



The two ends of the tertiary education spectrum: Can universal design and universal design for learning provide a unified enhancement approach across the sector?

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ABSTRACT

Tertiary education over the past ten years has seen a significant increase in learner diversity and variability. Learners today are not a homogeneous group, instead they bring a variety of rich cultures, abilities, multiple and intersectional identities, varied lived experiences, and educational backgrounds. What was once known as the non-traditional or under-represented learner, today it is a more common experience with the increase in international learners, refugees, asylum seekers, neurodiverse learners, carers, vulnerable learners, widening participation and access learners. We know this variability exists with the increase in learners registered with the disability or wellbeing services, a targeted approach to recruiting international learners, and the widening access and participation efforts. While variability and diversity should be celebrated it does require adequate resources and funding, inclusive support structures and systems to be put in place, as well providing staff professional development. As highlighted by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) with this change there is an opportunity through enhancement that involves “doing new things or doing established things in different ways” (QAA Scotland, 2022, p.6). Inclusive education, “understood as equal access and opportunities, has become a guiding principle of higher education agendas” (Timus et al. 2024, p. 473).

Across institutions there is a plethora of inclusion allies, advocates, initiatives, strategies, policies and professional development supports, so why are so many learners leaving courses, not engaging, not attending and certainly not seeing the value of education? Is it the pendulum shift toward marketisation, commercialisation and privatisation that learners are not seeing institutions as spaces and places of equity and justice but factories where money needs to cross hands? Where on this spectrum is the balance for enhancement and could universal design and universal design for learning be at least the starting point?

Keywords: universal design, universal design for learning, inclusion, tertiary education

Introduction

Tertiary education across the sector (UK and Ireland) has come a long way over the past ten years. So-called ‘non-traditional’ groups, once in the minority, now make up most of the learner population (HEA, 2022; Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019). The numbers from under-represented groups have grown significantly, supported by a range of outreach programmes, widening participation and access initiatives, and financial incentives for institutions. Indeed, what was once seen as the difficult part – ‘the getting access to’ – is less of a challenge today as opposed to that of ‘staying and succeeding’. Institutions are now faced with challenges of student retention, progression and awarding gaps for ‘non-traditional’ students, exacerbated by other factors such as financial restraints/realities, long commutes (Maslin, 2023), and unaffordable accommodation (Farha, 2023).

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At one end of the spectrum is supporting learner diversity and variability, under extremely difficult circumstances such as the increasing cost of education, learners having to work full time (Adams 2024), vulnerable learners, or having caring responsibilities, where education is not seen as the priority. At the other end is a shift toward neoliberalism that can lead to social inequality with the focus on profit making, the reduction in government funding and the shift toward competition, marketisation and privatisation of education our learners are spoken of as consumers (Balan, 2023). Where will the pendulum settle? Blankman (2024) asks if we need a reboot of the inclusion discussion as we continue to focus on the medical model with the focus and blame on our learners rather than looking at the bigger picture of our processes, systems, technologies and learning environments. There are long societal remnants of the deficit based medical model around societal thinking of disability focusing on the needs of the individual (Quirke et al.,2024). Instead, a positive move toward the social model intentionally focuses educators to rethink inclusive design around learning, teaching and assessment practices, as well as the physical spaces when embedding active learning methodologies (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013).

An evaluation by the QAA (2024) Scotland highlighted some best practices around the Enhancement Themes initiative that emphasised equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), flexible and accessible learning, community and belonging, supporting staff and learner success. Building on this work, why not focus on a unified approach across the sector through the lens of universal design and universal design for learning that could be the golden thread to align all the competing agendas across tertiary education. This opinion piece provides some insights and recommendations that have emerged from working across different institutions and regions in tertiary education and the importance of a unified approach across tertiary education.

