her PhD drew on a sociological analysis of the experiences of mature students in higher education.

Bairbre leads a team of access professionals in her role as Director of UCD Access & Lifelong Learning. The team attracts, supports, and develops strategies for the 35% of students who come to UCD through a range of access routes. Bairbre is the current chair of the PATH Leinster Pillar 1 consortium which is collaborating to increase access to higher education for targeted under-represented groups

Bairbre led a national project to develop a digital badge in Student/Learner Support for further and higher education staff, as well as leading on a number of projects to develop innovations around post-entry student support. Bairbre leads on the Data project for UCD, developing strategies for visualising, democratising, and using data in order to lever change.

Bairbre has experience of working with adult learners and under-represented students. She has created an innovative way of offering part-time learning in the university through leveraging spare capacity in existing classes. Her focus is on mainstreaming projects, including the transition of university access programmes to university governance, developing progression pathways for part-time learners, and the democratisation of data.

Preface

Unlocking Inclusion: Toolkit for Universal Design in Higher Education, is a practical step–by–step 'how–to guide' to assist the higher education sector to create inclusive institutions where all students belong. Predicated on the incremental nature of mainstreaming participation of under–represented students in higher education, this updated **Toolkit** uses the lens of student diversity to inform and guide the design of an inclusive educational experience that embraces all students equitably.

In Ireland, three groups of students are identified as under–represented in higher education: those who are socio–economically disadvantaged (including low–income, first–time, or second–chance learners, and those who have experienced the care or criminal justice systems); members of the Irish Traveller and Roma communities; and students with disabilities (HEA, 2022, pp. 22–23). However, student diversity in higher education goes well beyond these groups, and now includes issues of nationality, age, gender, LGBTQ+, ethnicity, religion or linguistic minorities, and those with caring responsibilities (Athena Swan Ireland, n.d.; HEA, n.d., 2022). In this context, this Toolkit plots a course from institutional afterthought or 'add on', to inclusion being 'baked–in', everyone's business, and all students belonging, feeling valued, and part of university life.

This second edition is part of a body of work focusing on the knotty issue of how to create inclusive higher education institutions: how to move from narrative and aspiration to action, implementation, and institutional change (Fleming, 2017; Fleming et al., 2022; Kelly, 2017, 2018; Kelly et al., 2023; Kelly & Padden, 2018; Padden et al., 2017, 2019, 2021). The test location for this work was University College Dublin (UCD), where we developed the University for All initiative, prompted by Kelly (2017), whose study of implementation of access policy in Ireland's seven universities identified an "inclusion implementation gap", despite the policy imperative that explicitly promoted the integration of access and inclusion into everyday life of the university (HEA, 2015). In response to this gap, UCD's University for All was designed as a whole–institution evidence–based and systemic response to ensure that all students belong. Using an institutional lens, University for All frames the creation of a culture of inclusion necessary to embed and mainstream access in higher education. It engages a triumvirate of implementation actors — leaders, university community, and students — thereby ensuring that all voices are heard, contextual issues are considered, and ownership is fostered. It uses a top–down and bottom–up strategy to percolate change through the entire university community (Greenbank, 2007).

Through the process of socialising this new model of inclusion, we identified a need to assist the university community to translate their commitment to access and inclusion into institution-wide practice. We observed an absence of know-how, confidence, and understanding, which inhibited actions and led to a struggle in moving from narrative to action. Hence, although the Toolkit for Inclusive Higher Education Institutions was first published in 2018 in print format, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic offered an opportunity to migrate to a digital version.

There have been important developments in the higher education sector since we began this journey, which serve to underpin the concept of inclusive education for all. Following the first edition of the Toolkit, we have noticed a shift in thinking and culture. A tangible indication is the assumption of shared ownership; the message of equity and inclusion is rippling through higher education institutions. Leaders, faculty, and professional staff are taking action, stepping up, and forging new and innovative inclusive [approaches](), including the growing implementation of Universal Design in educational settings (Padden, 2016; Padden et al., 2017, 2019, 2021). The [HEA PATH]() initiative, with a focus on increasing participation by under-represented groups in higher education, and the setting up of the [ALTIT**UD**E Working Group](), a consortium of education partners who developed the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education, represents a significant advance. Similarly, the establishment of the [National Tertiary Office](), charged with developing an integrated system that offers diverse education pathways, enabled learner progression across and between further and higher education institutions. The commitment at both national and EU levels to address equitable access to higher education for part-time students is also encouraging (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2023; 2022; [HEA, 2024](); EUA, 2024; IUA 2020).

Such developments are evidence that the tertiary education sector is challenging old orthodoxies and questioning assumptions and perceptions. The process of valuing diversity, recognising difference, and enabling flexibility increasingly result in inclusion being placed centre-stage, and in so doing, has the potential to flip thinking, transform problems into opportunities, and develop new ways of doing.

The question has become 'how' rather than 'why'. In writing this Toolkit, we set out to answer the 'how' question. This Toolkit uses a self-assessment format that reflects all areas of activity in higher education and may be used by all university personnel to systematically uncover progress and to identify areas requiring improvement. While the primary focus of this handbook is the higher education sector, we recognise that some elements complement and align with further education (Heelan & Tobin, 2021; SOLAS, 2020). In the development of this Toolkit, we have continued to develop, test, and research how best to assist the university community in the complex and challenging task of embedding an inclusive approach. We know this change is complex, and we acknowledge the demands, expectations, and challenges faced by higher education institutions (Garrell & Estermann, 2023). In this context, and drawing on the work of Tobin and Behling (2018), we recommend a 'plus 1' approach that recognises the iterative and cyclical nature of university life. Put simply, using a 'plus 1' logic involves refining and tweaking actions rather than using a 'big bang' approach — an approach that is often unduly burdensome, time-consuming, and which may result in unnecessary resistance. We have found that fusing a 'plus 1' philosophy with the Toolkit methodology, results in a cascade of changed practice, iterative and effective enhancements, and the development of a wider range of options that better reflect the needs of a diverse student population.

Finally, the evidence gathered over time, confirms that **Unlocking Inclusion: Toolkit for Universal Design in Higher Education**, is effective in systematically driving institutional change and embedding inclusion. It has moved from conversations on aspiration and 'opening the door' to college, and instead, promotes universally designed inclusive systems, processes, and approaches that meet the needs of all students, without labels. Through a focus on all the components of college life, the **Toolkit** demonstrates that one size does not fit all, but a universally designed higher education institution will.

Structure of the Toolkit

The structure of this **Toolkit** reflects all zones of activity of higher education institutions, which collectively contribute to the provision of an effective and equitable student learning experience. Using this institutional lens, the Toolkit is organised into the following sections:

Section A
- Model for an Inclusive Higher Education Institution:
  UCD's University for All Case Study

Section B
- Enablers
  1. Institutional Foundations
  2. Initiative Scaffolding & Catalysts
  3. Access and Inclusion Leadership

Section C
- Pillars
  Pillar 1: Learning, Teaching & Assessment;
  Pillar 2: Student Supports, Services, and Social Engagement;
  Pillar 3: Physical Campus and the Built Environment;
  Pillar 4: Digital Environment.

Section D
- Conclusion
- Glossary of Terms

Section A describes the context and background to development of the model for inclusion.

Sections B (Enablers) and **C** (Pillars) elaborate a series of statements that will guide the discussion and enable priorities for action to be identified. Examples of associated good practice are also offered, which inform the development of University for All Action Plans, which form part of the implementation process (elaborated in Section B).

Section D draws conclusions, lists the Terms used and offers an extensive bibliography.

Model for an Inclusive Higher Education Institution: UCD's University for All Case Study

What is UCD University for All?

UCD's University for All is our big idea for the 21st century to promote and embed educational access and inclusion and realise institutional transformation in higher education. It was officially launched by the Minister for Higher Education, Deputy Mary Mitchell O' Connor, T.D. in November 2017 (UCD, 2017). The 'University for All' model places emphasis on the higher education institution, shifting the focus from bespoke solutions to meet the needs of some students to adopting an institutional lens that questions 'how things are done'. In other words, 'University for All' seeks deep institutional transformation and culture change, which is fundamental to fully embedding and mainstreaming access, inclusion, and educational equity for all students. It is a whole-institution, evidence-based, and systemic response to create a university where all students feel welcome, belong, and are valued (Kelly et al., 2023). Uniquely, this model is not focussed on opening doors to higher education; instead, its focus is on the institution's ethos, values, principles, and practice. Historically, some groups of students in higher education were referred to as 'other' — they were considered differently, labelled accordingly, considered 'non-traditional', their journey to university was described as 'exceptional'; they 'beat the odds', they were 'not like the rest', 'not one of us', not a 'traditional' student. In today's diverse society, the UCD University for All model of inclusion challenges these assumptions and perceptions; it questions how things are done; it demands that the difference is recognised; that diversity is valued.

In this scenario, inclusion is placed centre-stage; student access, participation, and success migrate from the margins to the mainstream. University for All flips our thinking, transforms problems into opportunities, and develops new ways of acting. In so doing, 'how' rather than 'why' becomes the question. Rather than expecting, or indeed requiring, some students to modify or change in order to fit in, this model requires a strategic institutional approach.

Critically, however, it must be stressed that the UCD University for All model is not a 'one size fits all' approach. Rather, it recognises a need to offer a range of solutions to meet the needs of a diverse student cohort, offering a universally designed approach that values all students, recognising that 'a student is a student'.

Conversations are shifted from theoretical arguments about the merits of inclusion to solution-mode, and the need to offer flexible responses that accommodate and include all. It replaces a siloed or bolted-on approach (Jones & Thomas, 2005) in favour of embedding and integrating access and addressing the question of how to make inclusion a collective responsibility and everyone's business.

I look towards a land both old and young; old in its Christianity, young in the promise of its future...
I contemplate a people which has had a long night and will have an inevitable day. I am turning my eyes towards a hundred years to come, and I dimly see the island I am gazing on become the road of passage and union between two hemispheres, and the centre of the world...

—John Henry Newman (1891, p. 32)

The UCD University for All model (Figure 1) comprises all the pieces of the jigsaw, which collectively contribute to the creation of an inclusive higher education institution. Figure 1 shows the Enablers, the elements that create the institutional environment, helping to prepare the ground, support and bolster efforts, and ensure that changes become part of the university's DNA. Also included are four Pillars — Learning, Teaching, & Assessment; Student Supports, Services, and Social Engagement; Physical Campus and the Built Environment; and Digital Environment — which directly impact on the provision of an effective and equitable learning experience for all students.
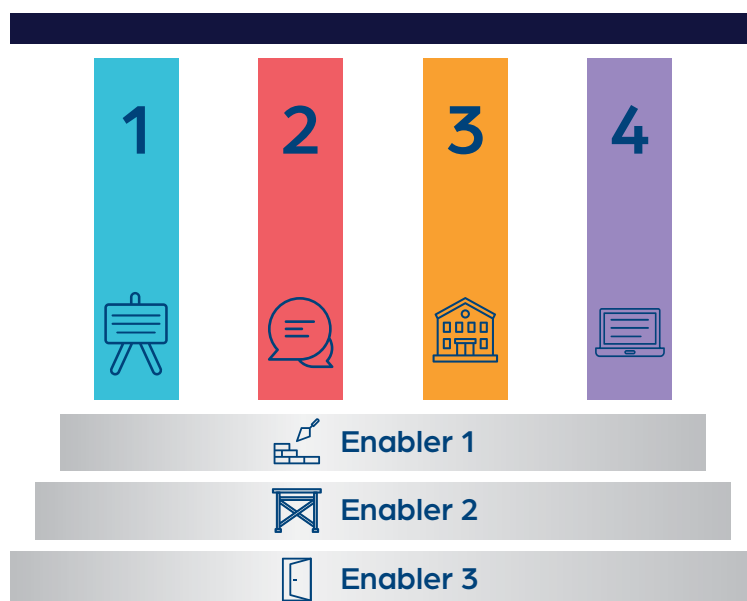
Figure 1. The UCD University for All model.

The Benefits of Becoming a University for All

There are numerous benefits to adopting this institution–wide approach, not least that it conveys to current and prospective students, and their wider circle of support, that the university takes its social justice obligations seriously. An inclusive approach results in students no longer needing to routinely advocate for flexibilities and adjustments. The learning environment is designed inclusively and, as a result, the needs of all students are anticipated and planned. In such higher education institutions diverse student needs are no longer considered exceptional: they are in–built when designing systems, structures, and processes.

Benefits also accrue to university faculty and staff. In particular, adopting a holistic inclusive approach eliminates duplication of effort. As we know, faculty and staff plan and design their offering (e.g. teaching) or service (e.g. library) carefully and diligently. However, the assumptions made may not always be correct, and offerings may be designed for the so–called 'mythical middle'. As university students have diverse needs and preferences, faculty and staff find themselves having to retro–fit, reconfigure, and reshape some or all elements. Such situations are time–consuming, burdensome, and often result in dissatisfaction and frustration. Instead, by anticipating the breadth of diversity now commonplace in higher education, this inclusive model offers an avenue to transform recurring 'problems' or challenges into opportunities.

In recognition of the iterative and cyclical nature of university life, we recommend using a 'plus 1' approach (Tobin & Behling, 2018) as a pragmatic way to adjust or refine these offerings. Engaging in a series of refinements or tweaks, rather than a 'big bang' approach is more effective in our experience. Incremental changes to the design process are less onerous, less time–consuming, and reduce the levels of resistance. The accumulative effect of these small changes can and does lead to a cascade of changed practice, effective enhancements, and the development of a wider range of options that better reflect the needs of a diverse student population.

Via this process, the university community will experience incremental achievement and help build momentum. Through its ethos of capacity–building, and the focus on the application of Universal Design, the UCD University for All model strengthens and enables the entire university community to make a distinctive contribution to ensuring that the benefits of higher education are available to all in our society.

Implementation of the UCD University for All model

Implementation is the holy grail of creating an inclusive university: we are frequently asked the 'how' question. Regrettably, there is no magic answer with no single action that can be taken; there is no silver bullet. Enabling institutional transformation and culture change, and developing a university for all, is a complex and challenging endeavour. Systemic change is not easily achieved. It is a non–linear process and, in our experience, doesn't have a predetermined starting point.

Our approach to the implementation question is informed by our own research and practice (Kelly et al., 2023), policy implementation literature (Bowen, 1982; Hill & Hupe, 2009; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984), and shaped by specific leadership studies (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002; Butcher et al., 2012; ECU, 2014; Kotter, 2001, 2014). Drawing on this literature, coupled with our access expertise and experience, our approach to implementation is grounded in practicability and feasibility.

Hence, we established four crucial elements in the implementation process:

1. The University for All Implementation Framework; as illustrated in Appendix (see page 131)
   Critical components of the University for All Implementation Framework (Kelly et al., 2022, pp.27/28)

Component	Action
University Leadership and Institutional Strategic Planning	Articulate the vision and commitment to becoming an inclusive university in the institution's strategic plan. This creates visibility, offers direction, anchors the initiative, and signals institutional commitment both internally and externally. Develop the university's access and inclusion strategy, which includes key objectives that focus on institutional components, such as teaching and learning, built and technological environments, as well as those of the student dimension, e.g. engagement, support and welfare, measurable targets, and key performance indicators (KPIs). Assign leadership and accountability responsibility to a senior institutional leader who sits on the institution's management team, and acts as senior sponsor. Seek the support of senior academic and professional staff who have a vital role in achieving buy–in and communicating the University for All message.
Governance & Structures	Develop institutional governance arrangements that integrate with organisational structures and process, and enable coherence, co–ordination, and strategic alignment. Establish an institutional oversight committee, led by a senior leader, to guide, monitor, and support institutional change. Members of this committee are nominated representatives rather than selected because of their personal interest only. Develop a hybrid structure for the management of student access, diversity, and inclusion, which provides central co–ordination while dispersing responsibility and accountability to academic schools and programmes. Incorporate 'top–down' and 'bottom–up' of the institution in the implementation process to facilitate discussion and allow time and space to align implementation with 'local' factors.

Component	Action
Evidence and Data	Use evidence and data as a key lever to guide and support institutional change.
	Set participation targets at institution and programme levels that include and reflect all the under-represented groups.
	Gather and publish student data, including entry, participation, and success at institution and programme levels.
Implementation Planning & Leadership	Be realistic in implementation timelines; systemic change takes time, so allow for incremental change, early adopters, and develop strategies to extend ownership and buy-in (Rogers, 2003).
	Assign 'local' people to lead, co-ordinate, and champion implementation of University for All within their Schools, Units, Colleges.
	Promote the development of local alliances, such as senior leaders for Teaching & Learning, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (and others, where appropriate).
	Designate a team to provide University for All 'scaffolding', which enables and drives the process of institutional change and provides the requisite expertise and knowledge.
	Use Unlocking Inclusion: Toolkit for Universal Design in Higher Education to drive the implementation process, including gathering examples of good practice, identifying areas to be addressed, and developing and publishing Action Plans.
	Ensure that the student voice is incorporated.
	Make local implementation plans available to all.
Consultation	Build in regular consultation arrangements, including with individuals, groups, and 'Town Hall' style meetings, to test awareness and develop understanding of mainstreaming and inclusion.

Component	Action
Promotion & Communication	Develop a communications strategy to articulate and represent the institution's vision, support, and commitment to inclusion. Develop strategies to encourage and support buy–in, build visibility and accept accountability, e.g., by making local implementation plans available to the entire community using dissemination opportunities such as publication of reports, speeches, symposia/conferences, etc. Identify early 'adopters' and use a variety of means to showcase good practice, such as publishing case studies; celebrate pockets of good practice as they emerge. Promote the development of Communities of Practice. Use consistent branding to ensure communication of a clear message.
Staff Training and Development	Promote the use of recognition and reward systems to acknowledge and encourage staff to participate and adopt inclusive practices. Develop a professional development framework for all employees (faculty, professional, support), which uses a variety of ways and opportunities to develop understanding of mainstreaming and inclusion, ie an induction process for new staff, and formal training in areas such as Universal Design.

