

Universal Design in Education and Training – policy Landscape in Ireland

# Introduction

The National Disability Authority works through the [Centre for Excellence in Universal Design](http://universaldesign.ie/) (CEUD) to promote universal design of physical and digital environments, services and systems that can be easily accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.

CEUD promotes Universal Design in Education (UDE) through a whole systems approach 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 by all key stakeholders, in a more inclusive environment. This approach further promotes the inclusion of Universal Design as subject matter in curricula and assessment, to ensure a broader and more widespread adoption across the educational spectrum. A key focus of the Universal Design approach is to prioritise accessibility and usability for people with the more diverse capabilities, characteristics and preferences from the earliest possible design stage and throughout all phases in the life of products and services, and their interoperability with assistive technology.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is one of the core elements of Universal Design in Education. “UDL is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn, including Students with Disabilities. UDL aims to improve the educational experience of all students by introducing more flexible methods of teaching, assessment and service provision to cater for the diversity of learners in our classrooms.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

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

“the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of their age, size, ability or disability”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

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

This definition of Universal Design has found expression in national policies across a wide range of sectors, from education and training to the built and digital environments.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Act also provides for the establishment of the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD), the first statutory centre of its kind in the world.[[4]](#footnote-4) This uniquely places Ireland at the forefront of countries worldwide in terms of having a favourable legislative and policy landscape that supports the implementation of Universal Design across a wide range of sectors, including education and training.

Section 19C(3) of the Disability Act 2005 specifically highlights the statutory remit of the CEUD in respect of education and training. It states that:

“In relation to assisting and promoting the introduction of the Principles of Universal Design to courses of education and training, the Centre shall liaise with vocational and third level educational institutions and with professional bodies…” for them to undertake the following activities:

* Encouraging the provision of courses of education and training on the Principles of Universal Design
* Ensuring the development of appropriate curricula so that the concept of Universal Design forms an integral part of the courses,
* Ensuring as far as practicable that assessments, including but not limited to those recognised by professional bodies in courses, include material relating to those Principles.

# Inclusive education and training – from vision to rights

The pursuit of equality and inclusion has been a mainstream concern of Irish education policy since the 1966 “Investment in Education” report[[5]](#footnote-5). The Vision of the current (2021-2023) statement of strategy of the Department of Education highlights inclusive education as a fundamental principle of the Irish education and training system[[6]](#footnote-6). It states “We must redouble our efforts to tackle educational inequality and ensure no child loses out in our education system, including those who have been additionally disadvantaged during the Covid-19 pandemic. This must come not only from increasing resources for students at risk of disadvantage, but by ensuring that the education system is conscious of the needs of all students.” This vision is further elaborated in Goal Two entitled “Ensure equity of opportunity in education and that all students are supported to fulfil their potential”. This goal, supported by a series of key actions recognises that: “Equity of opportunity and inclusivity must be fundamental principles in our education system. Our aim is to develop a system that welcomes and meaningfully engages all students, including those with special educational needs and students at risk of educational disadvantage.”

A key feature of the national policy landscape for education and training is the ambition for all learners to learn in the company of their peers in a fully integrated and inclusive way and within the same educational and training facilities and campuses, underpinned by the provision of graduated supports. This ambition is reflected in policy documents across the educational continuum, from early childhood education[[7]](#footnote-7) , to primary[[8]](#footnote-8)secondary[[9]](#footnote-9), higher education[[10]](#footnote-10)and further education and training.[[11]](#footnote-11) For example, SOLAS in its FET strategy (2020-2024) states that the strategic priority “Fostering Inclusion” must be met through:

“Developing and applying good practice guides and toolkits on inclusive practice across the system [and] adopting a universal design for learning (UDL) approach in shaping [the FET sectors] future provision”.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, in its National Access Plan - A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028, places equity, diversity and inclusion at the heart of its objectives. It notes “That the higher education student body entering, participating and completing higher education, at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population.” and “That our higher education institutions are inclusive environments which support and foster student success and outcomes, equity and diversity and are responsive to the needs of students and wider communities.” This National Access Plan frames these ambitions in the context of Universal Design by seeking to ensure that “every student has a positive student experience supported by the principles of Universal Design and inclusive approaches to teaching and learning”.

