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Embedding Universal Design for Learning in HECA Colleges

An exploratory study

The Higher Education Colleges Association, through its Academic Quality Enhancement Forum, recently conducted an exploratory study demonstrating that since the pandemic, universal design for learning (UDL) has shifted from an ad hoc enhancement activity to a key strategic imperative across HECA colleges. This article describes the findings of that study, showing how UDL has advanced from piecemeal and niche activity to be increasingly a strategic priority.

Every opportunity to build upon the principles of UDL must be leveraged across the entire academic community. The assumption of homogeneity continues to be challenged – HECA classrooms are vibrant and diverse settings. It is important that this diversity is harnessed when facilitating students to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and competence. (HECA, 2021)

Introduction

A recent report by the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA, 2021) describes how ‘alternative assessment arrangements advanced the UDL agenda by providing students with greater choice and variety to demonstrate what they knew in assessments’ (p.28). The report endorses universal design for learning (UDL) as a ‘framework for supporting student success’ (ibid., p.37) and recommends that HECA colleges prioritise UDL at both programme and institution level.

The shift from ad hoc enhancement activities to strategic embedding of UDL was implicit in the study. Consequently, in summer 2022, HECA’s Academic Quality Enhancement Forum Committee (HAQEF) began an exploratory study to investigate the positioning of UDL across HECA colleges.

Method

Three focus groups were conducted with participants from five of the twelve HECA colleges. Participants were staff working in executive, senior leadership, and middle management positions in operations, quality assurance (QA), programme management, and learning support, along with instructional designers. Some had lecturing duties. The five participating colleges offer programmes in business,



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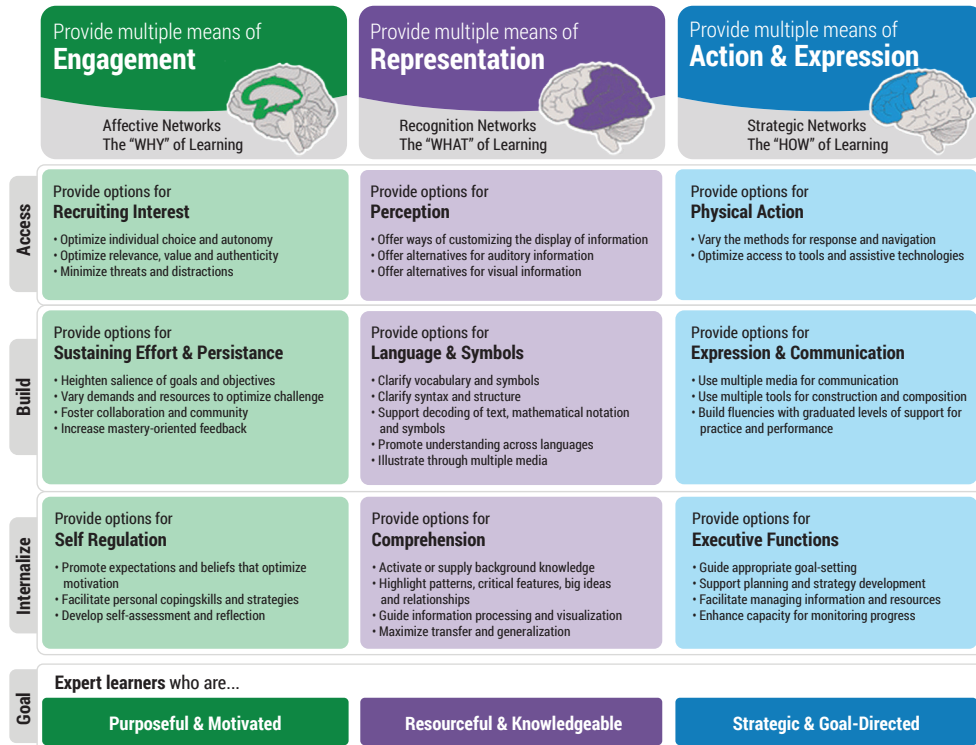
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ICT, and the humanities, leading to awards up to and including level 9 of the National Framework for Qualifications to approximately 20,000 learners.