2. The creation of systemic cultural change requires a **triumvirate of actors**: university leadership, the university community, and the student voice (Kelly et al., 2023, p. 208). The deliberate involvement of all these actors is necessary to ensure that all voices are heard, contextual issues are considered, and ownership is fostered. In our experience, two of these actors tend to be automatically considered for leading parts. However, increasingly, the pivotal role of students is also being recognised (Brooks et al., 2015; Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011). Students are powerful catalysts for change and their role as 'ally' is integral to the implementation process.

The inextricable link with mindset and, in this context, we have singled out three essential 'intangibles' for this change journey. We consider courage and self–belief, comfort with ambiguity, and a healthy respect for imperfection as indispensable ingredients in sustaining the development and implementation of a project of this scale and complexity. These 'intangibles' helped us to make progress, propelled us forward, and strengthened our resolve in the face of headwinds (Kelly, et al., 2023, pp. 26, 29).

3. The lasting lesson learnt during development of the University for All idea is that **incremental achievement, compromise, and less than perfect solutions** all generate movement in the right direction. Courageously taking that step forward demonstrates a level of seriousness and intention, conveys energy and belief, and is integral to building momentum, or as Bowen (1982) put it, creates the bandwagon effect.

4 crucial steps in the implementation process

1   Use the University for All Implementation Framework

2   Creation of systemic cultural change requires a triumvirate of actors: university leadership, the university community, and the student voice

3   Foster courage and self–belief, comfort with ambiguity, and a healthy respect for imperfection as indispensable ingredients in sustaining the development and implementation of a project of this scale and complexity

4   Acceptance of incremental achievement, compromise and less than perfect solutions

Figure 2. Crucial steps in the implementation of a University for All.

Policy Backdrop to the Development of the UCD University for All model

The UCD University for All model (Kelly et al., 2023) is an innovative response to Irish and European policy that promotes student diversity and inclusion in higher education.

In particular, this model aligns with Ireland's policy commitment to:

> **Provide supports and opportunities for learning to all, recognising the needs of vulnerable learners and the most marginalised, and assist people in access to and progression through higher and further education and training, so as to grow prosperity across communities and build social cohesion. (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2021, p. 6)**

The UCD University for All model is an imaginative big idea to support widening participation to reflect the diversity of Ireland's population (HEA, 2004, 2008, 2015, 2018, 2022). These national policies consistently advocate for the integration of access and inclusion into the "everyday life of the HEIs so that it permeates all faculties and departments and is not marginalised as the responsibility of the designated access office" (HEA, 2015, p. 25). Indeed, the most recent policy — the Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success 2022–2028 — "extends beyond access to a greater focus on the participation and success of the student", setting out two overarching objectives:

> **That the higher education student body entering, participating in and completing higher education, at all levels and across all programmes, reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population.**
>
> **That our higher education institutions are inclusive, universally designed environments which support and foster student success and outcomes, equity and diversity, and are responsive to the needs of students and wider communities.**
> **(HEA, 2022, p. 28)**

This vision moves access and inclusion from being an institutional 'add on', to being integral to the higher education institution — becoming an institutional core belief and value that is practised and demonstrated. This is at the heart of the University for All approach.

Provide supports and opportunities for learning to all, recognising the needs of vulnerable learners and the most marginalised, and assist people in access to and progression through higher and further education and training, so as to grow prosperity across communities and build social cohesion (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2021, p. 6).

Significant progress has been made to widen participation of under–represented groups in higher education in Ireland (HEA, 2022a, 2018). However, this policy vision goes much further; it challenges higher education to move beyond opening doors, beyond the development of a pipeline of diverse students, beyond silos, beyond quotas, beyond labels, beyond the rhetoric of access. In other words, Irish access policy is groundbreaking and calls for systemic change; it asks institutions to translate the vision for diversity and inclusion into tangible changes across all aspects of campus life.

Throughout Europe too, there is an increasing focus on diversity, inclusion, and equity issues in higher education with migration and globalisation contributing to this growing awareness. The Bologna Process frames the enhancement of European higher education, focussing on degree structures, ECTS credits, mobility of staff and students, quality assurance, and the creation of socially inclusive higher education (EUA, 2008; Westerheijden et al., 2010). It is argued it has "transformed the face of European higher education" (European Commission et al., 2012, p. 7). Whereas Ministers responsible for higher education have reaffirmed their commitment to developing a more inclusive, innovative, interconnected, and resilient European Higher Education Area (EHEA Rome, 2020), progress is less evident in respect of equity of access (European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2022).

Over the years, we have seen much discussion, reports, and, indeed, commitment at state, institutional, and personal levels. As experienced access professionals, however, it is apparent that this belief in the merits of access and inclusion is not always matched with confidence or knowledge to realise the vision of inclusion (Unger, 2019). So, taking inspiration from the oft misquoted line, "If you build it, he will come" from the film **Field of Dreams** (1989) — we developed the UCD University for All model as an innovative solution to realise this access policy imperative.

Practice & Research Backdrop to the Development of the UCD University for All model

The evolution of the UCD University for All model — an approach that demonstrates how higher education institutions can mainstream access and inclusion and provide equitable, universally designed learning environments for all students — was influenced by a wide range of research and practice.

As access practitioners responsible for ensuring that all students enjoy an equitable learning experience, the increasing participation rates of under–represented students (Fleming et al., 2022) highlighted the need for sustainable, long term approaches to access and inclusion. Thus, the development of the University for All approach is grounded in the work of access colleagues, and builds on their knowledge, expertise, and experience. This practice deepened understanding of the student experience, provided a window to the challenges of campus life, and exposed the demands faced by the wider university community. In so doing, these access professionals expanded our thinking, helping to unravel ideas and generate solutions.

In addition, a trawl through relevant research helped shape this model. For example, literature that specifically considered institutional responses to inclusion identified four key themes, i.e. institutional practice, culture, quality, and leadership. We found evidence of a growing understanding of the need for changed institutional practice articulated in various studies (Bamber & Tett, 2001; Callaghan, 2000; Clarke, 2003; EAN, 1999; Gorard et al., 2006; HEA, 2006c; Osborne et al., 2007; Skilbeck & O'Connell, 2000; Verbeurgt, 2014; Wagner, 2002; Woodrow, 1999).

There also was a growing number of frameworks to support inclusion, and embed equality of access in higher education (Baker et al., 2004; Blackmore, 2018; Blythman & Orr, 2002; Bohle–Carbonnell & Dailey–Hebert, 2015; Burgstahler, 2013; Clayton–Pedersen et al., 2009; Duvekot, 1999; EUA, 2008; Garvey & Treanor, 2011; HEA, 2013; Hill & Hatt, 2012; Jones & Thomas, 2005; Layer et al., 2003; Lynch, 2005; May & Bridger, 2010; Schroeder, 2012; Shaw et al., 2007; Thomas, 2011; Thomas et al., 2005, 2009; Thomas & Tight, 2011; Tuitt, 2016; Universités du Maghreb: Enseignement inclusif, 2014; Williams et al., 2005; Woodrow & Thomas, 2002). These frameworks pinpoint a broad range of areas of institutional change, including vision, leadership, key influences, culture, structures, staff development, policies/procedures governing areas such as, admissions, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, career development, student supports, targets, data collection, and resource allocation. There was an emerging consensus that an institutional approach to higher education access is the necessary step in the development of participation by under–represented students. For example, Greenbank (2004) and Wray (2013) point to the developing awareness of the impact of institutional culture on access and widening participation, and recommended it as a prerequisite to creating a more inclusive culture.

Studies that examined the oft–heard fear that the quality of education would suffer as a consequence of widening access, found that the evidence reviewed did not support this view (Brink, 2008; Shah & Nair, 2012; Whiteford et al., 2013). However, what these studies did indicate was that equality of access to higher education needed institutional commitment, an inclusive approach, and sufficient resources.

Other studies highlight the importance of awareness and understanding of access and inclusion among higher education leaders (Kotter, 2001, 2014; Aguirre & Martinez, 2002; Foucault, 1972; Pasque, 2010; Pasque & Rex, 2010; Bourdieu et al., 1994; Burke, 2012; Cascarano, 2014; Science Foundation Ireland, 2015; Butcher et al., 2012; ECU, 2014). Leaders play key motivational and visionary roles, and their understanding of the associated issues enables them to promote change, model attitudes, and foster practices throughout the institution and beyond. Kelly's study (2017), involving interviews with Presidents/Provosts, Chief Academic Officers/Registrars, and Student Union Presidents in Ireland's universities, revealed an absence of institution–wide policies and practices to foster and inculcate inclusion and diversity.

The development of the UCD University for All model is also influenced by and draws on work in 'universal design' (Burgstahler, 2013, 2023; Bracken & Novak, 2019; Mace, 1985, 1998; Nelson, 2023; Padden, 2016; Quirke et al., 2023; Rose et al., 2006; Rose & Meyer, 2002), 'inclusive design' (Clarkson & Coleman, 2015; Goodman, 2016; Kelly, 2017; Politis et al., 2014), and 'design for all' (Bendixen & Benktzon, 2015).

Drawing from the above wide range of research and practice, we have forged a model for equitable and inclusive higher education institutions, which reinforces the importance of a universally designed learning environment, where all students feel welcome and are valued, and not considered 'other'. Rather than expecting, or indeed requiring, some students to modify or change in order to fit in, the UCD University for All model prioritises parity of treatment for all students. This model therefore is predicated on an institutional approach to designing–in student access and diversity, and ensuring that inclusion is everyone's business.

University for All Principles

We developed a set of underpinning principles to serve as the anchor for the UCD University for All model. These principles are core to the model; the mainstay of the approach, intended to act as a bulwark that will secure and guide its implementation. As described previously, the shape and format of implementation of the UCD University for All model may morph and change, as determined by each institution's context, influences, and milieu; the principles however, remain constant.

The development of the University for All principles was guided by consultation with key players, in particular an online anonymous survey to ascertain students' views on what they considered an inclusive university would look like. Their responses were most revealing. For example, one highlighted the need to "get around without needing to wait for someone to open a door or go the long way around away from my friends and other students". Another emphasised the need for "simple things: slides on Blackboard, emails answered and everyone comfortable enough to talk in class". Yet another said that there would be "no discrimination and nothing to get in the way of anyone who wants to go to college", while another said, "no matter where you come from or what your disadvantage might be, you have the option to avail of the same opportunities as everyone else and the help you need to do this is readily available". This survey underscored the importance that the essential components of an inclusive university are clearly understood by students.

The development of the University for All principles was also informed by the European Access Network Dublin Proclamation (EAN & UCD, 2016). This international gathering of over 200 higher education participants agreed on a set of statements to guide EAN's advocacy work.

As described earlier, students are part of the triumvirate of actors essential to the creation of an inclusive university (Kelly et al., 2023, p. 208). In 2022, the University for All Roadshow took place (UCD, 2022b), which involved students from all disciplines engaging in a series of events over the course of two weeks, where they had an opportunity to share their suggestions and views on the implementation of University for All. These contributions were then analysed and collated thematically according to a range of common headings, including, ageism, transport, societies, accessibility, supports, lectures, events, facilities, financial supports, campus, and representation. This sense checking exercise reinforced the underpinning principles and provided a structured opportunity to hear students' voices and perspectives on priorities, as well as generating ideas and solutions.

It is clear to us that the University for All principles remain a mainstay of the model and they have proved to be resilient, relevant and fit–for–purpose.

University for All Principles

1   Mainstreaming inclusion is the job of the entire university community and is the responsibility of all.

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2   Everyone has the right to equal participation and engagement in higher education.

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3   The student body entering, participating in, and completing higher education must reflect the diversity of Ireland's population.

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4   Widening participation means ensuring all students can access higher education and that they have an equal opportunity to progress and succeed within and beyond University.

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5   To achieve a university for all we must engage with everyone – students, faculty, practitioners, community partners, educators, researchers, and policy makers.

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6   The University believes that diversity is an enabler of excellence work.

Using Unlocking Inclusion: Toolkit for Universal Design in Higher Education

This Toolkit forms a central plank in the implementation of the UCD University for All model as outlined earlier in Section A. Since it was first launched in 2018, we have used it successfully and it has proved to be a most helpful, practical, and easily understood resource. The value of the Toolkit is described by one university Widening Participation Lead as a 'sword and shield' (Farrelly, 2023).

As described earlier, this Toolkit uses an institutional lens to reflect all zones of activity in higher education institutions, which collectively contribute to the provision of an effective and equitable learning experience for all students. This Toolkit is infused with Universal Design: this approach at its heart promotes flexibility, choice, and alternatives 'ways of doing'. It challenges perceptions and assumptions, and encourages anticipating and planning for a range of needs, barriers, and solutions, and deliberately designing–in these from the start.

Here, it is worth repeating the structure of the Toolkit as found in of the Toolki. It is organised into three sections, i.e.

> **Section A** – describes the Model for an Inclusive Higher Education: UCD's University for All Case Study

> **Section B** – outlines the Enablers, comprising 1) Institutional Foundations, 2) Initiative Scaffolding & Catalysts, and 3) Access and Inclusion Leadership.

> **Section C** – specifies the four Pillars (Pillar 1: Learning, Teaching, & Assessment; Pillar 2: Student Supports, Services, and Social Engagement; Pillar 3: Physical Campus and the Built Environment; and Pillar 4: Digital Environment).

> **Section D** – includes Conclusions, Glossary, References and Index.

Designed to assist higher education institutions to move from narrative and aspiration to action and institutional change, the Toolkit offers a systematic way to progress the creation of an inclusive learning environment. It does this by helping to identify the range of areas, activities, and processes that form part of this task. It allows for the identification of progress already made, which offers reassurance and a platform on which to build. The goal is to help identify any levers of change, potential resources available, and ultimately enable the development of a University for All Action Plan for the creation of an inclusive higher education environment. In summary, the Toolkit is intended to:

- Recognise the work already achieved.
- Identify areas of priority.
- Offer practical steps to implement and embed inclusive practice.
- Facilitate dialogue between faculty, professional staff, technical staff etc. on the importance of inclusive higher education practice.
- Assist in creating a University for All Action Plan.

Who Should Use this Toolkit?

This Toolkit is intended for use by all university and college leaders, faculty members, and professional and administrative staff to mainstream access and inclusion, foster confidence, and build a body of good whole–institution practice. While it can be used at various levels and departments throughout the organisation, ideally an institution–wide group, including those with responsibility for the organisational strategy, as well as each of the four pillars, works best.

Understanding and commitment of senior colleagues is a central component in realising the vision for an inclusive higher education experience for all students. If an institution has established a committee to support the work of access/inclusion/equality issues, this self–assessment Toolkit offers a mechanism to assess progress and to identify opportunities for action. Some areas of the self–assessment may require a more in–depth institutional knowledge; in such cases, engagement with relevant stakeholders is highly recommended. The completion of the self–assessment exercise with as many colleagues as possible can be highly effective in creating awareness of inclusive practice. Undertaking this exercise collaboratively also acknowledges and respects domain expertise and demonstrates inclusion in practice. In highly complex educational organisations, considering the perspective and standpoint of all stakeholders, including students, is highly recommended and often results in more creative problem solving and effective solutions (Page, 2007).

The ALTIT**UD**E Charter, reflecting the principles of the UCD University for All model, was developed collaboratively by the sector to ensure that Universal Design is embedded within institutional policy, thereby helping to ensure long term sustainability of inclusive practice and the creation of equity for learners in tertiary education. It is intended that **Unlocking Inclusion: Toolkit for Universal Design in Higher Education,** will enable and support the implementation of the ALTIT**UD**E charter, thus ensuring that these inclusion statements are translated into institution–wide practice and commitment.

Collaboration, Partnership, and Distributed Leadership

This Toolkit has been used extensively in UCD since its inception. The full implementation strategy and practice is explained and showcased in Kelly et al. (2023) and is briefly outlined here to assist those planning the use of the Toolkit in their own context. As mentioned above the Toolkit is designed for use with a group of colleagues either within a single discipline or unit or with representation from across an institution. Each statement should be discussed in small groups: a score should be agreed and (more important than the scoring) examples of good practice relating to the statement should be identified and areas of priority in the short, medium, and long term should be discussed with project ideas briefly outlined. Given the depth of discussion recommended for each statement, we recommend doing this self assessment for no more than one hour with 5 or 6 statements identified for discussion.

In UCD these workshops are led by our Widening Participation (WP) Leads who represent their discipline or unit on our University Widening Participation Committee. The role and purpose of the Committee is to provide a formal mechanism to oversee, monitor, and promote the University's achievement of a diverse and inclusive scholarly community (UCD Strategy 2020–2024: Rising to the Future), characterised as a University for All.

The WP Leads work with the University for All team to identify statements for discussion and other workshop elements which could include a student panel, an overview of relevant data, a Universal Design training workshop, or other relevant training such as digital accessibility. This model of distributed leadership increases buy–in and ensures that the areas of focus align with already established local priorities and resources. Following the workshop a project plan should be developed with a timeline agreed with senior leadership ensuring that metrics for success are planned and reported on for the lifetime of the proposed change projects.

The Toolkit can, of course, also be used by individuals with great success. It provides an overview of the key areas of change which can be implemented in a scalable way. We encourage colleagues, whether working individually or with their colleagues, to focus on a 'plus one' approach to change (Tobin & Behling, 2018) — improving inclusive practice in an incremental way allowing for systemic cultural change in an organisation which, above all else, takes time and sustained commitment.

Toolkit Structure

Section A   Describes the Model for an Inclusive Higher Education: UCD's University for All Case Study.

Section B   Outlines the Enablers, comprising 1) Institutional Foundations, 2) Initiative Scaffolding & Catalysts, and 3) Access and Inclusion Leadership.

Section C   Specifies the four Pillars (Pillar 1: Learning, Teaching, & Assessment; Pillar 2: Student Supports, Services, and Social Engagement; Pillar 3: Physical Campus and the Built Environment; and Pillar 4: Digital Environment).

Section D   Draws conclusions, lists the Terms used and offers an extensive bibliography.

How to use the Toolkit: Self–Assessment Exercise

The Toolkit is designed as a **self–assessment exercise**. A series of statements is set out for each of the three Enabler and four Pillar components:

Each statement asks for a score of 0—5, as follows:

- Provide a score of 0 if the area has not been considered previously. An area can be deemed 'considered' when it has been tabled in at least one mid to senior level meeting.