Universal Design, and inclusion are key to achieving the right to education and training as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the first legally binding instrument to contain a reference to the concept of quality inclusive education and training.[[13]](#footnote-13) This clearly articulates the importance of Universal Design as the preferred approach to an inclusive society.

# A systems approach to transforming education and training through Universal Design

Article 24 of the UNCRPD contains the first explicit legal enunciation of the right to inclusive education and it imposes wide-ranging duties on States Parties to the Convention[[14]](#footnote-14). The UNCRPD Committee’s General Comment No. Four provides a framework, through which to consider the transformation required to realise inclusive education.[[15]](#footnote-15) This is a “whole systems approach” which embeds “the necessary changes in institutional culture, policies and practices”. The whole systems approach incorporates the:

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

The UNCRPD Committee further elaborates particular aspects of the system that must be transformed, made inclusive and more accessible to all learners. These include “buildings, information and communications tools, the curriculum, educational materials, teaching methods, assessments and language and support services.” Other aspects of the environment include school transportation, water and sanitation facilities (including hygiene and toilet facilities), school cafeterias and recreational spaces

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

A Universal Design approach enables independence and social participation for all through continual improvement in all contexts.[[16]](#footnote-16) By continuing to adopt and implement a Universal Design approach, as defined in our primary legislation and as introduced into education as Universal Design for Learning through the work of Rose and Meyer, the whole of the education and training system can be made more inclusive.[[17]](#footnote-17)

# Universal Design in Education: the Irish Context

Underpinning the whole systems approach to Universal Design in Education is the Disability act 2005. Section 19C(3) clearly prescribes the role of the CEUD in both encouraging, and ensuring, the inclusion of Universal Design in all facets of education. Thus, any effort to engage in the paradigm-shift to a whole systems approach can, and indeed should be viewed through this lens. In fulfilment of its statutory obligations, the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design works closely with relevant government departments, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), as well as partners both in Ireland and internationally. The Centre works collaboratively to conduct research and establish guidelines and standards that inform a Universal Design approach across a range of educational levels.

CEUD encourages the training in Universal Design of those involved in “courses of education and training in Universal Design for persons preparing to engage in work affecting the environment,…” or “…courses of training for persons engaged in such work.” The inclusion of this material should not only focus on the learning content, but should also be represented as a part of assessments and examinations.

It is notable that in this regard, Engineers Ireland has incorporated Universal Design into its most recent accreditation criteria.[[18]](#footnote-18) Specifically in Program Area Four where it states: “Students should have an understanding of the application of Universal Design as the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability. An environment (or any building, product, or service in that environment) should be designed to meet the needs of all people who wish to use it.” This ensures that programmes which wish to be accredited by Engineers Ireland must show evidence of the inclusion of Universal Design across their content and assessment. It represents a significant step forward in recognising it as an intrinsic part of the learning and assessment undertaken by students.

Quality Qualifications Ireland (QQI) has incorporated Universal Design into its accreditation criteria for Architectural Technologist NFQ (National Framework Qualification) Level 7 – Knowledge: Design principles, techniques and methods. It requires that students “Demonstrate an understanding of the application of technical design principles, techniques and methods to address factors including but not limited to user needs, environmental impact, **Universal Design**, safety, appearance, life cycle, conservation and refurbishment.”[[19]](#footnote-19) This approach may offer learning to inform future adoption of Universal Design criteria in the accreditation processes for other relevant qualifications.