Feedback was coded and analysed thematically, using the six-step framework created by Braun and Clarke (2006), then triangulated with the academic literature.

Universal design for learning

The concept of universal design originated in the context of improving the accessibility of buildings and products. In the 1990s, the Centre for Applied Special Technology created the CAST framework, incorporating guidelines that offer 'concrete suggestions for applying the UDL framework to practice and help ensure that all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities' (CAST, 2018).



A review of academic literature highlights numerous themes relating to UDL:

- AHEAD (2021b) reports a 226% increase in the number of students registering with disability support services in higher education in Ireland over the past 11 years.
- UDL supports all learners to do better (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

- Variety and choice in assessment are crucial to implementing UDL (AHEAD, 2021a).
- 'The multimodal nature of digital tools facilitates the integration of varied formats and flexible options into the learning experience' (Rao, 2021).
- Lecture capture aligns well with the principles of universal design (Watt et al., 2014).
- UDL can support other institutional priorities, such as culturally sensitive teaching (Kieran and Anderson, 2018).
- Quality frameworks combined with universal-design principles can enhance the online teaching and learning experience for learners (Robinson & Wizer, 2016).

SOLAS describes how the emphasis on 'flexible learning pathways . . . different modes of delivery . . . and a variety of pedagogical methods', as outlined in Quality and Qualifications Ireland's core criteria, aligns with UDL principles (QQI, 2016, cited in SOLAS, 2021, p.10).

Providers in QQI's Green Paper on Assessment (2020) advocate for implementing UDL approaches in assessment. More recently, the Higher Education Authority's National Access Plan 2022–2028 includes a commitment to a 'whole-of-institution approach to student success and universal design' (HEA, 2022, p.11).

Exploratory study findings

Codified and thematic analysis of focus group feedback revealed eight distinct themes, many of which align with findings from the literature.

Theme 1: The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated UDL implementation as a strategic priority on a whole-of-institution basis

'We want to make UDL a fully embedded part of college life. It's articulated in our Strategic Plan and Student Success Strategy.' (College 3)

'The embedding and articulation of UDL in strategies gives you a power in the context of implementation on the ground.' (College 1)

'UDL is not just a checklist, it's a mindset.' (College 4)

'The more UDL is linked to QA and becomes part of what we do, the more the need for accommodations will be reduced. We have just gone through a year of strategic planning. We want to make our plans in relation to UDL more explicit. The level of support that we offered during the pandemic has informed our strategic plan.' (College 4)

'HECA colleges had diverse assessment approaches accelerated by the pivot to emergency remote teaching.' (College 2)

Theme 2: QA processes further support the implementation of UDL

Participants described how QA processes drive increased accessibility and inclusive practice, albeit with further scope for improved alignment.

'Preparing for re-engagement was the real reset mode in relation to UDL.' (College 2)

'The annual reporting to QQI has also helped to accelerate the deeper embedding of UDL principles.' (College 2)

'Validation and programmatic review panels ask what is the profile of your learner and your graduate. These questions speak to inclusion.' (College 4)

'The QQI online-only pilot for short courses gave us key insights into how to engage learners, including learners with disabilities, in a purely online teaching and learning environment.' (College 3)

'The inspiration and aspiration are not always in line with the requirements of an accreditation body, as an example.' (College 4)

Theme 3: UDL is increasingly integrated into governance structures and QA policies

All participants indicated that UDL is prioritised by boards and committees, including academic councils, in HECA colleges. Larger HECA colleges have dedicated inclusion committees. Participants confirmed that their institutions' QA manuals do not include a dedicated UDL policy but do apply the principles of UDL across a range of policies. All colleges have a dedicated accommodations policy and staff with responsibility for accommodations. All agreed, however, that UDL has to be a collective responsibility.

'Awareness of UDL is strong, but full and consistent implementation of UDL remains an ongoing priority.' (College 1)

'The language of universal design is slowly making its way into policies and procedures.' (College 4)

Theme 4: Programme design is instrumental in UDL implementation

Participants highlighted the importance of maintaining a student focus and proactive instead of reactive approaches to UDL implementation. Also emphasised was the benefit of drilling into the CAST guidelines, not just the principles, when embarking on inclusive programme design.