- Provide a score of 1 if the area has been considered but has been addressed poorly. An area can be deemed addressed when at least one action has been suggested, planned, and completed. The area may be considered poorly addressed if the action taken has not had the desired impact or if a number of further actions are required.

- Provide a score of 2 if the area has been considered and has been partially addressed.

- Provide a score of 3 if the area has been considered and has been adequately addressed. The area may be considered adequately addressed when no further immediate action is required.

- Provide a score of 4 if the area has been addressed fully across the institution. The area may be considered fully addressed when all necessary actions have been taken and a system of ongoing review of the area has been implemented.

- Provide a score of 5 if the area has been addressed and the institution is now a leader in this area nationally or internationally.

To help apply the Toolkit scoring, sample scores are outlined as follows:

Sample Scoring: Enabler 1: Institutional Foundations

- The educational approach sets out a vision and strategy to support equitable teaching and learning environment for all students.

A score of 5 may be given where the HEI's strategic plans include vision, mission and values statements, and accountability measures, such as objectives and key performance indicators (KPIs), that explicitly enable and support the provision of an equitable learning environment for all students. Where the HEI's strategic plans include a general vision statement but offer few, if any, inclusion–related KPIs, a score of 2 may be considered, as the area has been considered but is only partially addressed.

Sample Scoring: Pillar 1 — Learning, Teaching, & Assessment

- Academic skills training is embedded in programmes e.g. a student is never asked to complete a task where the skill has not been expressly taught.

In a HEI where academic skills training is provided to students outside of their programme modules through a separate service, i.e. it is not embedded in the programme, a score of 2 is given. That is, the area has been considered and training is provided, but it is not linked in with the programme, making the skills more difficult to acquire as they are taught in isolation. To improve the score here, the HEI could conduct a programme level examination of the skills students are expected to acquire, with a view to determining if these skills should or could be assigned to modules, where they would then be taught and assessed in an integrated way.

Sample Scoring: Pillar 2 — Student Supports, Services, and Social Engagement

- All students can avail of the same level of support. For example, students with disabilities are not referred through the disability service for mainstream supports available for other students.

In a HEI where students with a disability are provided with a range of supports, including writing, mathematics, IT, etc. by the disability service only, rather than providing access to these mainstream supports, which are typically available to other students, a score of 0 may be given. The issue has not been considered and, as a result, under–represented students receive segregated services.

Sample Scoring: Pillar 3 — Physical Campus and the Built Environment

- Entrances to buildings are independently accessible using automatic doors, therefore avoiding segregation.

In a HEI where there is an accessible entrance with automatic doors using push buttons, rather than sensors on all campus buildings, a score of 3 would be given. The area has been considered and addressed adequately. To improve this score, sensor doors, which do not require any additional action from the user, should be considered. Such doors require less maintenance in many cases, which would reduce the possibility of users needing assistance to get through malfunctioning doors.

Sample Scoring: Pillar 4 — Digital Environment

- All reports and other documents published online are provided in an accessible format.

In a HEI where reports are published in an inaccessible format, but an accessible version is available upon request, a score of 2 is warranted. The area has been considered — the need for an accessible version is acknowledged. However, this method of providing accessible formats on request requires students, staff, and other readers to make an extra effort in order to access the content. This segregates users who require accessible content and fails to acknowledge that accessible content improves readability for all.

Using Self-Assessment Results to Accelerate Change

Recognising that change in higher education is complex and multifaceted, we identified seven critical components (see Appendix) to embedding inclusion in these institutions (University for All Implementation Framework (Kelly, 2023, pp. 27/28). Promotion & Communication is one of these essential components and is a particularly useful tactic when applied to the self-assessment results. Ensuring that this information is disseminated widely in the institution will accelerate the institutional change process. Broadcasting and creating awareness of progress and challenges is integral to creating a 'ripple effect' and the expansion of endeavour, sharing of practice, and the generation of interest in the work of inclusion.

The achievements discovered during the self-assessment exercise are 'inclusion gold'. Unearthing examples such as data collection measures, innovative teaching practice, training and development opportunities, novel approaches to student support, removal of financial barriers, redesign of buildings, etc. serve to encourage and inspire, and warrant dissemination. Too often such successes remain hidden; are achieved quietly and so may be unnoticed, and tend not to be celebrated or acknowledged.

Communication of such achievements and successes offers a platform on which to build. It strengthens engagement, creates momentum, and, crucially, galvanises the institution's leadership, faculty, staff, and students to engage and support the next inclusion steps. Promotion and communication mechanisms can take many forms, including reports, lunch and learn events, communities of practice, seminars, exhibitions, social media campaigns, newsletters, etc.

Enablers

The section below addresses institutional Enablers, which are the elements that create the institutional environment, helping to prepare the ground, support and bolster efforts, and ensure that inclusion becomes an integral part of the university's DNA. In Ireland, three groups of students are identified as under-represented in higher education: those who are socio-economically disadvantaged (including low-income, first-time, or second-chance learners, and those who have experienced the care or criminal justice systems); members of the Irish Traveller and Roma communities; and students with disabilities (HEA, 2022, pp. 22–23). However, student diversity in higher education goes well beyond these groups, and now includes issues of nationality, age, gender, LGBTQ+, ethnicity, religion or linguistic minorities, and those with caring responsibilities (Athena Swan Ireland, n.d.; HEA, n.d., 2022).

As described in Section A, institutional transformation is central to UCD's University for All case study, and in this context, attention to the Enablers is crucial to the task of creating an inclusive higher education institution that embraces all students equitably (Kelly, 2023). These Enablers form the bedrock that reinforces the development of a systematic, long lasting, and effective change. Importantly, they also scaffold the evolution of the whole-institution approach and help shepherd and guide its development. Enablers also provide impetus for the creation of an inclusive higher education institution. They are the catalysts for change: the external and internal factors that propel new thinking and new ways of operating.

When developing the model for inclusive higher education, we were concerned with ensuring that inclusion would take root, becoming part of the organisational culture and thus, sustainable and institutionally hard-wired. Therefore, attention to the Enablers allows inclusion to be seeded into the fabric of the institution and, as a result, the associated changes are less susceptible to being buffeted by headwinds. In other words, the changes effected in the institutional environment will become "how things are done around here" (Schein, 2009, p. 37).

Three categories of Enablers are set out, together with their constituent components, as follows:

1. **Institutional Foundations (page 48)**
   - Institutional strategy and approach
   - Institutional leadership and organisational structure
   - Student leadership
   - Quality assurance
   - Faculty and staff recruitment and development

2. **Initiative Scaffolding & Catalysts (page 51)**
   - Oversight and governance
   - Metrics, data, and analytics
   - Policy environment

3. **Access and Inclusion Leadership (page 56)**
   - Implementation planning
   - Communication and promotion
   - Awareness raising strategies.

Figure 3 below.
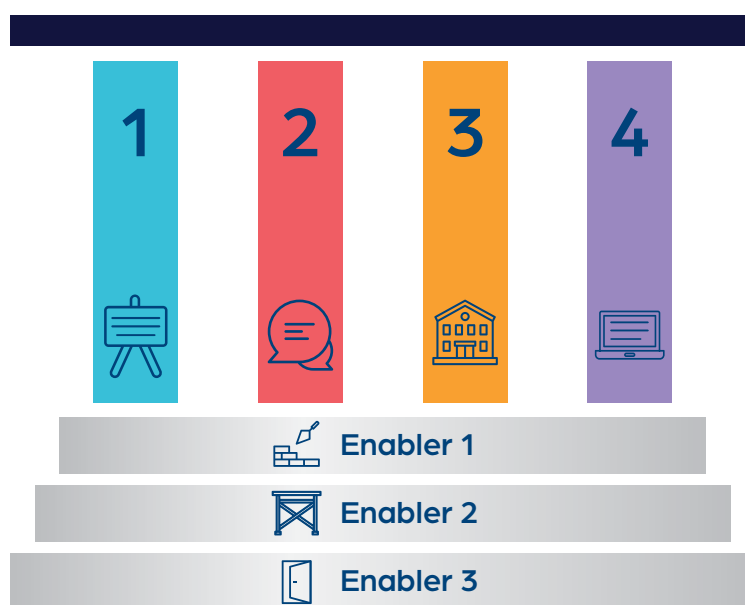
Figure 3. UCD University for All Implementation Framework

Enabler 1: Institutional Foundations

🗒️ **Self–assessment Exercise**

Using the series of statements below and the scoring system 0—5, as set out in Section A, undertake this self–assessment exercise. Thereafter, the output from this exercise will inform, identify gaps, and help shape your Action Plan.

Institutional Strategy and Approach

- Institutional strategic plans include:
  - vision, mission, and values statements;
  - accountability measures, such as objectives and key performance indicators (KPIs), that enable and support the provision of an equitable teaching and learning environment for all students;
  - specific reference to attracting and retaining a diverse student cohort;
  - commitment to universal design;
  - commitment to the provision of flexible and part–time education at all levels.

- The communications strategy and promotional materials reflect the diversity of the student population and inclusive nature of the institution.

- Funding arrangements are in place to support and facilitate student equity and inclusion.

- The institution has mechanisms in place to ensure adherence to relevant legislation/guidelines, including, the Irish Universities Act (1997), Technological Universities Act (2018), the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act (2014), the Disability Act (2005), Equal Status Acts (2000—2015), the Employment Equality Acts (1998—2015), the Education Act (1998), the HEA National Access Plan (2022—2028), and the HEA Race Equality in the Higher Education Sector: Implementation Plan 2022—2024.

Institutional Leadership and Organisational Structure

- The institution's leadership team explicitly holds responsibility for ensuring that a universally designed equitable education is available to all students.

- The institution has signed up to the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education (2024).

- Staff are assigned locally to lead, co-ordinate, and champion implementation of a universally designed equitable education within their academic schools/colleges, operational/administrative units.

- The institution's organisational structure enables and supports access and participation of under-represented students and the provision of an equitable education for all students.

- The institution's approach to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and widening participation supports and facilitates the provision of an equitable education for all students.

Student Leadership

- The institution's commitment to educating students as role models and leaders is articulated and includes advocacy, equity, and universal design development opportunities.

- Designated senior university leaders hold responsibility for ensuring that the voices and perspectives of all under-represented and diverse student cohorts are recognised and taken into account (as determined by HEA National Access Plan (2022–2028), the Student Success Strategy (2019), and the HEA Race Equality in the Higher Education Sector: Implementation Plan 2022–2024).

- The institution proactively ensures that diverse student cohorts are enabled to actively participate in university committees, working groups, etc.

- All incoming students (at under- and postgraduate levels) are offered co-curricular opportunities on diversity, inclusion and equity issues.

- The institution engages regularly with the Student Union to discuss inclusion, development, awareness raising campaigns, etc, in relevant activity, including class representatives, clubs, societies, etc.

Quality Assurance

- The institution's quality assurance and enhancement policy ensures student equity and success and supports access, diversity, inclusion, and widening participation.

- The institution's quality framework supports an inclusive environment for students through academic governance, academic regulations, and policies, and promotes their embedding in school/units.

- The institution's quality review processes ensure that student equity, access, diversity, and widening participation are embedded within the university, academic school, support unit or programme activity and addressed by each as part of reviewing and enhancing the student experience.

- The institution's quality assurance and enhancement procedures recommend representation from all student cohorts, including under-represented and diverse cohorts, in student feedback or relevant focus groups.

- Student data, including admission, progression, and success on under-represented and diverse cohorts inform the development of all self-assessment reports and discussions with quality review panels.

- Recommendations from quality review panels on student equity, access, diversity, and widening participation should be addressed by units in their quality improvement plans and five-year planning process.

Faculty and Staff Recruitment and Development

- The institution's human resources policy includes a commitment to recruit and retain a diverse workforce and leadership (encompassing age, ethnicity, colour, cultural background, disability, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic background).

- The institution's faculty/staff development policies include a commitment
  – to provide training and development in equity, diversity, inclusion, universal design, and compliance with legislative requirements for all staff (including leadership, faculty, professional, technical, and administrative);
  – to track and monitor the uptake of inclusion-related training;
  – to support learner co-creation in the design and delivery of professional programmes and services;
  – to operate a faculty/staff recognition and reward system that acknowledges and encourages all employees to support and adopt inclusive practices.

Enabler 2: Initiative Scaffolding & Catalysts

Self–assessment Exercise

Using the series of statements below and the scoring system 0—5, as set out in Section A, undertake this self–assessment exercise. Thereafter, this exercise should help to devise an action plan for any gaps identified.

Oversight & Governance

- The institution has an oversight committee aligned with the institution's academic and organisational structures, and reporting to the institution's management group, which is assigned responsibility for overseeing work to embed and mainstream access and inclusion, and the promotion of an equitable universally designed learning environment.

- The institution has arrangements in place to support and guide the work of this oversight committee, avoiding duplication of effort and/or a siloed approach.

- A senior academic holds the role of Chair of the oversight committee, with membership drawn from senior faculty, relevant policy and support services, and student representatives.

Policy Environment

- The institution's suite of policies support and enable the provision of an equitable learning environment for all students, including, education, student success, research, recruitment and admissions (undergraduate and postgraduate levels), programme governance, staff development, etc.

- The institution has mechanisms whereby academic policy, regulations, and other governance instruments are informed by national and international access and inclusion policy developments.

- Opportunities to inform and influence national access developments are fostered by the institution.

Metrics, Data, & Analytics

Data are compelling and can act as a catalyst. The use of Widening Participation (WP) data in capturing, reporting, and shaping an institution's mission is a particularly compelling concept. Our experience of fostering and promoting a University for All is that evidence is critical. We have found that the collection and dissemination of dynamic and relevant access data is a key lever to drive institutional transformation and embed inclusive strategies across the institution. Our data focus has moved from the collection of entry information to tracking retention and completion rates: this approach relies on analysis and interrogation at individual programme level, which greatly enhances and embeds 'access' ownership across programmes and disciplines. It also disrupts the assumption that the student population is homogenous, and that 'one size fits all'. WP data allow colleagues to assess their situation, to highlight the progress made, and to generate solutions where difficulties emerge.

We are persuaded by data transparency and democratisation and know the importance of stakeholders seeing the data, setting realistic targets per programme/ group and measuring progress overall. We can also see the merit in having data at the individual programme level. UCD gathers and reports internally on admissions, participation, progression, outward mobility, completion, and graduate outcomes, overall, and at the level of individual programmes.

Using the metaphor of data as a 'burning platform' is an evocative and tangible way to prompt us to act (Kotter, 2008, p. 120). Those who stand on a data platform "will begin to act differently if a fire starts on the floor beneath their feet" (Kotter, 2008). The clear, transparent, and democratic use of access data to record the proportions of all access students can offer us that platform and may have the impact of inciting enough urgency to generate change. In that context, performance metrics are an increasingly important factor in higher education decision making, particularly at public institutions (Felten & Hrabwski, 2016). "Inclusion of a WP [Widening Participation] metric … has the effect of reducing some of the differences … somewhat levelling the playing field between universities with different institutional priorities" (Hubbard et al., 2021, p. 295).

The launch of UCD's University for All initiative has given further impetus to the data process as we explore and share other ways of visualising and displaying our data with programme areas. When the University for All initiative was introduced to programme boards by the project team, all programmes requested disaggregated data in order to attain greater visibility of the diversity of students within their own programmes and make informed implementation and action plans. As a result of this, a data visualisation project began in April 2018 to provide both institutional and programme level data on our WP student profiles. These data were benchmarked against our 33% target for widening participation and provided to members of the Widening Participation Committee in UCD. The provision of programme level data is key to the implementation of University for All, and the dissemination of these disaggregated data through programme boards and University for All programme workshops has created a significant lever for change. This democratisation of data is critical in empowering and fostering a sense of ownership for the University for All initiative. The data were subsequently collated and written up in a publication *Who Counts*? (Fleming, Padden, Kelly 2022) and shared widely across the sector. The more institution–specific data specific to programme patterns of admission, participation, and retention are retained and shared on the Intranet.

1. **Scope of Data Collection**
2. **Data reporting**
3. **Definitions of under–represented student cohorts**
4. **Data collection mechanisms to be used to gather and report on these students**
5. **Participation targets and Key Performance Indicators**
6. **Reporting**

1. Scope of Data Collection

- The data being collected are consistent with a sector–wide agreed set of data metrics and multi–indicators for equity groups and facilitates reporting requirements of funding agencies. The agreed metrics recognise that student diversity in higher education also includes issues of nationality, age, gender, LGBTQ+, ethnicity, religion or linguistic minorities, and those with caring responsibilities.

- The institution has an access data system that allows for tracking, comparison, and reporting of access and inclusion metrics, and which meets the information needs of internal and external stakeholders. The data focus on the full student journey of access in higher education spanning pre–entry to career success.

- The key measures of student success are indicated, including diversity, experience, progression, and completion.

- Participation targets are set at institutional and programme levels, which include and reflect all the under-represented groups. Institutional metrics are also developed to measure embedding and mainstreaming access and inclusion.

- Student data are gathered and published, including entry, participation, and success at institution and programme levels and can be shared with a range of stakeholders, offering a range of access permissions that offer either headline data or more detailed data within the institution.

- Data are not shared where the number of students in specific categories is so low that there is a potential for a student to be identified. Mixed data options are all anonymised and include Student Voice/Testimonials, Student Feedback, and Focus Groups.

2. Data Reporting

- A live data system exists allowing for staff and faculty to view access, progression, and success statistics for all identified under-represented student groups.

- Data can be shown at all levels — institution, programme, stage, and module. This allows for additional supports to be provided, where necessary.

- Data can be easily visualised, allowing for planning of outreach, engagement, and recruitment strategies at all levels.

- Students give express permission for the use of their data for statistical and tracking purposes.

- Regular consideration is given to appropriate access to data across the institution.

3. Definitions of Under-represented Student Cohorts

- There is a clear and institution-wide definition of each student cohort which is clearly articulated and shared with the university community and stakeholders.

- The definition of each cohort or equity group reflects national policy and has been agreed at the most senior level in the institution.

