



# NEXT STEPS

## for Teaching and Learning:

### Moving Forward Together



## AHEAD

### Learning from the Pandemic Experience



**Despite the pandemic presenting a myriad of challenges and difficulties, many innovative practices, processes and actions have been developed to address the extraordinary circumstances. This unprecedented crisis has inadvertently demonstrated the flexibility and capability of much of the sector that can be harnessed to improve the experiences of students with disabilities in future learning. Our research, and other literature in the sector, posits that many of the teaching and learning practices that were and are a corollary of Covid-19, could potentially inform a more effective long term higher education experience, in both academic and extra-curricular activities (AHEAD, 2020, 2021; HEA, 2021; IUA, 2021).**

### Introduction

This Insight is underpinned by a number of AHEAD's research projects, including two *Learning from Home* research projects and our annual *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland* survey that have explored the narratives of students with disabilities and examined the student and staff experiences of teaching and learning as the pedagogical landscape witnessed abrupt and unprecedented transition (AHEAD 2020, 2021). The Insight seeks to amplify the voice of students with disabilities and how they envision this time of change. Alongside the retention and promotion of practices pertaining to Universal Design for Learning (UDL), our research and work with the Next Steps project also highlights the importance of retaining the commendable actions undertaken to address and reduce the digital divide. This is another example of positives that have emanated from the challenge of Covid-19, and AHEAD would suggest that these measures are retained and developed. Furthermore, AHEAD suggests that Covid-19 has provided the opportunity to explore and recognise the link between success and academic practices, well-being and connection to the institution. This has been reinforced in the recent student success toolkit, entitled *The Seven Cs of Student Success* and can only be achieved through the fostering of a concept of community, belonging and inclusion (curricular and co/extra-curricular) in third level education.

### Embedding flexibility, accessibility, choice and autonomy through UDL

Covid-19 has posed significant challenges for the higher education system, yet in the process, it has also widened our understanding of access and inclusion. It has forced us to re-consider how we facilitate accessibility to learning and assessment for all students, and brought to the fore barriers for many students which long existed but remained under-discussed.

Many of the changes in teaching practice during Covid-19 were consistent with the three principles of UDL - providing more options for engagement, representation and action/expression. AHEAD's *Learning from Home 2021* survey data indicates that many students with disabilities wish to retain some of the more student-centred teaching practices applied by institutions which provided them with more flexibility, agency, autonomy and choice post-pandemic, all of which are outcomes that UDL strives to enable. Students' desire to retain many of these practices has been echoed in wider national research conducted through [StudentSurvey.ie](https://www.student-survey.ie). In particular, the literature highlights students' desire for the retention of recorded and captioned lectures and the provision of more variety and choice in how they are assessed.

**Ensuring all lectures are recorded. This THIS please!!!!  
The amount of extra emotional and physical harm I've put myself through forcing myself to get to class because I was already behind and the only person missing out was me. (Learning from Home survey participant cited in AHEAD 2021, p.92)**

The findings of much of AHEAD's research throughout the pandemic highlighted the huge diversity of experiences for students with disabilities, as well as the significant diversity of views and desires for how they wish to experience teaching and learning post pandemic, (AHEAD, 2020, 2021). Pandemic teaching and learning has inadvertently illuminated the value of providing more flexibility and choice in pedagogical practice to ensure we reach all learners; all of which are central to a UDL approach. As an evidence-based framework of teaching that fosters inclusivity, agency, flexibility and choice, UDL will be invaluable if blended and hybrid learning is to become a more recognised feature of the pedagogical landscape in the future. AHEAD believe that the pandemic has illustrated the importance of all staff having UDL training as an endeavour that would improve future teaching and learning.