In June 2022, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) ring-fenced funding of €3 million) to enable higher education institutions to implement Universal Design and inclusive practices on their campuses. All 19 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) applied for funding. The proposals included improvements to campus accessibility, development of wayfinding apps, signage and small-scale capital works such as sensory rooms or quiet zones. This funding scheme clearly highlights the importance placed upon Universal Design by key departments with a remit to oversee third level education and the broad applicability of Universal Design and its Principles in projects at the HEIs.

To support these ongoing efforts, the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design develops, promotes and hosts a range of guidance resources which are useful for implementing Universal Design in a design thinking, whole systems approach.[[20]](#footnote-20) International conferences hosted by the Centre have brought together a unique mix of educators, trainers, designers, architects, engineers and policy makers to focus on the transformative potential of taking a design-led approach to the whole of the educational and training environment.[[21]](#footnote-21)

A number of key statements emerged from the conferences that continue to inform the work of the Centre. These covered how Universal Design and UDE are transformative agents, which are progressively realisable processes that are learner centred and result in benefits for all learners. For a fully inclusive educational and social environment, practitioners need an emotional response to fully engage with and understand the barriers that exist and the enablers that are needed to bring about the necessary change: “our response must be emotional – we must feel the need for change and challenge our own values, beliefs, and assumptions”.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Universal Design is the “highest expression of a person-centred planning philosophy… ‘to the greatest extent possible’ acknowledges the real world complexity and points to a process, not to a size idealised ‘one size fits all’ solution”.[[23]](#footnote-23) This approach can “enable the transformation of education from an inequitable learning environment for many students to a more holistic, student-centric experience”.[[24]](#footnote-24)

As such, “inclusive education models require learner-centred approaches to education and environments that maximally support learners with diverse physical, linguistic, cognitive and learning styles, while at the same time meeting national education standards”.[[25]](#footnote-25)

In this way “many of the resources and adaptations needed for students with disabilities would benefit all students”.[[26]](#footnote-26)

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

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

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

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

## Resources

* Building for Everyone: A Universal Design Approach: <http://universaldesign.ie/Built-Environment/Building-for-Everyone/>
* Research on Universal Design of Shared Educational Campuses in Ireland: <http://universaldesign.ie/Built-Environment/Shared-Education-Campuses/>
* Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings: <https://aim.gov.ie/universal-design-guidelines-for-elc-settings/>
* Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service - A Universal Design Approach: <http://universaldesign.ie/Products-Services/Customer-Communications-Toolkit-for-the-Public-Service-A-Universal-Design-Approach/>
* Web accessibility techniques: <http://universaldesign.ie/Technology-ICT/Web-accessibility-techniques/>
* "Education Across the Continuum: Innovating through Universal Design" 2015 conference: <http://education.universaldesign.ie/>
* Universal Design and Higher Education in Transformation Congress (UDHEIT2018): <https://www.udheit2018.com/>
* Resources for education: <http://universaldesign.ie/Awards/Education/>
* Universal Design Grand Challenge Student Awards: <http://universaldesign.ie/Awards/Student-Awards/>

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1. https://ahead.ie/udl [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Government of Ireland, 2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, “Programme for Government - Our Shared Future”, p55; “Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings” and “Doing more with Digital - National Digital Strategy for Ireland”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (Centre for Excellence In Universal Design, n.d.) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Department of Education, 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Department of Education, 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth , 2019; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Department of Education, 2019, [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. National Council for Special Education, 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Higher Education Authority, 2022; Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science,, 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Solas, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. (Solas, 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. United Nations, 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Broderick, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. (Craddock & McNutt, 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As cited in (Craddock, et al., 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. (Engineers Ireland, 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/Architectural%20Technology%20Awards%20Standards.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Design thinking is an iterative process for creative problem solving comprised of phases to understand users, challenge assumptions, redefine problems and create innovative solutions to implement and test. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, 201). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Craddock et al, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. (Bencini, et al., 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Craddock and McNutt, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Bencini, Garofoloand Arenghi, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Craddock, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)