4. Data Collection Mechanisms to Gather and Report on Under–represented Students

- A data collection mechanism, which records and tracks each equity group/access cohort is centrally located, robust, and uses a methodology that is consistent with the institution's WP targets, KPIs, and definitions.

- Data include more than quantitative data, incorporating student voice and triangulating the data with qualitative evidence from such as Student Survey.ie (https://studentsurvey.ie/).

5. Outreach Data

- A data collection mechanism is in place, which records and tracks pre–entry initiatives & participation, to measure impact and the numbers who transfer to higher education.

- Pre–entry, student recruitment, and admissions policies are in place which address the needs of access cohorts identified as under–represented in higher education.

6. Participation Targets and Key Performance Indicators

- Key Performance Indicator (KPIs) have been developed to measure the admission, progression, and success of access student cohorts, as well as metrics that facilitate embedding and mainstreaming access and inclusion.

Enabler 3: Access and Inclusion Leadership

📋 Self–assessment Exercise

Using the series of statements below and the scoring system 0—5, as set out in Section A, undertake this self–assessment exercise. Thereafter, this exercise should help to devise an action plan for any gaps identified.

Institutional Approach to Access and Inclusion

- The institution's access and inclusion strategic plan is
  – consistent with national access policy and addresses entry and participation, student success and engagement, progression and completion, and graduate outcomes;
  – promotes a universally designed inclusive and equitable learning environment;
  – aligns with the institution's policy objectives and priorities, including education, engagement, and research.

- The institution has a mechanism to allocate and monitor the staffing, financial, and training and development resources necessary to undertake its access and inclusion objectives.

- The institution's structural and operational arrangements enable
  – a whole–institution approach to access and inclusion;
  – central co–ordination, while dispersing responsibility and accountability to academic schools, professional, and administrative units.

- The institution recognises, promotes, and supports the development of students as leaders and advocates for inclusion.

Implementation Planning & Monitoring

- The institution has allocated resources to the implementation of an institution–wide approach to mainstreaming access and inclusion, including
  – a dedicated team to lead the project;
  – 'local' change teams;
  – student advocates/leaders;
  – access/widening participation data metrics and data.

- The institution uses the **University for All Implementation Framework** (Appendix) to identify the key components needing attention, timelines, and priorities for action.

- The institution has arrangements in place to facilitate and support the self–assessment exercise and the development of a University for All Action Plan.

- The institution requires regular reporting at local and institutional levels of University for All Action Plans, which include current good practice, identifying gaps, and setting out priorities for the future.

Communication and Promotion

- The institution has a university–wide communications strategy to promote an equitable learning environment for all students.

- The institution encourages, supports, and monitors the visibility of diverse students in materials such as brochures, publications, speeches, symposia/conferences, etc.

- The institution has identified and engages with a range of external stakeholders and partners (such as schools, FET colleges, local authorities, community organisations, etc) to advance access and inclusion.

- The institution provides opportunities to share access and inclusion practice, experience, and learning, such as Community of Practice.

- The institution uses a range of awareness raising events, actions, and celebrations to promote an understanding of access and inclusion issues.

Actions to Consider

Strategic Planning Process

Is the institution's strategic plan due for renewal? This offers a useful opportunity to review current practice and consider timely changes and/or additions to progress mainstreaming and embedding access and inclusion. It may be helpful to revisit any inclusion statement, with a view to strengthening or amending. If such a statement is not part of the existing strategic plan, a case could be prepared for its inclusion, pointing to external policy developments, such as the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), SOLAS, etc.

Review of Policies

Likewise, are other institutional strategies or policies due for review? These can include policies which govern education and student success; equality, diversity & inclusion: staff development, programme governance, recruitment, admissions, careers, etc. Such opportunities offer the space to infuse these documents with inclusion, equity, widening participation, and diversity concepts, thus creating a university–wide ripple effect. These reviews also offer a time to align the institution's approach with national policies, where these exist. Seizing the opportunity to amend such policy documents offers an 'inclusion backstop' that will support efforts to move the agenda forward and help create a culture of inclusion.

Possible Challenges and Suggested Solutions

Competing Priorities in Higher Education

The institution's key priorities typically revolve around research, teaching, and community partnership, and thus institutions may view development of institution–wide inclusive practice as burdensome. In dealing with these concerns, it may be helpful to situate the need for such practices in the context of national access policy goals and objectives, which promote the creation of equitable learning for all students (HEA, 2022b). In HEIs today, key faculty and professional staff are demonstrating good practice in including students from diverse backgrounds; acknowledging this commitment benefits these staff and also offers examples to the wider institution. Alongside diversifying the student profile, national access policy also prioritises mainstreaming the delivery of access (HEA, 2022). Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 places a legal duty on public sector organisations to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality, and protect human rights in their daily work. It requires public bodies to take proactive steps to address the equality and human rights issues that affect the people who use their services, people affected by their policies, and people employed in the organisation.

The Institution is Performing Well in Terms of the Number of Diverse Students Admitted

This argument is sometimes heard in institutions that have historically placed emphasis on outreach and building links to enable students from diverse backgrounds to attend college. These colleges may also have well–developed supports in place for some students, such as students with disabilities. Such work is an essential component to increasing access to higher education. However, the focus of national access policy is on increasing the participation and success of under–represented students, and on creating a universally designed learning environment (HEA, 2022b). Creating a sense of belonging is central to ensuring an equitable learning experience for all students (Fleming, 2023; Thomas, 2023). Using the institution's data is a useful way to begin a conversation on student participation, progression, engagement, and success.

Another argument that comes to the fore is the progress that has been made to increase participation at undergraduate level. This must and should be acknowledged; however, the achievement of advanced degrees is required in some professions, such as teaching, social work, etc. and there also is increasing evidence that higher level qualifications are becoming de–facto requirements. Hence, the quest for access to an equitable education at all levels remains the goal.

Examples of Good Practice

Loyola Marymount University (LMU), USA

The DEI Office and University Intercultural Council (UIC) aim to identify and fund inclusive excellence capacity building, community healing practices and projects that help LMU achieve its mission by way of infusing diversity and interculturalism throughout the campus community. UIC Membership includes staff and faculty who represent various departments and units across campus https://resources.lmu.edu/dei/initiativesprograms/grants/.

James Cook University Australia (JCU) Inclusive Practice Awards

Through AccessAbility Services, the Directorate of Learning, Teaching and Student Engagement assists teaching staff to provide the best teaching and learning experiences for JCU's diverse student population. The Inclusive Practice Awards have been part of AccessAbility Services since 2000 and are presented annually. The Awards recognise the efforts made by staff to be flexible, consultative, proactive, and/or innovative in minimising the challenges for students studying with a temporary or permanent disability, injury, illness, or health condition — https://www.jcu.edu.au/centre-for-education-and-enhancement/pd-and-recognition/awards-and-citations/inclusive-practice-awards-ipa#:~:text=The%20Awards%20recognise%20the%20efforts,injury%2C%20illness%20or%20health%20condition.

University College Dublin (UCD)

UCD has several strategies and programmes in place. UCD Strategic Plan is an example of an institutional strategy that addresses inclusion issues in both the vision statement and also in the key goals (https://www.ucd.ie/strategy/). The UCD Education & Student Success Strategy: https://www.ucd.ie/registrar/educationstrategy/ is an example of how UCD infused access and inclusion into its educational strategy. UCD University for All is an example of how UCD has translated its strategic commitment to access and inclusion by assigning responsibility to the UCD ALL for leadership, planning, and monitoring of actions to become an inclusive university. https://www.ucd.ie/all/aboutus/. The University has set up a UCD Widening Participation Committee, whose role is to oversee and monitor progress towards the achievement of an inclusive university. Its remit extends to all facets of campus life, including academic programmes; infrastructure and facilities; student support; outreach and engagement; and costs, finance, and scholarships. https://www.ucd.ie/universityforall/.

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Erasmus University has developed the IDEA Centre (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity & Access) to thread an access and inclusion perspective through the university https://www.eur.nl/en/about–eur/vision/inclusion–diversity–equity–access.

Pillars

Pillar 1: Learning, Teaching, & Assessment
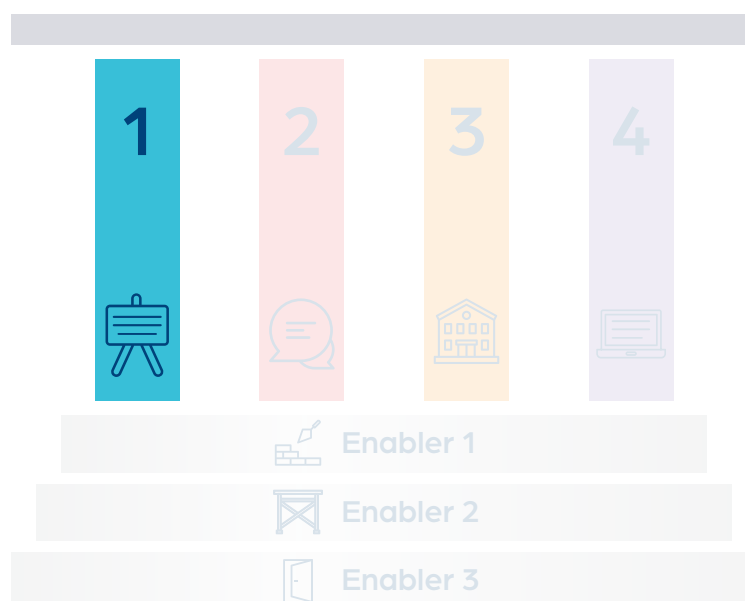
Figure 4. Pillar 1: Learning, Teaching, & Assessment.

 The students' experience in their academic programme constitutes the primary component of their educational journey. Because of its centrality, it is placed as the first pillar in the development of an inclusive institution (Kelly, Padden, & Fleming, 2023). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is the primary framework used in the development of inclusion in this area with the provision of flexibility being the main priority throughout elements of engagement, representation, as well as action and expression (CAST, 2018). While UDL is the main framework engaged with here, it should be noted that the statements in this area have been enhanced through the provision of learner feedback gathered as part of the ALTIT**UD**E Charter development project (ALTIT**UD**E Project, 2024).

In Ireland, three groups of students are identified as under-represented in higher education: those who are socio-economically disadvantaged (including low-income, first-time, or second-chance learners, and those who have experienced the care or criminal justice systems); members of the Irish Traveller and Roma communities; and students with disabilities (HEA, 2022, pp. 22–23). However, student diversity in higher education goes well beyond these groups, and now includes issues of nationality, age, gender, LGBTQ+, ethnicity, religion or linguistic minorities, and those with caring responsibilities (Athena Swan Ireland, n.d.; HEA, n.d., 2022).

The statements below are designed to assist in identifying progress made and in establishing opportunities and priorities for further development in the areas of learning, teaching, and assessment.

Pillar 1 components are:

- Programmatic approach
- Assessment
- Teaching materials
- Classroom practices
- Decolonising the curriculum
- Work placements/internships/practice education
- Assistive technology in the classroom

Self–assessment Exercise

Using the series of statements below and the scoring system 0–5, as set out above, undertake this self–assessment exercise. Thereafter, the output from this exercise will inform, identify gaps, and help shape your Action Plan.

Programmatic Approach

- Teaching takes place during the usual business hours of the institution. Where exceptions are considered, such as weekends, the impact on students who have commitments, such as childcare, eldercare, or employment, are considered and flexible arrangements are put in place.

- Workload is balanced across modules of the same level and credit weighting.

- Core graduate competencies are agreed, and programme teams work together to ensure students are all taught the associated skills allowing for individual learner pace.

- Equality, diversity, and inclusion is visible in the curriculum, and this can be clearly articulated (e.g. decolonising the curriculum, gender balance, disability awareness, adult learning principles, disparity of wealth, ageism, etc.)

- Specific issues of inclusion form part of the feedback gathered for each module/ course and actions are taken to close the feedback loop.

- All information regarding Reasonable Accommodations for students with disabilities is communicated appropriately and discretely to those teaching these students, and these students are invited by teaching staff to discuss any individual needs with them.

- Students are given the opportunity to be partners in their learning and have input in co-creating teaching content, assessment, and other processes.

- Learning and assessment are centred on problem solving, engagement, and action, rather than on memorising content.

- Programme design includes development of academic skills and information literacy, with the skills required expressly taught at every stage (i.e. assumptions are not made about skill levels).

- Opportunities to engage in outward mobility are available for all students, removing barriers that may exist for a diverse student population i.e. financial, accessibility, etc.

Assessment

- Assessment strategies are aligned across a programme and student workload is taken into consideration when planning deadlines and exams.

- Students always have a diversity and/or choice of assessment e.g. a module isn't assessed using only one method such as a midterm essay followed by essay-style exam questions/answers.

- In all modules, students have the opportunity to complete continuous assessment.

- Timed exams are replaced with other assessment modes where possible, consistent with student feedback.

- There are readily available published rubrics, marking criteria, sample answers, and grade descriptors available to students. Where possible the rubric is developed through co-creation with students.

- The requirement to complete hand-written timed exams is eliminated, where possible.

- Feedback is always provided early in line with institutional policy (ideally within three weeks) and students have an opportunity to discuss feedback one–to–one with teaching staff.

- Students are provided with preparation and skills training for assessment modes throughout their programmes.

Teaching Materials

- A variety of learning materials are provided ensuring that these are given in advance on the VLE where possible.

- Reading lists are prepared on a programme level, taking into consideration cost, availability, and accessibility. As much material as possible is provided in a free of charge, accessible digital format in collaboration with library support services and provision of ebooks.

- Students are provided with a glossary when starting a new module or area of study.

- All teaching materials follow guidelines for accessible documents (e.g. good colour contrast, sans–serif font, minimum size 24pt for presentations, minimum size 12pt for printed materials, etc.)

- Materials are provided in a clear and consistent manner in the virtual learning environment (VLE), where possible using an agreed, accessible template to maximise ease of use across modules.

Classroom Practices

- Online, hybrid, and hyflex options are developed where practicable, in line with student feedback.

- The physical teaching space is used as collaboratively as possible, encouraging student engagement even in large lecture theatres e.g. using technology–enhanced exercises.

- A community of learners is fostered in the classroom through group work, and group assessments and material are provided for study groups who wish to meet outside of class time.

- Students have the opportunity to meet with teaching staff one–to–one, either at advertised office hours or at dedicated "module clinics". Students are encouraged to engage in this individual communication.

- Student belonging is actively fostered through relationship building both with students and among students.

- Cognitive load is considered and students are provided with comfort breaks and regular opportunities to check understanding.

- Captions are activated by faculty for all classes both in person and online.

Decolonising the Curriculum

- Curriculum review takes place regularly examining inclusion of histories of disciplines, with particular focus on race, empire, slavery, and how these are navigated.

- A citation policy is in place for reading lists which recommends a percentage of marginal scholars are included in the lists for each module.

- In each module there is an explicit inclusion of subjugated histories, voices, cultures and languages.

- Where diversity in teaching staff has not been achieved, faculty identify guest lecturers to ensure representation of marginalised voices in the discipline.

Work Placements/Internships/Practice Education

- Each programme provides an opportunity for students to engage in practice education – placement, internship etc.

- Additional cost is identified and removed as a barrier for student engagement in work placement and internship.

- Students are given support in identifying and securing placement opportunities ensuring that lack of cultural capital is not a barrier to engagement.

- Universal Design training is provided to placement partners e.g. clinical sites, on–site placement coordinators etc.

- Community partners are identified as potential placement sites to ensure diversity in offerings for students and representation of diversity.

Assistive Technology in the Classroom

- Assistive technologies, such as lecture capture, are embedded in classrooms, labs, etc.

- All teaching spaces have a microphone and speakers, which are regularly maintained to ensure good working order.

- Audio induction loop systems, also called audio–frequency induction loops or hearing loops, are integrated in all teaching spaces on campus. These systems allow those who use hearing aids to access audio content more easily.

Key Actions to Support Pillar 1

Curriculum or Programmatic Review — Recognition of Current Inclusive Practice

Higher education institutions typically undertake periodic curriculum or programmatic reviews. These offer opportunities to review current practice and to identify areas where more inclusive practices could be adopted. Such review processes can be a vehicle to acknowledge and/or recognise the existing good practice across faculties.

Promotion Pathways and Rewards for Early Adopters

It is recommended that faculty members who engage in inclusive practices be formally recognised. The promotion pathway offers a route for such recognition. Where possible, it is recommended that demonstration of inclusive practice be embedded in existing promotion pathways rather than as a separate recognition process developed to acknowledge such work. Such a mainstreaming approach reflects the importance of this work and signals that improving the accessibility and inclusivity of teaching is a requirement for all faculty. Other recognition mechanisms could include monetary awards or other awards achieved through application or nomination.

Possible Challenges and Suggested Solutions

Academic Autonomy

Traditionally, faculty members have had a high level of autonomy in their work, which allows them to focus on their chosen field of research and area of specialty. At times, this can be considered as a barrier to introducing changes in practice, in that they can be seen to infringe on that level of autonomy and academic freedom. A useful way to address such concerns is to adopt both a top-down, as well as bottom-up, approach to embedding and mainstreaming inclusion. A whole-institution approach that clearly identifies access and inclusion as integral parts of the institutional vision, goals, and policies, etc. sets clear expectations regarding the priorities and ambition of the institution. Using language of persuasion, rather than enforcement, in the first instance is helpful in encouraging uptake of inclusive practices. Identifying early adopters and collating case studies for others also helps to provide practical advice for those who wish to develop their own practices, as does rewarding such practice, as described previously. Ultimately, legislation requires that all students are treated equally (e.g. Equal Status Act 2000 to 2004 and Disability Act 2008): this legislative argument can be used as a final resort. Persuasion and collegiality, however, are more effective when endeavouring to achieve long-term changes to practice.

Contact Time, Class Size, Student/staff Ratios, and Content Requirements

Some faculty members may be concerned that increased engagement time with students and scaffolding skill development may leave less time for delivery of content. Emphasising the link between programme delivery, content, and graduate attributes offers a useful way to demonstrate the importance of embedding increased engagement, expression, and interaction in teaching and learning activities. At programmatic review, it is recommended that the key content is identified, and a redeveloped strategy and timeline allows sufficient time for successful delivery, which includes multiple means of action, expression, and engagement for students. These principles form the basis of Universal Design for Learning about which those teaching students should be provided with professional development, as outlined above.