### Continuing the reduction of the digital divide

The digital divide is an extant barrier that was arguably amplified by Covid-19. Our research indicated a marked increase in sole ownership of PC/laptops, combined with an increase of 54% of students with disabilities who now used Assistive Technology (AT) one year into the pandemic. The welcome increase in students employing AT was also accompanied by a decrease in those who found their use to be problematic while learning from home, a decrease from 28% to 16%. However, there are some caveats to what is unequivocally notable progression in addressing the digital divide. A full analysis of the digital divide necessitates an inquiry not just into PC/laptop ownership and the use of AT but also into privacy, internet connection, comfort and the distractions from home



that are crucial factors in the quality of the learning in the home environment. Our research explored these aspects of remote learning to analyse these often implicit and concealed elements of the digital divide.

Although the increase in students using AT and the concomitant reduction in those who find their use problematic is welcomed by AHEAD, 16% still represents a significant cohort of students who are experiencing difficulties and are at a substantial disadvantage as they attempt to navigate learning from home. It is also crucial to note that our data suggests that many students with disabilities who had received AT have little guidance about how to use them. A low cost intervention (e.g. bespoke training) would both advance value for money and a more level playing field for students with disabilities.

The nuanced digital divide should also address the home environment if hybrid learning is to become a reality for students with disabilities. Timonen, Greene and Émon (2021) explored Irish students' experiences of pandemic learning, reporting that many students recounted "positive experiences of their life in 'lockdown homes' with supportive families" (2021, p.1). However, AHEAD's research reframes this narrative for some, with many of our cohort stipulating a number of 'concealed' or less obvious challenges with their remote learning 'space' and internet connectivity (25% stated their connection was not adequate), while others reported distractions at home that often inhibited their ability to engage with their studies (21% and 16% of respondents rating comfort and privacy as below average respectively).

To advance equity of learning for students with disabilities and others that are potentially socio-economically disadvantaged, stakeholders must consider these nuances in any exploration of the learning from home narrative and any further funding streams that are to be developed to ensure equity of the learning from home experience.

### Balancing Student Well-Being and Academic Rigour

Aside from digital challenges, there were other issues that many encountered learning from home, and are argued to have impacted on well-being and student connectivity.

Results from AHEAD's *Learning from Home 2021* research illustrated that 46% of higher education undergraduate students with disabilities say they are still not coping well with learning from home, with our corpus of datasets from the duration of the pandemic citing very significant challenges with issues such as 'accessibility', 'a lack of motivation' and 'lack of ability to structure my day' (AHEAD 2020, 2021). If we are to introduce remote learning in any form, for example through blended, hybrid or fully online learning, it is crucial that student well-being is also monitored with a strategic commitment to institutional oversight. There is a need for institutions to examine more critically whether students are being over-assessed, and whether better cross-programme collaboration on the planning of student schedules and assessment deadlines can ease pressure on students without reducing standards, as well as boosting well-being and connection to the institution in the process.

**The design of assessments, all written work. I am so worried because I have 4 essays due from last semester and 10 or so pieces from this semester. I really wish we could have done more interactive assessments and this would have been taken into account... absolute overload of work. This has made education less accessible to many like me who struggle in general. (Learning from Home survey participant, cited in AHEAD 2021, p. 47)**

Additionally, changes in the post-pandemic higher education landscape need to initiate equitable avenues for socialisation and other activities that go beyond the academic sphere, therefore advancing equity and inclusivity across the higher education experience, without depriving the student of the opportunity of gaining social capital, cultural capital, enjoying international mobility and the many other activities that combine to inform the full student experience. All students, including those with disabilities should be entitled to these experiences.

### Conclusion

This diverse range of pandemic learning experiences is reinforced throughout the 2020 and 2021 survey cohorts, and these differing dispositions and reactions are indicative of a student body that had a wide range of personal perspectives and experiences engaging with pandemic teaching and learning. Our research situates the three discussed learnings as pivotal to the objective of the Next Step project from the perspective of students with disabilities.

### References

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### Authors: Dr Richard Healy and Dara Ryder

Email Address:

dara.ryder@ahead.ie

richard.healy@ahead.ie

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