'A fully fleshed out UDL approach with multiple pathways for action, expression etc., multiple means of navigation, can also be overwhelming for the learner . . . We do have to be careful not to overload.' (College 4)

'CAST can put a structure on what we are already doing.' (College 2)

Learner survey feedback, including from learners with specific needs, informs programme design, but fully embedding a student partnership approach remains a work in progress.

'We have learners with visual impairments, hearing impairments, etc. We have feedback from these learners already that we use to inform programme design.' (College 2)

'I am open to learners being involved in programme design, but you have to be very careful that you aren't designing a programme based around the needs of one or two learners.' (College 1)

'The holy grail of a fully collaborative design process with students is very difficult to pull off. We want to include the student voice, however.' (College 4)

Theme 5: Technology is a key enabler of UDL

Ensuring the technical competency of staff engaging with UDL was emphasised, along with providing access to the correct software for both learners and staff. Asynchronous learning was highlighted as a key UDL enabler.

'It took a global pandemic to bring about universal access to class recordings across the sector. They are so important.' (College 1)

'Gamification is good for UDL, as is storytelling.' (College 5)

'Our educational technologist is a key enabler of UDL. He is responsive to learner needs and keeps in close communication with them.' (College 2)

Theme 6: Educational initiatives and guidelines promote engagement with UDL

The importance of formal and informal supports came through strongly.

'There is a postgraduate programme of education within our college in which UDL is taught to staff.' (College 1)

'Informal meet-ups between colleagues to discuss UDL have also helped re implementation, supporting a cross-pollination of ideas across the college.' (College 1)

'We have a college-wide nourishing environment in relation to UDL. Approximately 40 staff have taken the National Forum and AHEAD digital badge in universal design. . . . The badge is embedded in our culture.' (College 1)

'We need to train all faculty to ensure that all learners receive an equitable teaching and learning experience.' (College 3)

'National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, AHEAD, and FET resources are hugely important for UDL implementation, a centre of gravity for UDL.' (College 5)

Theme 7: Diverse feedback mechanisms are central to advancing UDL

Participants highlighted the need to employ different feedback mechanisms to underpin effective engagement with UDL.

'Programme board meetings are an essential QA mechanism for ensuring that we have met the needs of our learners, including learners with disabilities. Learning analytics are also important.' (College 4)

'Our next step is to scaffold in the student voice.' (College 1)

'Anecdotal feedback is important. You also need to ask questions you can't ask on a feedback form. We need to have more focus groups with staff and learners and not just the feedback surveys. Equally, open-door policies where learners with disabilities can come and chat with us are so important.' (College 3)

'In our weekly operational meeting, faculty can feed back about learners with disabilities.' (College 4)

Theme 8: UDL forms part of an increasing focus on Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)

'There is some overlap between UDL and EDI. In our college, the EDI perspective is considered across college activities and committees. After every meeting, we ask, "What are the EDI implications of this?"' (College 1)

'We are currently training faculty in relation to gender issues and what is permissible to say and what isn't.' (College 2)

'UDL maximises the opportunity for learners to engage, but we will never see the situation where we don't have accommodations. We need to support all learners.' (College 4)

One college reflected on how UDL is an effective tool for overcoming barriers that may otherwise arise in supporting disabled learners in the absence of funding for learners with disabilities in private colleges.

'The principles of UDL in the context of curriculum helps to remove barriers in the absence of funding.' (College 1)

Conclusion

Feedback from an exploratory study with five HECA colleges indicates that UDL has advanced from piecemeal enhancement activity promoted by UDL

champions, and is increasingly a strategic priority. Engaging staff across a range of functions is evident, including quality assurance, library, learning support, and teaching and learning. A continued focus on implementation across all programmes and institutional workflows remains a priority, informed by sectoral developments and good practice as promoted by bodies such as AHEAD and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. The findings of this study can inform the construction of a survey tool to test themes on a larger scale across all HECA colleges, providing an evidence-based framework for the strategic and cohesive implementation of UDL HECA-wide.

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