Artificial Intelligence and Academic Integrity Concerns

Recently, concerns in relation to the impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence and its impact on academic integrity have meant a shift back towards timed in-person exams. We are now seeing a return to pre-COVID-19 levels of timed assessments which is causing serious strain on our students as well as the systems and staff who support examinations. A shift in thinking is required as ultimately we will not be able to find 'AI-Proof' assessments and rather we need to consider assessments which are authentic and offer opportunities for students to practise their learning as well as demonstrate understanding and knowledge. A counter-argument which can be useful here relates to improving AI literacy for both students and faculty. Explicitly addressing concerns about AI in class and through engaging class discussions and tasks can reduce the fear of AI and demonstrate to students how it can be used as a scaffolding tool in some cases but not as a replacement for learner effort.

⭐ Examples of Good Practice

Universal Design and Inclusive Curriculum Training and Resources

An important step in developing inclusivity within teaching and learning is the provision of training and resource development. The method of this can vary and should be tailored to suit the institution's culture. Atlantic Technological University has developed the first masters level UDL programme in Ireland. This programme which begins with a Postgraduate Certificate with the option of going on to masters level is designed to further participants' knowledge in UDL and also to provide support in the development of UDL-based research which will add to the evidence and resources already available. The Institute of Art, Design and Technology has developed a Special Purpose Award worth 10 ECTs at Level 9 on the topic of Universal Design for Teaching & Learning. This model allows for the development of expertise across faculty in varying disciplines with a specific purpose of embedding inclusivity. In UCD, universal design is embedded in various modules across the Professional Certificate in University Teaching and Learning, including modules on curriculum design, assessment, and technology. Trinity College Dublin has developed the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum programme, which is a self-evaluation tool, including suggested actions to improve inclusivity in the curriculum. AHEAD and UCD have developed a digital badge in Universal Design for Teaching and Learning, which forms part of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education professional development framework.

Faculty Partnership as Platform for UDL Implementation and Professional Development

In an environment where those who are teaching are time-poor, a structured and resourced model is needed to support the implementation of change to the teaching, learning, and assessment environment and practices of educators. One such model is the funding of teaching staff/faculty as partners who lead on facilitation of UDL professional development and support of colleagues who are redesigning their practice to embed inclusion. This has worked well, both in the development of new modules and when reviewing modules where a difficulty or barrier has been identified. This model is successful as it empowers already engaged faculty, while providing them with a platform from which to influence and persuade their colleagues. This partnership model has operated in University College Dublin since 2021 (Kelly, Padden, & Fleming, 2023).

Institution-led Lecture Recording

A significant educational barrier for some students is the need to rapidly take notes in lectures and other classes. While this is an important way of learning, it also acts as a barrier for students who have a difficulty with listening and writing simultaneously, and they often miss out on recording vital content. Some students with disabilities are given permission to audio record; however, concerns may arise as to the ownership, quality, and subsequent use of such recordings. An institutional policy approach to video recording was beginning to emerge before 2020 and has become an even more pressing matter post-COVID. There are several benefits to lecture capture: faculty and educational technology staff can edit the material recorded, as they deem necessary; the recording quality is improved; and the intellectual property rights are clarified. From a student perspective, all experience an inclusive and supportive learning environment, where those with particular needs are not 'othered'. For example, the University of Manchester has equipped all of its teaching spaces (over 340) with lecture capture technology. JISC reports that "they record approximately 40,000 hours of teaching and learning activities per academic year, and these recordings have been accessed in excess of two million times by students." University College Cork (UCC) has implemented lecture capture using Panopto, facilitating remote recording of lectures in over 100 teaching spaces across the campus.

Inclusive Teaching & Learning Policy

The University of Edinburgh has developed an [Accessible and Inclusive Learning Policy](#) to enhance the student experience by creating a learning and teaching environment, and culture, that is dynamic, accessible, and inclusive. This policy applies to all students and all staff who teach and support students. According to the following guidance:

1. Course outlines and reading lists shall be made available at least 4 weeks before the start of the course.

2. Reading lists shall indicate priority and/or relevance.

3. Lecture outlines or PowerPoint presentation slides for lectures/seminars shall be made available to students at least 24 hours in advance of the class.

4. Key technical words and/or formulae shall be provided to students at least 24 hours in advance of the class.

5. Students shall be notified by email of changes to arrangements/announcements such as changes to courses/room changes/cancellations.

6. Students shall be permitted to audio record lectures, tutorials, and supervision sessions using their own equipment for their own personal learning.

7. All teaching staff shall ensure that microphones are worn and used in all lectures regardless of the perceived need to wear them.

Pillar 2: Student Supports, Services, and Social Engagement
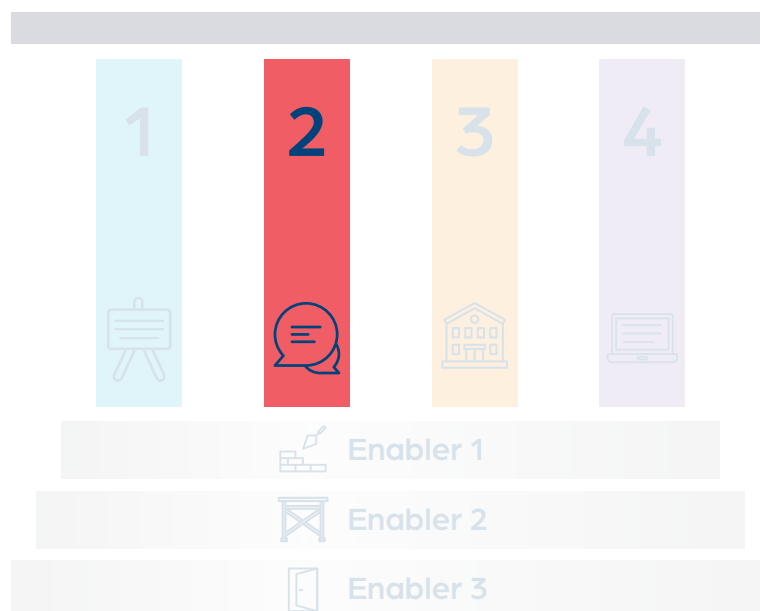
Figure 5. Pillar 2: Student Supports, Services, and Social Engagement.

The second pillar of the framework in the development of an inclusive higher education institution concerns services and supports, which enable students to participate fully, enhance their study experience, and act as the platform for their success and well–being.

In Ireland, three groups of students are identified as under–represented in higher education: those who are socio–economically disadvantaged, (including low–income, first–time or second chance learners, and those who experienced the care or criminal justice systems); members of the Irish Traveller and Roma communities; and students with disabilities (HEA, 2022, pp. 22–23). However, student diversity in higher education goes well beyond these groups, and now includes issues of nationality, age, gender, LGBTQ+, ethnicity, religion or linguistic minorities, and those with caring responsibilities (Athena Swan Ireland, n.d.; HEA, n.d., 2022).

The Myth of the Ideal Student

Access to higher education is fundamental to securing opportunities and options. The last one hundred years has seen the transformation of higher education from a collection of small elite institutions to a mass system. This growth has generated new challenges in respect to the logistics of selection, funding, resources, organisation, and governance. In addition, there are more complex challenges to creating different conditions for teaching new types of students with diverse aspirations and academic talents. Higher education expansion also raises a series of challenges about the diversification of the sector and the changing nature of student support, and student support roles, within higher education.

This is explored in more detail in the chapter on Pillar 2 — Student Supports & Services in *Making Inclusive Higher Education a Reality* (Kelly et al., 2023). Here, Fleming discusses two discrete but relevant strands of student support in a university for all, examining the universality of design and delivery to maximise the impact of support for all students, and the status afforded to those staff who provide such support (Fleming, 2023).

The importance of the first-year experience as the foundation stone to successful student engagement, student retention, and student learning is well established in the literature (Tinto, 2006; Kuh et al., 2009; Brinkworth et al., 2009). Student engagement, which is defined as a key part of student success (Kuh et al. 2009), encompasses both social and academic aspects of the student experience and is influenced by activities inside and outside of the classroom (Krause & Coates, 2008). Student supports should be seen as an integral and intentional part of student life. They should be as critical to a student's learning experience as teaching and research. If we were to consider the concept of a three-legged stool, with teaching and research as two of those legs, the third leg, and the one that balances that structure, is Student Support.
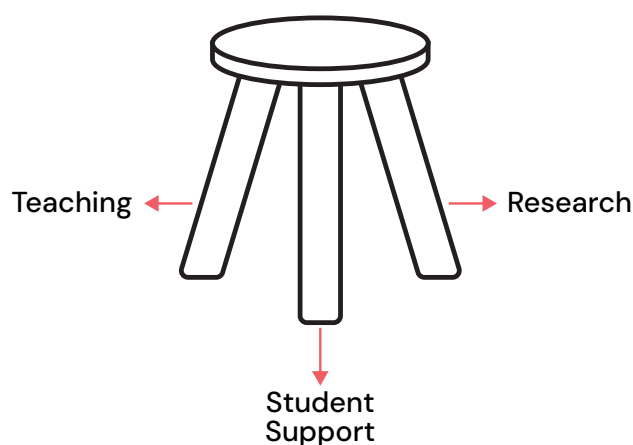
Figure 6. Three critical aspects of a student's experience: Teaching, Support, and Research.

Typically, however, the commentary on Student Support can often come from a deficit discourse with an accompanying narrative that "there's something wrong with me". This deficit framework is further entrenched by commentary that refers to surviving or resilience and coping. This lexicon suggests that student life and study are to be endured rather than intentionally managed and enjoyed.

The promotion of student success and engagement in an inclusive university involves:

a. Increasing a sense of belonging to the university.

b. Using learning and teaching practices that enhance engagement and inclusion.

c. Ensuring that assessment practice enhances learning.

d. Providing accessible support services.

Availability of Data and Tracking Students

The effective and efficient collection of robust student data requires a significant investment of time and expertise. This can pose a challenge to some higher education institutions. Data are typically gathered on many student groups. Gathering similar information on under-represented students is recommended. The ready availability of accurate student data enables the timely provision of relevant information, which can be used not only to report on student admissions and to compare different cohorts, but it also enables planning for areas such as outreach, recruitment, and provision of student supports.

An institutional approach is helpful, as is convening an institution-wide group, to agree the student definitions, taking account of national definitions, such as the HEA definition of mature students as those over the age of 23 who haven't previously engaged in higher education. It is also recommended that an effective and efficient mechanism be devised to collect the data, ideally at application/registration stage. Safeguards will also need to be considered to ensure that students are made aware of the purpose of data collection and the ways their data will be used.

Student Support in a University for All — "it takes a campus to educate and graduate a student"

Universities know that student supports are important. However, both the status of the supports and the perception of them is vexed. Student supports tend to be located outside the academic sphere. Consequently, they are typically located in administrative or professional units, serving and supporting but unlikely to be shaping. Some student support roles are new or evolving and support staff may not have "ready-made scripts for their roles" (Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2019). The location and governance of student supports therefore runs the risk of undermining or devaluing the function, efficacy, and impact of student supports and services in supporting an inclusive university.

Max Weber referred to academic life as "an utter gamble" (Ruser, 2020, p. 162). This epithet of a gamble could also be applied to the status and security of some roles in the university. Rosewell and Ashwin (2019) distil the perceptions of the academic role to being either a researcher, a teacher, a researcher and teacher, an academic, a professional, or a manager. Similarly, the role of 'professional staff' has also changed. The earlier description of roles being either 'academic' or 'non-academic' has been challenged as the "binary perceptions tend to polarise academic and non-academic activity, with the result that the two are often seen as being in tension with each other" (Whitchurch, 2013, p. 5). In his study of academics' perception of professional staff, Gray (2015) refers to a perception of a divide between academic and professional staff, with the latter being comparatively impotent or largely invisible, in spite of the contributions they make to their institutions. In his observations in 'Culture clash or ties that bind?' These observations have led to an alternative and promising concept — that of the Third Space.

The application of the concept of Third Space captures an alternative to the binary perception. Whitchurch proposes the use of Third Space to explore the emergence of broadly based, extended projects across the university, which are no longer contained within fixed boundaries and have generated new roles and activities. The Third Space captures the complex, altering, and dynamic nature of the current higher education landscape, as even the term 'professional' is contestable. However, in general, 'professional' now refers to staff who are not employed on academic contracts (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007). While professional staff may not have academic contracts, many have academic credentials and experience and may be research active and teachers. Similarly, academic staff may also work in this Third Space, bringing a range of additional skills and competencies around project management, leadership, and innovation (Fleming, 2023, p. 138).

Dispelling the Myth

Irrespective of what language we use to describe student supports, or those working in support, what is most important is to "dispel the perception that seeking support is reserved for those who are desperate or dependent and promote the importance of [students] utilising their available support as a key attribute of an independent student" (Wong & Chiu, 2019, p. 878). The capacity to signal and understand what supports are available to students throughout their student lifecycle is key to offering the right support at the right time. Some students come into HEIs connected and ready. Conversely, others, especially those from under–represented backgrounds, may need to overcome their fear or reluctance to ask for help. Students may know about the services available, but don't want to go because they are either afraid or too proud to ask for help. It is therefore important to factor this insight Into planning supports and the communication of them to student cohorts. It is our responsibility "to create inescapable opportunities for connections" (Smith & Williams, 2021), so that everyone is connected and not just those who came in ready. Central to this is the development of a range of formal and informal opportunities to engage with, or mentor, students. Brad Johnson, a leading scholar on mentoring in the USA, emphasises that students do not need a mentor — they need a constellation or a web of mentors. Having this constellation means that they get a range of support (W. B. Johnson, 2014). The ideal scenario would be the fostering of a culture that allows for 'Mentors of the moment' where students can have opportunities — in the moment — where they can have one–off discussion. To develop this, the institution has to foster a culture of informal check–ins and relentless welcoming (Scobey, cited in Felten & Lambert, 2020) — a dynamic that asks 'how are you doing?' And then listen.

Self–assessment Exercise

Using the series of statements below and the scoring system 0–5, as set out in Section A, undertake this self–assessment exercise. Thereafter, the output from this exercise will inform, identify gaps and help shape your Action Plan.

Pillar 2: Supports, Services and Social Engagement components are set out, together with their constituent components, as follows:

- Promotion of student success
- Accessing student services
- Academic advice and guidance
- Operation of Student Support Services
- Financial support
- Careers services
- Workplace
- IT support
- Library services
- Student mental health services
- Outreach, recruitment, & admissions

Promotion of Student Success

- The institution has adopted a universal design approach to development of all student services and supports.

- Student services and supports are advertised centrally and through individual programmes and faculty. Information on supports is available in an accessible format (online, plain English, clearly signposted).

- A collaborative approach to providing support and guidance is used across services for those students deemed "at risk", with a clear understanding of key roles, record keeping, and referral.

- Students are given a method of providing feedback. This feedback is reviewed and actions are taken when necessary.

- Messaging around belonging, being welcome, and fitting in are incorporated into Social Media, Communications, and notices at Pre–Entry, Orientation and Welcome, and throughout the student's time on campus.

- The institution has developed a coordinated approach to student engagement with student societies and Students Union.

Accessing Student Services

- All students can avail of the same level of support. For example, students with disabilities are not referred through a disability service for mainstream supports that are available for all other students.

- Access to library and key student supports services are available in off–peak hours and open to all students, including part–time students.

- Learning supports in academic skills and study management, and programme specific supports, are available to all learners through in–person and online methods.

- There is a clear and integrated communication strategy that minimises the number and range of information being emailed to students. This may be achieved by targeted communication to relevant cohorts and should prioritise critical academic or financial information.

- Communication to students is clear and intuitive and the methods can be anticipated so that students can predict where they can locate key information and updates.

- Professional/Support staff have all received Universal Design, GDPR, Unconscious Bias, and Disability Awareness training.

Academic Advice and Guidance

- All students have access to a designated faculty member to support them in making appropriate choices from a wide range of opportunities towards achieving realistic academic and professional goals.

Operation of Student Support Services

- There is a clear referral system in place between support services. The referral system offers transparency to staff, faculty, and students in relation to process, waiting times, and confidentiality.

- Childcare is provided for students who require this service. This is provided in a facility on campus, is affordable, and allows for flexibility of hours.

- Communication methods with services should be made clear, and students should be given clear guidance as to the timeframe within which they can expect a response (e.g. such as a response time to emails).

- Student expectations of the service are managed through clear information at every step of the process, before and while using a service.

- Services are provided free of charge, where possible. Where a service charge is levied, financial support is available to the student where required, and the process of availing of this support is simple and fast. If financial support for a service is provided from within the institution, the payment is made directly and does not require the student to make an initial outlay.

- Support services offer flexibility for students who are experiencing challenges in relation to finance, access, or other commitments beyond the control of the student.

- All services are available on a flexible basis (outside core hours and in accessible locations).

Financial Support

- Policies governing financial support are in place to ensure the achievement of a diverse student body.

- Scholarships and Bursaries are available to students.

- The eligibility criteria are established and align with sectoral guidelines and with best practice (such as, SUSI, DFHERIS).

Careers Services

- Careers education, information, advice, and guidance are available to all students.

- Mentoring services are available for all students on professional programmes.

- All Career staff can offer advice to students with disabilities in relation to disclosure in the workplace.

- Internships and placement sites are provided with necessary training and clear lines of communication and responsibility in relation to providing supports for under–represented student groups.

- Advice and support are offered to all students on the appropriate attire for interview/workplace, and advice is provided on an inexpensive way to achieve this.

Workplace

- Academic Programmes for the professions (e.g. Law, Medicine, Architecture, Nursing, Teaching, Actuarial Science, Social Work, Engineering, etc) have a process for engaging with the professions and for early career support and progression opportunities (e.g. Alumni networking, mentoring programmes, and support for summer internships).

- A process is in place for engaging with the professions to build capacity to develop inclusive workplaces.

- Academic programmes which include work placement, including the fields of teaching and healthcare, have incorporated inclusive practices for placements as part of their approach to universal design.

IT Support

- PCs and laptop loans are provided for students to use on campus regardless of programme, stage, etc.