Inclusive education through the lens of universal design and universal design for learning

Inclusive education is a basic human right (UN, 2006) that works directly in alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Goal 4: Quality Education and Goal 10: Reducing Inequalities (UNESCO, 2015). Inclusive education aims to “improve the effectiveness and quality of educational services for all learners where diversity is celebrated, a sense of belonging and community is fostered, and learners with a wide range of talents can all flourish” (Qu & Cross 2024, p.1).

Universal design (UD) and universal design for learning (UDL) are by no means new concepts, both significantly overlap and aim for the same thing, equity. UD is the concept where design fits all regardless of age, size, ability or otherwise (Mace et al. 2016) and has been applied in many fields such as physical spaces, services and information technology (Burgstahler, 2015). It is defined as the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need to adapt or specialise the design. UDL which draws directly from UD, was founded on the social model of disability in the design of learning environments (Mole, 2013). However, with the launch of version 3.0 in July 2024, the framework builds upon previous iterations emphasising the importance of addressing barriers rooted in biases and systems of exclusion (CAST, 2024).

Globally as part of the inclusive education shift, UDL is the fastest growing area across tertiary education (Ewe Plantin & Galvin 2023; Timus et al. 2024). The effectiveness of UDL as an instructional strategy through intentional design to achieve inclusive education is increasingly recognised for its flexible curricula,

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identifying barriers and allows educators a range of options for their classrooms (UNCRPD, 2016; UNESCO, 2020). The foundation of UDL is to “anticipate diverse learner needs, instead of plastering on ad hoc adjustments for individual learners later on when support needs are identified” (Qu & Cross, 2024, p.2). UDL can be a viable and sustainable approach to create more inclusive learning for diverse international students in higher education, moving beyond disability (Bracken & Novak, 2019; Tobin, 2021; Fovet, 2020). According to Quirke and McCarthy (2020) both UD and UDL are both key components of the inclusion agenda and address issues of disability, diversity and inclusion, the trick for everyone now is to enact both with intention by “having a go from the get go” (p.19).

A rationale for embedding UD and UDL across tertiary education

One such way of supporting inclusive practice is by embedding it through a UD and UDL lens as they directly align to many institutional agendas such as EDI and education for sustainable development (ESD) focused on social justice and human rights, as outlined in the UK Quality Code (2024). In terms of equity across institutions, UDL aligns to charters such as Athena SWAN and the Race equality Charter, by facilitating greater learner performance, and higher retention rates can be alleviated (Evmenova, 2021; McKenzie & Dalton, 2020). Another key aspect of UD and UDL is digital accessibility and the use of technology to support learners and staff. Since the introduction of the compliance from the public sector body accessibility regulations in June 2020, the digital accessibility of tertiary institutions websites, library systems and the virtual learning environments are being monitored (Central digital and data office, 2024). Digital accessibility is a core part of the UD and UDL frameworks. To support accessibility and improve educational materials, there is a growing trend amongst institutions to adopt UDL practices (Peacock & Vecchione, 2020; O’Shaughnessy, 2023). This can be seen with the adoption and enhancement of the use of accessible software such as Ally by Anthology and Microsoft 365 features that include Immersive Reader and Speech to Text tools (Jarke et al., 2020). While embedding UDL can reduce pressure on accessibility services by demonstrating to instructors that most students’ needs can be accommodated in class with simple inclusive design strategies (Capp, 2017; Fovet, 2020), it is the only framework which aligns itself with sustainability (Fovet, 2017) and is particularly relevant for international and indigenous learners (Fovet, 2019). Through UD and UDL, “inclusivity should be central to what we do, not seen as an add on” (Quirke et al., 2024, p.88).