- Assumptions are not made about the devices available to students, e.g. many students are not in a position to purchase a new laptop or tablet when entering higher education.

- Support is provided for students in the use of technology, taking into consideration all levels of skill.

- Support is provided online, on the phone, and face–to–face.

- Support is provided through workshops and one–to–one support.

Library Services

- The redesign or development of library spaces will incorporate principles of universal design to incorporate elements of accessible spaces, quiet study spaces, sensory spaces, etc.

- A simple system for uploading reading lists is available for faculty to allow for texts to be available online, or in sufficient numbers, before teaching begins.

- Texts are available online, where possible, to allow for access from home or other off–campus locations.

- Extended loans are available for those with an identified need for this service, such as students with a disability, those who study part–time, have financial needs, or other commitments. An example of this service is the provision of a semester–long loan scheme for low–income students.

Student Mental Health Services

- Student health and well–being policies are in place.

- Positive mental health is promoted to all students, including education campaigns and services, such as mindfulness groups.

- Waiting times for counselling services are stated clearly and adhere to best practice. There is quick access for these services to additional funding to ensure this level of service.

- Access to counselling and mental health services is monitored and reported to anticipate the growing demand for this key service.

- Counselling service is delivered by trained counsellors.

- Access to counselling services is communicated in a clear and accessible manner, with student expectations for the service clearly articulated.

- Students may self–refer, but may also be referred through other support services and faculty for a priority appointment.

- A psychiatrist is available to students via referral (either internal or external to the institution) from the Health or Counselling service.

Outreach, Recruitment, & Admissions

Outreach
- The institution's outreach strategy is informed by a clear understanding of potential students' needs and is based on consultation and engagement with stakeholders.

- Pre-entry initiatives and external community partnerships are publicised as part of the institution's communication strategy.

- The institution-wide outreach approach is multifaceted, builds capacity, supports aspirations, and demystifies higher education. It may include mentoring and opportunities for students to taste or experience the campus.

- The institution-wide outreach approach provides opportunities for faculty and students to engage in the development and delivery of initiatives and leverages the benefits of a co-ordinated approach with an institutional network.

- Each programme engages in outreach activities and initiatives which address the pre-entry needs of the access cohorts identified as under-represented in higher education.

Recruitment
- Clear information on the entry criteria and application process for all admission pathways is visible on all promotional material. Marketing and promotional material reflect the diverse student population in higher education.

- Policies governing Graduate education, and the inclusion of mechanisms to attract, recruit, and support a diverse student population, are in place.

Admissions
- Admissions policies identify an admissions quota for all entry routes – these are distributed equally and practices are in place to maximise the number of under-represented students receiving these places.

- Admission policies, flexible entry routes with full and part-time academic programmes, are in place, which address the needs of access cohorts identified as under-represented in higher education.

- Each academic programme develops a range of flexible entry routes to address the needs of access cohorts identified as under-represented in higher education.

- Key stakeholders are involved in an annual review of enrollment policies and practices. Policies governing student support such as information, financial support, and social support are in place to ensure the success of a diverse student body.

Key Actions to Consider for Student Support

All Supports for All Students

Historically, many so–called non–traditional or under–represented student cohorts have been supported solely by specialised services, e.g. mature students meet a dedicated mature student officer for <u>all</u> needs. In an inclusive higher education institution, it is recommended that the underpinning philosophy is that 'a student is a student', regardless of background, age, disability, and pace of study. In this scenario, all supports will be offered to all students. For example, students requiring writing support or academic advice will be able to receive this support in the same way, regardless of entry route. Where supplementary supports such as assistive technology or learning support are required, these are usually provided by specialists. In this context, these supports augment rather than replace mainstream services. This approach strengthens inclusion and mitigates the tendency to consider under–represented student cohorts as 'other'.

Universal Design Beyond the Classroom

The growth of student supports is accompanied by an increase in the numbers and range of staff supported students. This has prompted the development of a new [Universal Design Beyond the Classroom Online Digital Badge](#), led by Access & Lifelong Learning, in partnership with AHEAD. This new badge has been developed for professionals working 'beyond the classroom' and offers an understanding of Universal Design and how to apply it to professional roles. The free badge offers practical knowledge and tips to empower student engagement and support staff working beyond the classroom, to make their contribution to the student experience more flexible and accessible to all. It has been created for further education and training (FET) and higher education staff who interact either directly or indirectly with students and learners beyond the reaches of the classroom setting. The UD badge is a clear reflection of HEI commitment to Continuing Professional Development in this key area of student support.

The Relentless Welcome

Incoming students, irrespective of their background or prior experience, need to feel welcome, and that they belong. Welcoming students is more than a single event, and is described by David Scobey as a 'relentless welcome'; emphasising the need to maintain and integrate a sense of welcome (Scobey, cited in Felten & Lambert, 2020). Students need more than a welcome session of a week at the start of their programme, it needs to be maintained and reframed across campus and throughout their studies. This is of particular importance to those for whom the campus may appear like a strange land (Reay et al., 2009).

This approach can also incorporate the need for different interventions when students need them, particularly at critical times in their study. Many students experience a crisis in what can be described as 'Wobble Week' which can be Week 6 or 7 in their semester when assignments are first due and the academic workload can seem insurmountable.

Some institutions have experimented with the use of Chatbots to be available to offer instant responses or referrals to standard but pressing questions students may place out of hours. This proactive and thoughtful approach to student support should enhance the student experience, reassure those who are anxious and concerned, and ultimately facilitate the student to proceed and to thrive, not just survive.

Belonging

> **If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, then there will emerge love and affection and belongingness needs, and the whole cycle already described will repeat itself with this new centre. Now the person will feel keenly.**
>
> *Abraham Maslow*

A sense of belonging is a basic human need located within Maslow's framework. American scholar Terrell Strayhorn is recognised for his definition of belonging in the context of university engagement as "perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected and valued" (2019, p. 4). Strayhorn offers a conceptual model that draws on Maslow's hierarchy to highlight that students' fundamental needs and motivations (physiological necessities, safety, belonging, esteem, and self–actualisation) depend on social spaces and the college environment and that these experiences can have an adverse or advantageous impact on the student experience.

> **Higher education is a culture. It has clear markers of its cultural character (Strayhorn, 2022).**

Recognising that higher education is a culture is to recognise that it needs to be understood or interpreted. If a student is a first-generation entrant they will need to be assisted by a 'cultural navigator'. In our context these cultural navigators may be academic or student advisors, access professionals, access leaders, or family or friends. Whoever these navigators are, we need to recognise the importance of conveying the university's rules of conduct, its customs and values, and language. Recognising the value of navigating and conveying positive and inclusive language and messaging will facilitate that critical sense of belonging, and everything that it implies and promises.

Lessons from COVID-19

The oft quoted "Never let a good crisis go to waste" attributed to Winston Churchill, is appropriate when considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the higher education system in Ireland. The crisis prompted a range of flexible and innovative solutions to student support and challenged many assumptions and practices, prompting more flexible models of delivery and learning.

A post-COVID-19 campus requires students to adapt anew to face-to-face learning and this poses challenges as they transition from remote learning. Critically, those students for whom a remote learning environment was positive have to either adapt or negotiate a more flexible approach to their learning.

One clear benefit of the adaptability brought about by COVID-19 has been the demonstration of the merits of flexibility. Those students for whom full-time engagement in higher education is not an option due to work, family commitments, or health factors, have demonstrated that they can effectively engage with the academy remotely. This illustrates the potential of a flexible higher education provision that addresses the need of those for whom previous provision, requiring on-campus presence, was a barrier to access. The COVID-19 crisis also highlighted the divide between those students who are resourced, and those who are not. This was particularly evident with challenges around internet connectivity, as well as the absence of an appropriate place to study.

Academic Advising

Student support should not be considered the preserve or responsibility of a specific and small number of student support specialists. Student supports are around helping a student decide. The emerging growth of Academic Advising is critical in offering key insights and choices to students. Academic Advising is part of the educational experience, where students are supported by faculty in making appropriate choices from a wide range of opportunities towards achieving realistic academic and professional goals (UCD, 2024). The new UCD Academic Advising objectives aim to facilitate students to:

- Evaluate personal interests and abilities leading to the creation of realistic academic and professional goals.

- Develop an educational plan that leads to the timely completion of educational goals.

- Develop the critical thinking and independent decision–making skills to make and accept responsibility for academic decisions.

- Understand the most appropriate choices to make in order to achieve goals (module or major choices).

- Know what the most appropriate research opportunities are to support their educational and professional goals.

- Know what the most appropriate internship, study abroad, and or co and extra curricular opportunities are to support educational and professional goals.

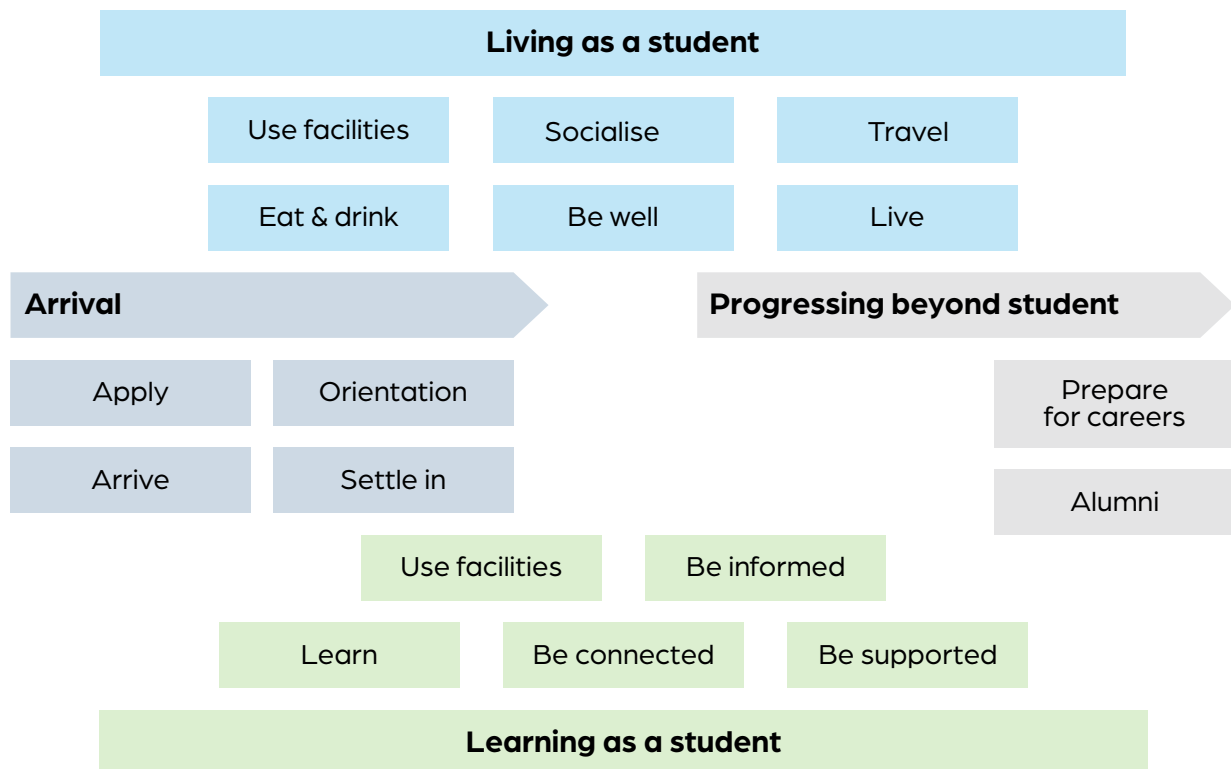**The Role of Reflective Practice in Student Support**

Theories of reflective learning and practice are generally associated with the work of John Dewey a century ago (Dewey, 1910), who articulated the basic creed that *We learn by doing*.

These ideas were revived and further developed in the 1980s by theorists such as Donald Schön (Schön, 1991), who advanced the theories of reflection 'in' and 'on' practice. He argued that organisations and individuals need to be flexible and should incorporate lessons that are learned throughout the lifespan. He termed this organisational learning.

This learning is key to Organisational Development (OD) and is central to being an adaptive organisation. This requires the institution to sense changes in signals from its environment and adapt accordingly. In the context of Student Support Professionals, this process model could be used to interrogate student support practice and the extent to which staff are prompted or inclined towards reflection – moving from 'Doing the Right Things' to 'Doing Things Right'.

Student Support Map

Student support and services are widely available in higher education. Some of these may operate separately from other parts of the institution and thus may appear disjointed to the student. One useful way to alleviate this and present services in a seamless fashion is to create a map of services. Is it recommended that this mapping process involve all key stakeholders, including students. Such an approach offers clarity, signposts the services available, and provides clear contact information. It is also an effective way to ensure that students can quickly identify the support service that they need. This will reduce the occasions where students approach a 'wrong' service, which may result in them being sent in search of a different service to get the help they need. The UCD Student Support map, as depicted in Fleming (2023), is shown as an example (see Figure 7).

Living as a student

| Use facilities | Socialise | Travel |
| Eat & drink | Be well | Live |

Arrival →   **Progressing beyond student** →

| Apply | Orientation |
| Arrive | Settle in |

Prepare for careers

Alumni

Use facilities   Be informed

Learn   Be connected   Be supported

Learning as a student

Figure 7. UCD Student Experience Map, 2019.

Possible Challenges and Suggested Solutions

Consistency of Support Across All Student Groups

Ensuring coherence, consistency, and availability of student support across all programmes is a complex operation that offers many challenges, particularly in larger institutions. In this context, adopting a mainstreaming and inclusive approach can be considered as onerous. Staff expertise and skills are central to the provision of effective student services and supports. Initiating a consultation process about mainstreaming can be a useful way to begin as it helps create awareness of the goals of inclusion, offers an opportunity to identify good practice, and it determines any training and development gaps. Addressing staff development needs in areas such as written, verbal, and digital communications, and unconscious bias, offers a solid foundation on which to build understanding of inclusion issues and enables staff to identify solutions that are appropriate to their particular setting.

Increasingly, students are engaged in work placements as part of their studies. Critically, and reflected in the Employment Equality Acts 1998 as amended, the Act includes work placement as part of a course in its definition of employment. Part 2, Section16; 3 (b) states that an employer shall do all that is reasonable to accommodate the needs of a person who has a disability by providing special treatment or facilities, and the Act further notes that "references to a person who has a disability include… such a person who is participating in any such course or facility". In this context it could be constructive to offer UDL training to those external workplace employers to facilitate them in accommodating the needs of those on placement.

Identifying Groups Who Require Supports

Identifying those who require supports, such as financial, academic, and personal, is challenging where students are reluctant to identify as needing such services. Students entering through the various alternative entry routes are identifiable and so more easily targeted for support. However, higher education is experiencing a growing number of students who also require particular supports and services, including students from low-income households, those parenting alone, as well as students who are struggling academically and/or failing to progress, etc. The development of an institutional framework, built on the principles of mainstreaming and inclusion, offers an effective guide to the delivery of services and supports for all students. Such an approach also helps normalise the concept of support, and it encourages and reassures all students that support is an integral part of their educational experience.

Examples of Good Practice

A Cohesive Approach: Working Groups for All Those Supporting Students

It is important that those working in the areas of student support have an opportunity to network, share information, and exchange practice. In UCD, there are two mechanisms through which this occurs. Firstly, a "Supports for Students Working Group" offers a monthly meeting for a range of services, including Access & Lifelong Learning, Estates Services (including Campus Services and Residences), Graduate Schools, Graduate Studies, International Office, IT Services, Library, Programme Offices, Registry (including Admissions, Assessment, Communications, Fees/Grants, Registration, Scholarships, Student Desk and Student Recruitment), Student Advisers, Student Services/Orientation, Students' Union, and UCARD (Student ID services). Typically, meetings include updates, information sharing, and, importantly, provide an opportunity for staff to meet each other and become aware of the roles and responsibilities of other services — the contact points. It also helps to ensure smoother and faster referral processes. Secondly, a "Combined Services" group in UCD provides an opportunity for Student Advisers to meet with the Chaplaincy and the Student Counselling Service. These are two examples of institutional arrangements that strive to provide a mainstreamed and seamless service to students. Encouraging communication across discrete services means students will not be incorrectly referred or faced with asking their question multiple times before finding the answer.

Childcare Provision on Campus

University College Cork (UCC) provides an onsite crèche facility, which caters for the children of students and staff. Reduced fees are available to full-time students — https://www.ucc.ie/.

Galway 100

The student voice and authentic representation are key to collaboration and engagement. The University of Galway identifies a representative sample of students, called Galway 100, who act as a sounding board for Student Services on new initiatives and resources. They help to ensure the university's services are student-centric, accessible, inclusive, and responsive to student needs. In existence since 2021, the group (which changes every year) has supported the development of a student journey map, the Cara chatbot, advised on exam supports and the weekly student ezine. The group regularly participates in focus groups with other units across the university to give feedback on several topics including website developments, communications, and services — https://universityofgalway.ie/galway-100/.

Engage Student Award

Dublin City University has developed a student award to recognise and reward student extra-curricular engagement and achievement. The award is endorsed by IBEC (Irish Business and Employers Confederation) and is recognised by Ireland's top employers. It allows graduates to highlight the additional skills that they have developed at university and is considered an enhancement to students' CVs. The awards are offered across three levels — Bronze, Silver, and Gold (the Uaneen Award). Students can start at any level but ideally should start at Bronze in First Year and build towards the final award —
https://www.dcu.ie/students/about-dcu-engage-student-award.

Peer Support, Peer Mentoring, Peer Assisted Learning

Peer support can be instrumental in the success of students in higher education. The positive impact of peer supports and mentoring is particularly important for under–represented students, such as those with disabilities, students from low–income households, and mature students. Organised programmes that promote the formation of peer bonds through mentoring, social groups, and subject tuition ideally should be integrated at an institutional and programme level. A UK report drawing on the findings of a three–year study into peer mentoring, conducted at six higher education institutions, provides empirical evidence that peer mentoring works (Andrews & Clark, 2011), suggesting others should:

1. Consider embedding peer mentoring as part of an institutional retention strategy.

2. Decide on the form of mentoring programme to be introduced.

3. Design a robust and well–structured programme.

4. Appoint a dedicated person, or persons, to manage the programme.

5. Ensure effective marketing of the programme.

6. Introduce a rigorous mentor selection and training process.

7. Take care in pairing mentees and mentors to ensure a good match.

8. Make clear the availability of ongoing support (if needed).

9.   Evaluate the programme at an appropriate point or points in the year.

10. Consider academic credit / recognition for mentors.

Customer Communications for Services to the Public — A Universal Design Approach

This resource provides guidance on written, verbal, and digital communication in the public service. It contains checklists, examples, and other useful elements, which can be easily understood and implemented and is available to read online or can be downloaded as an accessible pdf.

Pillar 3: Physical Campus and the Built Environment
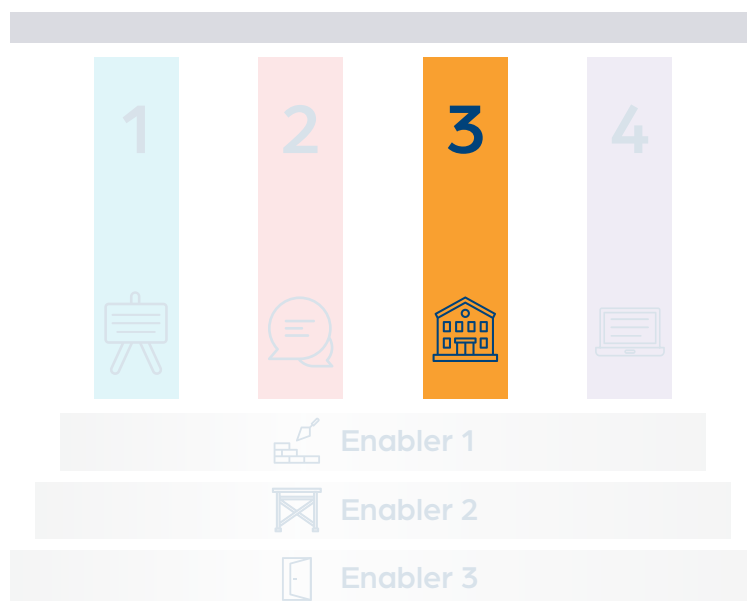
Figure 8. Pillar 3: Physical Campus and the Built Environment.

Pillar 3 centres on the development of an inclusive built environment, a pivotal component in the development of an inclusive learning environment. In Ireland, three groups of students are identified as under–represented in higher education: those who are socio–economically disadvantaged, (including low–income, first–time or second chance learners, and those who experienced the care or criminal justice systems); members of the Irish Traveller and Roma communities; and students with disabilities (HEA, 2022, pp. 22–23). However, student diversity in higher education goes well beyond these groups, and now includes issues of nationality, age, gender, LGBTQ+, ethnicity, religion or linguistic minorities, and those with caring responsibilities (Athena Swan Ireland, n.d.; HEA, n.d., 2022). Lombard (2023, p. 155) describes the relationship between the person, environment, and everyday performance, and defines an inclusive built campus as

> **one that caters to the diverse needs of the population so that as many users as possible can access, navigate and use the campus facilities without the need for specific accommodations, modifications or assistive technologies and hence can engage in all aspects of university life.**

She characterises the physical environment as part of the 'jigsaw' of higher education, with the physical campus and built environment directly impacting and influencing levels of student engagement with everyday activities, including teaching and learning, research, recreation, residential activities, retail, sport, and wellbeing activities. It is crucial that campus development is informed by data, and Lombard stresses that such data need to reflect all user needs including, physical, cognitive, age, gender, language, and culture.

Corcoran and Hamill (2023), who work as 'campus custodians', recommend that higher education needs "to go beyond mere compliance and to understand that inclusivity and diversity is to be embraced and encouraged in the university community, and that the built environment of the university should be equally inclusive by design" (p. 181). They describe the development of a 43–point Universal Design checklist (Appendix, p. 221) to which all 'new builds' are subject. Sweeney and Lowe (2023) describe how primary responsibility for campus inclusion and accessibility moved from the access service to Estates Services. They cite particularly important lessons in this process, including gathering data and evidence, assigning resources, fostering effective collaborative working relationships, creating awareness, developing ownership, financial commitment, incremental change, and the support of senior leaders.

Pillar 3 components are:

- Built campus: strategy and leadership
- Exterior considerations
- Interior considerations
- Student on–campus residential accommodation
- Faculty and staff recruitment and development

An inclusive built campus is one that caters to the diverse needs of the population so that as many users as possible can access, navigate and use the campus facilities without the need for specific accommodations, modifications or assistive technologies and hence can engage in all aspects of university life.

Self–assessment Exercise

Using the series of statements below and the scoring system 0–5, as set out in Section A, undertake this self–assessment exercise. Thereafter, this exercise should help to devise an action plan for any gaps identified. An in–depth campus accessibility audit may be a necessary next step.

Built Campus: Strategy and Leadership

- The institution's strategy for the development of the built campus, including new builds and accessible public transport, goes beyond compliance with the relevant Building Regulations (e.g. Part M 2010 Building Regulations), to embrace and promote inclusion for all.

- The institution has mechanisms in place to address the availability of public transport, particularly from under–served communities, which aligns and supports outreach activities and the goal of further diversifying the student body.

- The institution has a designated senior Estates' leader with responsibility for ensuring that the built environment is accessible and inclusive.

- The institution has mechanisms in place to monitor the impact of the physical campus and built environment on student engagement with everyday activities.

- The institution has a mechanism in place to regularly gather and report on university community (faculty, staff, and students) data and feedback on accessibility and inclusion of the built campus and associated public transport services.

- The institution has mechanisms in place to enable the allocation of funding and resources to ensure the built campus is accessible and inclusive.

Exterior Considerations

- The principle of universal access and building navigation is applied: where this is not possible, appropriate ramps are provided, which are not segregated from stepped access.

- The institution has a campus accessibility auditing process, which reviews, monitors, and reports regularly.

- The institution ensures that the range of campus accessibility features are addressed, including:

- wayfinding map, showing accessibility and universal design features;
- approach to campus is well–lit and has directional signs to guide students to their destinations, using a range of accessible information, such as visual cues (maps, directions, symbols) and/or audio;
- tactile paving is provided to alert campus users to the edges of paths, changes of level, roads etc;
- handrails are provided beside slopes/ramps;
- pedestrian crossings provide auditory, as well as visual, signals;
- automatic doors are provided, rather than doors designated for people with disabilities set off to one side;
- layout of the walkways and the use of 'street furniture' allows for unrestricted, hazard–free safe movement;
- Students are provided with route training.

- Designated car parking spaces are available
  - for people with accessibility requirements who hold a permit;
  - for people with caring responsibilities;
  - temporary parking permits are provided for students who acquire an illness or injury and who require accessible parking on short notice;
  - parking set down areas are provided, with clear signage, to allow ease of access to all buildings;
  - on–campus enclosures are provided for service dogs.

- The institution offers a Personal Emergency Evacuation Planning service.

Interior Considerations

- The principle of universal access and building navigation is applied to all buildings. Where this is not possible, appropriate ramps are provided, which are not segregated from stepped access.

- The institution ensures that the range of interior accessibility features are addressed, including:
  - consistent approach to wayfinding within all buildings;
  - surfaces are accessible and safe i.e. polished surfaces are avoided;
  - directional signs to guide students to their destinations, using a range of accessible information and in accessible formats, including visual cues (maps, directions, symbols), audible aids, and tactile signs;
  - good lighting and visual contrasts are provided (e.g. a contrast strip is provided on pale walls);
  - provide for ease of movement to enable travel horizontally or vertically, including lifts;

- the provision of independently accessible sanitary facilities;
- the provision of lecture halls, laboratories, and study spaces which promote and facilitate participation by all students, thus avoiding segregation or (e.g. spaces for students using wheelchairs are within the lecture theatre and not in a segregated "box" at the back).

- The institution has a service dogs and/or emotional support animals policy that includes:
  - information on access to residences, teaching spaces, libraries, other support facilities, etc;
  - the provision of designated 'spending areas' for guide dogs.

- Changing facilities are provided in all buildings for people with disabilities.

- Designated respite/quiet spaces are provided for students who may become fatigued due to an ongoing illness or disability, or are neurodivergent.

- The institution accommodates the spiritual needs of the campus community through spaces that balance a diversity of religious, spiritual, and meditative practices.

On–campus Student Residential Accommodation

- The institution's student residential accommodation policies take account of:
  - the needs of a diverse student cohort, including those who attend part–time, those who have caring responsibilities, low–income students, care leavers, prison experienced students;
  - the availability of flexible accommodation arrangements, including 12–month lease options, shared, discounted, short stay, etc.

- The accommodation needs of wheelchair users are met, including:
  - the provision of en–suite rooms;
  - wheelchair accessible rooms.

- Assistance is provided to students seeking off–campus accommodation, and support is provided for students who experience difficulty with housing.

- All staff and residential assistants are provided with disability awareness training.

- Residence/Accommodation assistants are recruited from students recognised as low–income groups.

Key Actions to Support an Accessible Built Campus

Dedicated Role for Ensuring Accessible Infrastructure

In Ireland, the Disability Act (2005) stipulates that all public bodies are required to appoint "access officers" to coordinate arrangements for people with disabilities. Higher education institutions have made a variety of arrangements to satisfy this requirement. Typically, they tend to integrate these responsibilities with other roles. To ensure that accessibility moves beyond compliance to full inclusion, the appointment of a dedicated staff member, whose role is to ensure a coherent approach to ensuring accessible infrastructure, may be helpful. The role could include overseeing an audit of existing campus buildings and grounds, developing awareness of the needs of students with disabilities, and liaising with infrastructure teams undertaking any remedial and building works.

Access Consultancy Services

Consider accessibility at early design stage – where the higher education institution does not have expertise or experience in-house, an access consultancy should be considered in the design brief of the new project (Corcoran & Hamill, 2023). Such services typically offer advice and training particularly on issues of disability access, building legislation, compliance, and certification (https://www.accessconsultancy.ie/about).

Liaise with the Student Union

As the student population is the largest user group of any campus, the creation of arrangements to meet Student Union and student representatives about infrastructural issues can be helpful. Such meetings are useful in creating awareness of access issues for particular student cohorts and in identifying any areas of concern and potential solutions. This is also a good way to decide on priority areas of work: footfall alone may not be the best measure of potential impact for improvements.

Possible Challenges and Suggested Solutions

Older Buildings With Planning Restrictions

Many university campuses have a rich history and the earliest buildings stand as monuments to the history of the institution. These buildings can provide a challenge in relation to retrofitting for accessibility, as often they have heavy, narrow doors, stepped access, and various internal and external level changes. Some buildings may have 'protected' status, which poses additional layers of complexity in any renovation process. Trinity College Dublin installed concealed wheelchair lifts, which will emerge from the ground using cantilevers, thus facilitating access to the Exam Hall and the Chapel, both of which are protected buildings (MacNamee, 2018).

Cost and Funding

Funding remains a constant challenge in higher education institutions, and sourcing financial resources to carry out infrastructural work often presents additional concerns. An audit of campus infrastructure typically results in identifying a list of renovations needed. It is recommended that this is prioritised in terms of size, timescale, impact, and funding required. Grouping these works into projects that can be aligned with larger developments, and those requiring stand–alone remediation, can also be advantageous; it is often easier to undertake some accessibility works as part of a larger–scale development. The allocation of dedicated funding for remediation works, to be undertaken on an annual basis, is an effective and manageable way to approach the smaller scale activity, such as, retrofitting automatic doors, adding ramps, accessible toilet facilities, or purchasing systems such as a portable loop system.

Protocol for Reporting Campus Accessibility Concerns

UCD Estates has developed a protocol for reporting campus accessibility concerns, which offers a centralised approach to logging and monitoring such issues.

Promotion of Accessible Routes on Campus

It is important to promote the accessible features made to campus infrastructure so that students and staff can become familiar with these changes, and as a result their awareness and knowledge of these issues grows. UCD's campus accessibility offers information, videos, etc – https://www.ucd.ie/all/aboutus/campusaccessibility/.

NaviLens

NaviLens is a new accessible signage and information tool for the built environment.

It is a free application that uses colourful, customisable QR codes to assist users in wayfinding and identifying essential landmarks and services (see Figure 9). Offering audio–cues, written text, and vibrations, NaviLens is designed to assist users who are visually impaired to independently navigate the world around them, and in particular, internal spaces that cannot be easily captured by resources such as Google Maps.

As a University for All, UCD is currently piloting NaviLens to assist the UCD community in familiarising themselves with the campus environment. Phase 1 will focus on helping students to find key interior features such as elevators, bathrooms, and accessible entrances. Phase 2 will address the customisable aspect of NaviLens in providing scannable information about key University supports such as programme offices and their opening hours, booking links for appointments, and out of hours contact information. It is hoped that NaviLens will support the University's commitment to universal design by providing the flexibility of allowing students to engage with support services on their own terms, in their own language (NaviLens presents information in the language of the user's phone), and with a variety of communication options presented – https://www.navilens.com/en/.

Ground Floor
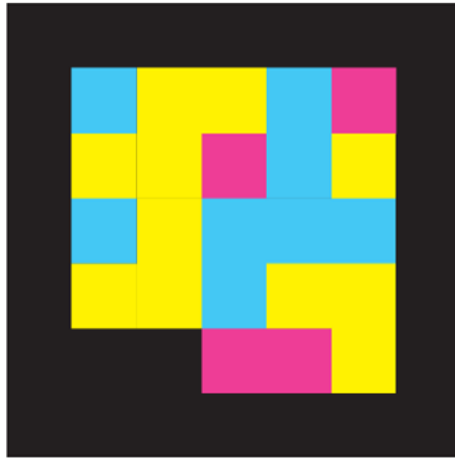
Figure 9. Example of a NaviLens colourful and customisable QR code for wayfinding and identifying essential landmarks and services.

Quiet Spaces and Quiet Times

Dublin City University (DCU) has been designated an [Autism–Friendly University](). An element of this designation is the provision of quiet spaces on campus, and quiet times during events. A busy campus can be an overwhelming experience for many students, including those with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD), and students managing sensory sensitivities. Designation of quiet spaces is increasing in importance, as the growth in social and group spaces have increased in libraries, which may traditionally have been regarded as quiet spaces. Programmes to promote increased student collaboration to improve engagement and participation: it is important that the impact of this approach is considered in the physical space on campus.

Wayfinding on Campus

The National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) has developed a resource to streamline and improve the campus [wayfinding](), with a view to providing a navigable, coherent campus that meets a diverse range of uses and users.

Short Stay Accommodation for Commuter Students

As the number of students who cannot afford to live locally rises, an increasing number commute ever–longer distances in order to attend college. [Maynooth University]() (offers a number of accommodation options, including short stay options. Such facilities enhance student engagement opportunities, including participating in clubs, societies, and college events more broadly.

📖 **Additional Resources**

The NDA Centre for Excellence in Universal Design has developed a number of key resources, which are useful when considering the built environment.

- [Building for Everyone: A Universal Design Approach]() provides comprehensive best practice guidance on how to design, build, and manage buildings and spaces so that they can be readily accessed and used by everyone, regardless of age, size, ability or disability.

Pillar 4: Digital Environment

Figure 10. Pillar 4: Digital Environment.

The final pillar, Digital Environment, was often overlooked in the pre–COVID landscape, but in recent years it has become clear that the digital campus is now as important, if not more important, than the traditional, physical campus (Kelly, Padden, & Fleming, 2023). Experiences of digital disparity and disadvantages to students due to lack of digital resources or literacy has spotlighted the need for a fully accessible and inclusive digital environment (Brown et. al., 2022) It is vital that accessibility and inclusion be central in the development of the digital environment for all learners. The recent introduction of the [Web Accessibility Directive](#) and associated monitoring and auditing processes in Ireland has made this issue even more pressing (Marcus–Quinn, 2022).

In Ireland, three groups of students are identified as under–represented in higher education: those who are socio–economically disadvantaged, (including low–income, first–time or second chance learners, and those who experienced the care or criminal justice systems); members of the Irish Traveller and Roma communities; and students with disabilities (HEA, 2022, pp. 22–23). However, student diversity in higher education goes well beyond these groups, and now includes issues of nationality, age, gender, LGBTQ+, ethnicity, religion or linguistic minorities, and those with caring responsibilities (Athena Swan Ireland, n.d.; HEA, n.d., 2022).

Much like any modern business or service, information technology systems are key to the success, efficiency, and development of higher education. As institutions grow, reliance on such systems and automation increases, as does the need to ensure that these are designed for diverse users (Treviranus, 2016; Zervas et al., 2014). The accessibility of such systems is integral to achieving inclusion and equity in higher education.

Pillar 4 components are:

- Assistive technologies and digital literacy
- Websites
- Virtual Learning Environment
- Systems
- Social media platforms

Self–assessment Exercise

Using the series of statements below and the scoring system 0–5, as set out in Section 3, undertake this self–assessment exercise. Thereafter, this exercise should help to devise an action plan for any gaps identified. These statements are informed by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 (see below).

Assistive Technologies and Digital Literacy

- Training is available for all faculty and professional staff on assistive technologies.

- Information on free and/or embedded assistive technologies is made available to all students through a variety of channels.

- Staggered and 'just in time' digital literacy training is available to students, faculty, and professional staff.

- IT Support is provided in a variety of modes with ease of access prioritised.

- Assumptions are not made about the devices and level of internet access available to students.

Websites

- The most recent Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are embedded in practice across the institution.

- Internal and external audits are regularly conducted on all websites and actions are taken based on the results in a timely manner.

- All content developers are provided with training and clear resources to ensure accessibility of all digital content.

- The Content Management System used for website development should allow for full accessibility in content development and use for all faculty and staff, including those using assistive technologies.

- Videos are all captioned and text descriptions are offered as alternatives to videos with no dialogue.

- Websites provide information in a variety of ways – images, videos, text, infographics etc.

- All reports and other documents published online are provided in an accessible format.

- Content is provided, with clear structure and headings to allow for ease of navigation.

- Images and video content represent diversity across all groups of students and staff.