A unified approach

Enhancement is not new to Tertiary education in Scotland with over 20 years leading the sector. More recently Wales and Northern Ireland have signed up to such an approach that unifies practices, quality and enhancement across the sector. Tertiary education has a duty of care to its learners and staff, as well as a commitment to the wider community, employers, accrediting bodies and funders. Therefore, what lens an institution views quality assurance and standards, as well as enhancement is important. As highlighted by Williams when citing the University of Aberdeen “it is increasingly important to promote improvement of quality and not just to ensure quality is maintained”. Therefore, the question of how quality assurance and quality enhancement are related has “important implications for how staff are treated, are respected and trusted, and how institutional data can be used to improve what institutions do, and what universities are actually for” (Williams, 2016).

There are a plethora of examples globally across disciplines who are intentionally trying to embed UD and UDL principles into their practice and scholarship (Bracken & Novak 2019; Koreeda et al., 2023; Fovet 2024).

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As well supporting students during the learning process (Capp, 2017), building a theoretical framework through active learning (Rogers & Gronseth, 2021) and in professional development across a PgCAP (Kennedy et al., 2023) and across a university (Moriarty & Scarffe 2019). A 2019 report on *Utilising UDL as a route to excellence* highlights the benefits of not only an institutional approach but for strategic sector wide systemic change for implementation through having baselines, staff development and student facing initiatives (Martin et al., 2019).

At a macro level an inclusive systemic tertiary approach around enhancement can be seen in Ireland where the aim is to bridge the gap between higher and further education through a collaborative inclusive framed philosophy of a UD and UDL lens (Finch et al. 2024). Aiming for a more unified approach across Ireland, the intention is to “draw from current strengths across existing sectors to develop a more coherent, collaborative system” (Government, 2023). Key policies across large organisations have adopted UD and UDL as core principles to effect change. This has led to Government funding of three national projects relating to UD: a national charter for UD in tertiary education; a UD training package for senior leaders including a symposium for leadership and a web accessibility template for institutions (Healy et al., 2024). The national charter for UD is called **ALTITUDE (All Learners are Transformatively Included Through Universal Design in Education)** and it identifies four pillars: learning, teaching and assessment; supports, services and social engagement, the physical environment and the digital environment. An ‘unlocking inclusion toolkit’ was developed by Kelly et al. (2024) to support the implementation of UD across the four pillars. This is further complemented by a national roll out of two different digital badge schemes on UD and UDL by AHEAD (2023) to support the professional development across tertiary education staff.

The aim of the ALTITUDE charter is to have a unified approach across tertiary education, to grow EDI as an agenda, create partnerships, and have a joined-up approach, a collective responsibility toward inclusion and learner success. While the collective movement is positive, it needs to have a long-term funding stream, buy-in from leadership as well as a wider dissemination of good practice (Healy et al., 2024). With this shift toward a more collective inclusive approach there is the possibility for not only learners and staff to draw from a shared mindset and philosophy, the same language, expectations and approaches but there is also an opportunity for a unified approach through a community of practice across tertiary education with links to communities, formal school years (teachers and support staff), employers, national organisations and professional statutory regulatory bodies (PSRBs).

Conclusion

This opinion piece aims to frame the changing nature of tertiary education by advocating a shared unified inclusive approach through a UD/UDL lens to support learner and staff agency. Inclusive practice needs to be woven across learning environments and professional development as well through its structures, processes, systems, technologies and beyond. While there will always be structural societal factors at play, there is an opportunity in this move towards tertiary to attempt a shift to find a balance. In conjunction with the vast support and resources available, the bigger root causes of barriers, inequity, and exclusion that often exist through paradigms of neoliberalism, capitalism, marketisation, and privatisation need to be tackled.

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Biography

Tracy Galvin is a lecturer in higher education practice at the University of Ulster, Belfast. She trained as a post-primary teacher and worked in Teacher Education for ten years before shifting to academic practice with various posts across Ireland, Scotland and Northern Ireland. She is a course director for the first steps to teaching that leads to associate fellow, and tutors on the PgCHEP module designing contemporary curriculum. Tracy has specific interests in inclusive and accessible learning environments, through supporting staff academic development EDI, UDL and assessment design. t.galvin@ulster.ac.uk
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