- A minimum of size 12 sans–serif font is used for all webpages.

Virtual Learning Environment

- An effective digital learning system is in place to ensure capacity to reach learners facing access barriers.

- VLE ease of access, navigation, reliability, and mobile responsiveness are all subject to regular student testing, monitoring, and development.

- Accessibility is a core requirement in the procurement of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

- A facility exists to allow for provision of Reasonable Accommodations (such as extra time or use of an electronic reader) in timed tests administered through the VLE.

- Students have the facility to make multiple attempts at uploading assignments through the VLE up to the deadline.

- Clear instructions and guidelines are provided to students in the use of the VLE, and face-to-face support is also available.

- A monitoring facility is provided on the VLE which allows faculty to view the accessibility of their materials, offering guidelines/advice on how to improve accessibility.

- Assistive technologies are embedded in the VLE for use by all students e.g. read aloud functionality.

Systems

- An integrated system is used to record all student data, allowing for ease of use for students and scalable functionality for staff.

- Students and accessibility experts are regularly consulted on the development and/or procurement of systems prioritising clarity, brevity, affordability, accessibility, and ease of navigation and use.

- A single student record is created on application and stays with the student throughout his/her studies, regardless of any gaps between programmes.

- Clear instructions, including instructional videos, are provided for each form/section required to be completed by students.

- Wi-Fi is reliable, sufficient and available in all parts of campus with regular testing and user feedback mechanisms.

Social Media Platforms

- Use of social media adheres strictly to institutional policies and procedures. These policies and procedures make explicit reference to inclusive practice and diversity in content.

- Material posted is socially and culturally sensitive to the diverse student population.

- Information is provided through a number of channels, and social media is not used as a single method of communication with students in any instance.

- Alternative text is provided in social media posts with imagery.

Actions to Consider

Annual Review of Systems

Regular systems review is a useful way to capture the data on the user experience; this can be particularly helpful in identifying any gaps, which can then form part of the improvement planning process. Such reviews should include user testing of developments in the system to ensure clarity, ease of use by diverse groups, and accessibility. These reviews are particularly helpful when a new system is installed, such as online registration; gathering feedback as soon as possible on a new process is highly desirable.

Training for Content Creators

The student population in higher education institutions is increasingly diverse and hence the creation of accessible content assumes an even greater urgency. The development of inaccessible content, often leading to a need to produce alternative formats, causes undue difficulty for all, both students and staff. Content creators include those updating websites, publishing reports, as well as those creating teaching materials and systems. It is recommended that the most effective way to create accessible materials is to ensure that all content creators are provided with training and resources in accessibility requirements. This training is best offered both on a face-to-face basis and online, to allow for varying levels of knowledge and skill. A variety of resources is helpful in developing this training, including the 'Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service – A Universal Design Approach', developed by the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (Centre for Excellence and Universal Design, NDA & Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2017). Information on using screen reading software is produced by NVDA, who have also produced a free screen-reading tool; this is a useful resource to assist faculty and staff to test the accessibility features of their materials (NV Access, 2018).

Possible Challenges and Suggested Solutions

Long-term Plans for Systemic Change Needed

Higher education institutions, like other large organisations, use a variety of digital tools. Many of these platforms and tools require a significant investment of time and money. Changes to systems can take a substantial amount of time. Changes or updates can be a more effective short or medium-term approach while planning for more accessible systems. Is it recommended that institutions embed accessibility and inclusivity in all procurement policies and practices. For example, in UCD, this has been done, and so when it came to procuring a new Virtual Learning Environment, the vendors were required to meet the accessibility requirements. The tender evaluation process also included colleagues with accessibility expertise.

Variety in Websites

Many higher education institutions typically use a standard website template, which has been developed for use by content creators/managers in individual schools, departments, and units. It is essential that these templates are fully accessible; this is usually the case. However, difficulties can arise when alternative templates or other tools are used, such as some free/open source systems (WordPress); some of these platforms are not secure and do not provide the necessary accessible frameworks or templates. It is recommended that the institution consider a policy response that sets out the acceptable templates, etc. In the absence of such a policy, then agreement to prioritise accessibility is required, at a minimum.

★ Examples of Good Practice

Integrated Student Information, Record, and Data Systems

Some institutions struggle to collate student information, as over the years they may have installed different systems which today are not compatible with each other. Institutions are increasingly moving to replace these. For example, UCD has a centralised system where data are captured, contacts are recorded, and through which students access their programme information and timetable. This system has allowed a streamlining of work, saving both time and other resources. Importantly, this system ensures that student data are secure and provided only to those who require it (e.g. module coordinators can see on their secure online class list details of those students who receive disability supports). Staff can also see a student contact record, and thus have access to a full picture of the student's engagement with a service or support.

Accessible Institution–created Content

Most of the content used by students in a learning environment has been created by staff or faculty. This content can include hand–outs, work sheets, presentations, and other online content, designed in a bespoke fashion for individual programmes and courses. Content that is created in–house gives the opportunity to embed accessibility from the outset and providing this material online means that all students can access it, hence removing a number of barriers arising from printed or costly materials. The Open University has implemented an [accessibility policy](#) whereby all material created must be accessible, and guidelines/resources on this creation are provided.

Accessible Digital Resources to Support Student Learning

Maynooth University has developed a suite of digital resources to be used by students to develop their academic skills and learning. Maynooth Inclusive Learning Online (Milo) is a self-directed learning platform created to provide accessible learning supports and resources for all Maynooth students — https://inclusive-learning-project.getlearnworlds.com/.

Dedicated Supports and Resources for Accessible Digital Environments

Inclusive UCC at the University of Cork is dedicated to promoting digital inclusion for all students. Their aim is to help UCC become a leader in digital accessibility, ensuring everyone has equal access to the university's learning resources. Inclusive UCC provides resources and support to help staff understand the importance of digital inclusion and make their digital content more accessible to a diverse student population — https://www.ucc.ie/en/inclusive/.

Additional Resources

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)
- These guidelines have been developed through global consultation and provide a single shared standard for web accessibility. Web content refers to any website or web page including text, images, graphics, videos, sounds, etc. The guidelines are available online — https://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/wcag.

Accessible Content Guidelines
- These guidelines provide clear practical guidance on how to create accessible Word, PowerPoint, and PDF documents. They should be used by content creators and shared with any external designers engaged to create materials. They are available on the UCD website — https://www.ucd.ie/all/ucdstudents/support/ disabilitysupport/informationforstaff/guidelinesforaccessiblelearningresources/

The National Access Plan sets out two overarching objectives:

1. That the higher education student body entering, participating in and completing higher education, at all levels and across all programmes, reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population

2. That our higher education institutions are inclusive, universally designed environments which support and foster student success and outcomes, equity and diversity, and are responsive to the needs of students and wider communities.

Conclusion

So, you have reached the last chapter of **Unlocking Inclusion: Toolkit for Universal Design in Higher Education**! We are delighted that you have joined us in this inclusion odyssey.

Since we began to tease out the knotty problem of creating inclusive higher education institutions, changes are evident, and progress has been made. We have seen a recognition that opening doors to higher education is but one part of the access equation. Of equal importance is the need to create inclusive institutions where all students belong. This twin-track approach is increasingly adopted, bolstered by the renewed focus of the national access policy, which emphasises the role of a universally designed learning environment in fostering student success, equity, and diversity (HEA, 2022).

We are persuaded by parity of esteem for all students. We believe that higher education must include, embrace, and welcome a diverse student cohort, and in so doing, demonstrate that access and inclusion is not just an institutional 'add on'. Rather, the hallmark of success in this regard will see it being woven into the fabric of the institution: a core belief, and a value fostered and practised by all.

The achievement of this goal is as ambitious as it is challenging. We are proud to have played our part in charting this journey. We offer the sector **Unlocking Inclusion: Toolkit for Universal Design in Higher Education**, an amalgamation of shared wisdom, as a practical resource to untangle the wide range of issues, complexities, and considerations necessary to enable changed practice. This Toolkit, together with our allied publication, **Making Inclusive Higher Education a Reality** (Kelly et al., 2023), offer insider knowledge and experience gleaned from implementing the UCD University for All initiative.

Finally, we look forward confidently to a more accessible and inclusive Tertiary Education sector, and are heartened by the launch of ALTIT**UD**E — the Charter for Universal Design. We have written this Toolkit to enable and support its implementation. Creating a universally-designed learning environment is the key to incremental but impactful change and will result in an ecosystem that is inclusive, diverse, and welcoming to all students.

Glossary of Terms

Term	Defintion
Alternative entry routes	Offer another pathway into academic programmes, aside from the main pathway, which in Ireland is the Central Applications Office (CAO) application on the basis of Learning Certificate examination results. In Ireland, the alternative entry routes nationally include the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) and the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR): both routes apply to school leavers, and enable access on the grounds of disability and/or socio–economic status. Other alternative entry routes typically include Mature Student entry on the basis of age (over 23 years), university access programmes (which offer preparation for undergraduate study), and routes from further education. Individual HEIs may also offer bespoke entry routes.
CAO (Central Applications Office)	The CAO processes applications for undergraduate courses in Irish HEIs. Decisions on admissions to undergraduate courses are made by the HEIs, which instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates.
Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)	This is a Department of Education policy instrument that addresses educational disadvantage by prioritising the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities through enhanced support for designated primary and secondary schools.
EAS (Equal Access Survey)	An annual voluntary set of questions asked of first–year full–time and part–time undergraduate students in Higher Education Authority (HEA)–funded institutions. The questions are asked as part of the registration process at the start of the academic year. Information obtained from the EAS supports measurement of national targets relating to equity of access and the development of an evidence base to inform policy in this area.

Term	Defintion
Educational barriers	Can describe any barrier which prevents an individual from accessing or engaging in education. Discussing educational barriers places the responsibility on the HEI to remove those barriers rather than using language of deficit in relation to students or potential students. Educational barriers can often be removed through financial support, disability supports, provision of childcare facilities, or other bespoke services. Each HEI should carry out an assessment of the educational barriers in their own institution.
Equity (vs Equality)?	Equity and equality are both concerned with fairness, but are different. Equality means everyone is treated the same exact way, regardless of circumstances or differences. Equity recognises that each person has different circumstances and allocates the appropriate resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome.
Further Education/ Further Education and Training (FE/FET)	This consists of post–secondary level, pre–higher education qualifications from Levels 1–6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). It includes apprenticeships, traineeships, Post Leaving Cert (PLC) courses, community and adult education as well as core literacy and numeracy services. The Education and Training Board network provides FE/FET courses and programmes. Other local providers also offer courses, including online through SOLAS eCollege.
HE (Higher Education)	Education at universities, technological universities, institutes of technology, and other education institutions, with qualifications of Levels 6–10 on the NFQ.
Inclusion	Is the state of being included in a group or framework. In the context of education, this means that the needs and characteristics of all participants in education are recognised and taken into account in the design of curriculum and support systems.

Term	Defintion
Inclusive practice	Is design for the full range of human diversity rather than a perceived notion of a typical, average or so–called 'traditional' student. 'Inclusive design' in higher education is taken to mean that all aspects of higher education, including the built and technological environments, educational experience, and student supports, are designed around the needs of <u>all</u> students.
Mainstreaming	In the context of higher education refers to the inclusion of all students in the same educational experience. This is in opposition to the delivery of segregated or "special" education for specific groups of students. Mainstreaming in higher education requires the delivery of educational support without the "othering" of groups, often in reference specifically to students with disabilities. Successful mainstreaming usually requires a redevelopment of the curriculum and universal design for learning is one framework with which this redevelopment can be achieved.
National Access Plan	Developed by the HEA, called the Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success 2022–2028, the National Access Plan "extends beyond access to a greater focus on the participation and success of the student", setting out two overarching objectives: **That the higher education student body entering, participating in and completing higher education, at all levels and across all programmes, reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population** **That our higher education institutions are inclusive, universally designed environments which support and foster student success and outcomes, equity and diversity, and are responsive to the needs of students and wider communities.** **(HEA, 2022–2028, p. 28)**

Term	Defintion
Reasonable Accommodations for students with disabilities	Where barriers cannot be completely removed, Reasonable Accommodations are a legal requirement for an appropriate change to a study–related arrangement, including assignments or examinations, to enable the student to complete their studies on a level playing field with their peers.
Under–represented cohorts	Are defined as those groups of students who traditionally have been under–represented in higher education. In Ireland, these groups are determined by the HEA National Access Plan. At the time of publication, these groups include students from designated socio–economic groups, those with disabilities, mature students, and part–time students.
Universal Design for Learning (UDL)	An educational framework that guides the development of flexible learning environments, which can accommodate individual learning differences.
Universal Design in Education (UDE)	Focuses on a 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 (Craddock et al., 2023).
Widening Participation	Work that seeks to diversify the student population to include the groups previously under–represented in higher education.

Organisations

Advance HE, Athena Swan Charter in conjunction with HEA.

AHEAD: An independent non-profit organisation working to create inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities. The focus of its work is further education and training, higher education, and graduate employment.

DFHERIS: The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is responsible for policy, funding, and governance of the higher and further education and research sectors and for oversight of the work of the state agencies and public institutions operating in those areas.

HEA: The Higher Education Authority is the statutory planning and policy development body for higher education and research in Ireland.

IUA: The 'Voice of Irish Universities', the Irish Universities Association (IUA) represents, supports, and advocates on matters of shared sectoral concern for university members.

National Tertiary Office: The National Tertiary Office is responsible for coordinating and supporting the development of policy in relation to further and higher education progression pathways for students. Working with the Higher Education Institutions and the Education and Training Boards, the NTO is advancing a strategic approach to enhancing the pathways between the Further Education and Training and Higher Education sectors in a number of specific programme areas. These collaborations between Higher Education Institutions and Education and Training Boards will see students commence their third level experience in further education and complete it in a partner higher education institution. The National Tertiary Office is jointly managed by the HEA and SOLAS.

SOLAS: Established in 2013, SOLAS is the State agency that oversees the building of a world class Further Education & Training (FET) sector in Ireland, developing skills to fuel Ireland's future.

THEA: The Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) is the voice of the technological higher education sector, advocating on behalf of and supporting members in achieving their aims and objectives.

Appendix

University for Implementation Framework

- Institutional Leadership and Strategic Planning
- Evidence & Data
- Staff Training & Development
- Governance & Structures
- Promotion & Communications
- Implementation Planning & Delivery
- Consultation

University For All

1 2 3 4
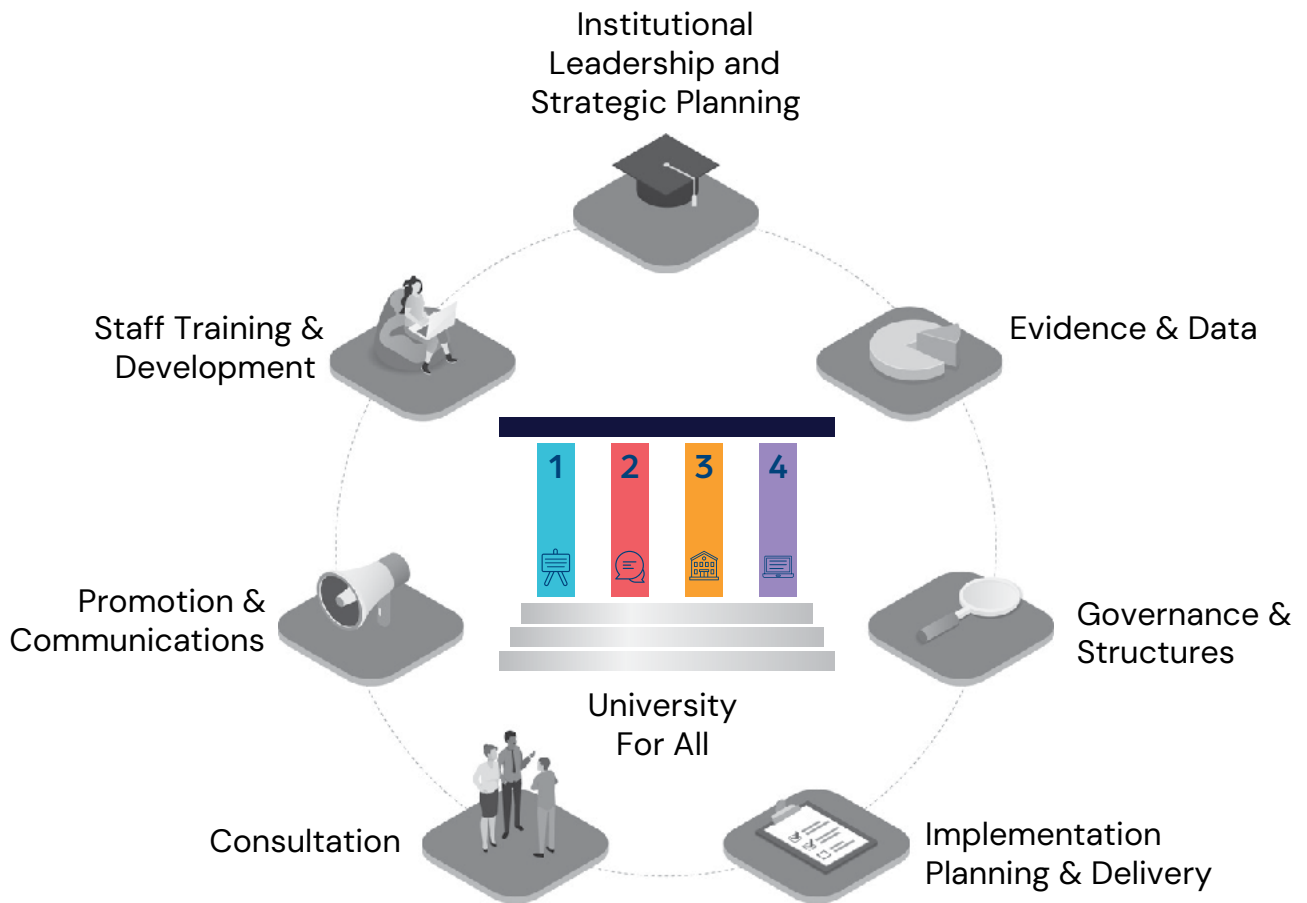
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