

Building Australian Tertiary Educator Knowledge and Skill in Universal Design for Learning

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Abstract

Students with disabilities continue to experience barriers to accessing tertiary (i.e., postsecondary) education in Australia. Using the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) may help educators proactively address barriers through the design of more accessible and inclusive educational experiences. However, at present, references to UDL appear in only a small number of Australian educational policies and tertiary institute websites, and few tertiary educators use UDL in practice. In this article, we describe how a team of educators, learning designers, accessibility advocates, and people with disabilities from multiple institutions across Australia collaborated to co-create a free, accessible eLearning program to build workforce knowledge and skill in UDL. We first describe how the advisory group was established, how the Knowledge to Action cycle was used to guide the activities of the advisory group, and the evaluation framework that was used to assess the outcomes of the eLearning program. We share potential future activities to raise awareness of UDL and influence policy and practice in local contexts and propose directions for future work in this area.

Keywords: postsecondary education, higher education, vocational education, disability, Universal Design for Learning

Australians with disabilities still struggle to access tertiary education (Grant-Smith et al., 2020), despite that Australia has signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, United Nations, 2006), which asserts that all people with a disability have the right to access education on the same basis as their non-disabled peers (Article 24). In Australia, the

UNCRPD is enacted in policies and legislation at the federal and state/territory level, and the right to education is articulated in local laws including the Disability Discrimination Act (Australian Government, 1992) and the Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government, 2005). However, research including the student voice has suggested that course technologies are inaccessible, students with disabili-

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ties have difficulty navigating the online or physical learning environment, and students lack support to get appropriate and needed accommodations (Kent, 2015). Compounding concerns raised by students, the 2020 review of the Australian Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government, 2021) found that tertiary educators were not confident about how to implement adjustments for students with disability.

At present, to receive accommodations in tertiary education, students with disabilities are typically asked to provide medical documentation as evidence of need and then negotiate individual accommodations (Pitman et al., 2021). This reactive approach to providing accommodations to individual students is challenging for several reasons. First, the approach places the responsibility on the individual student. In other words, it requires students to self-identify and advocate for their learning support needs. Doing so may require students to possess self-advocacy skills and a mature understanding of their educational needs (Kraglund-Gauthier et al., 2014). Secondly, this approach requires educators to develop and implement a suite of adjustments to suit each identified student need, which can be time and resource intensive (Lombardi et al., 2015). Finally, this approach might exclude students who may not be aware of their disability or who might not want to disclose their disability for fear that disclosure would be stigmatising or place them at a disadvantage (Moriña, 2016).

Given these challenges, the exploration of a proactive and systematic approach to building workforce capability in the design and delivery of inclusive education in Australian tertiary education institutions was deemed to be important. One way to support the inclusion of students with disability in tertiary education is to incorporate the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into the design and delivery of tertiary curriculum. Terms such as *universal design*, *inclusive design*, and *design for all* have been used to describe “the design of products and environments to be usable to all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (Centre for Universal Design, 2008, p. 1). UDL is an application of universal design that aims to ensure that learning content and activities allow the maximum number of learners to participate and learn, regardless of their age, cognition, physical ability, cultural background, or learning preferences (Pisha & Coyne, 2001). UDL’s proactive approach to learning and teaching design aims to give all students equal opportunities to succeed by providing students with flexible pathways for learning, such as multiple representations of content, multiple ways to actively engage with content, and multiple ways to

demonstrate their learning (CAST, 2018). In addition, UDL is not prescriptive about the specific teaching strategies to be used, and might be used in conjunction with goal setting, structured activities and lessons, scaffolding, multiple exposures to concepts and ideas, frequent formative feedback, self-monitoring, and other high-impact learning and teaching strategies (Hattie, 2009).

UDL might be considered an optimal strategy for addressing barriers faced by students with disability in tertiary education for several reasons. First, UDL has been demonstrated to improve student retention and participation in tertiary education (Capp, 2017; Seok et al., 2018). Second, UDL takes the onus off students to identify and request accommodations and places responsibility on institution and educators to proactively design more accessible and inclusive learning experiences (Chardin & Novak, 2020). Third, UDL is non-categorical; in other words, it can be applied flexibly to meet the diverse needs of learners across settings, subjects, age groups, cultural backgrounds, and disability types (Lowrey et al., 2017). Finally, UDL can be implemented strategically and systematically within a tertiary education institution as part of the provision of a continuum of support for students (Fovet, 2021), rather than as individual activity on part of educators.

At present, references to UDL appear in only a small number of Australian educational policies and tertiary institute websites, as indicated by a review of Australian tertiary education policies completed as part of this project (Jwad et al., 2021). The limited reference to UDL in policy and practice resources in the tertiary education sector, and lack of reinforcement in government policies in higher education and within the Vocation Education and Training (VET) sector, may partly explain the slow uptake of UDL in Australia. Australian policy and practice resources primarily advocate for the provision of individualised reasonable adjustments to students with disabilities (Fossey et al., 2015), although Fossey et al. point to universal design as a useful framework for Australian institutions to explore. In addition, there are few Australian courses, programs, or professional learning opportunities specifically designed to build educator knowledge and skill in UDL.

Setting and Participants

In response to the 2020 Review of the Australian Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government, 2021), the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET) and the Australian National Disability Coordination Officer

(NDCO) Program convened an advisory group of key representatives across the tertiary education sector to explore ways to increase support for and adoption of UDL in tertiary education in Australia. The project was coordinated by five core members representing ADCET, the NDCO Program, and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) South Australia. The expert advisory group was composed of members across Australia representing both vocational and higher education. Advisory members were recruited through the direct invitation of those with known experience with UDL, as well as through an expression of interest process shared through an Australian Tertiary Education email list subscribed to by over 700 tertiary education disability practitioners. The broader advisory group membership included teaching and learning specialists, learning designers, learning technology developers, disability services managers, accessibility consultants, researchers, and lecturers, all of whom are co-authors of this brief. Within the advisory group, several members had lived experience of disability. Advisory group members represented tertiary education institutions and/or programs from New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, and Western Australia.

Depiction of the Problem

In Australia, it is estimated that 7.3% of university students and 5% of VET students have a disability (Australian Government, 2022; National Centre for Vocational Educational Research, 2022). This represents an increase in the enrolment share of domestic students with disability by 64.9% over the past decade. However, research has shown that students with disability are less likely to complete their studies than their non-disabled peers, and, if they do graduate, are less likely to engage in meaningful and competitive employment post-graduation (Grant-Smith et al., 2020). In Australia, tertiary education attainment may increase the likelihood of employment, be associated with a higher income, and be related to greater social benefits (Deloitte Economics Access, 2016). Thus, there is an urgent need to identify strategies to support the inclusion and full participation of students with disability in tertiary education institutions, as successful completion of a certificate, diploma or degree may facilitate entry into the workforce and build social and economic capital.

Description of Practice

This project was conducted across several stages using the Knowledge to Action (KTA) cycle (Graham

et al., 2006). The KTA cycle is a conceptual framework designed to facilitate the translation of knowledge into sustainable evidence-informed practices in real-world settings (Field et al., 2014). The KTA cycle includes several stages: (a) identification of the problem, (b) determining potential solutions, (c) selecting a solution, (d) identifying possible barriers and facilitators to implementing the solution, and (e) creating tools to translate the solution into action. In what follows, we illustrate how the KTA cycle was used to guide the development of the UDL eLearning program.

Phase 1: Identifying the Problem

The 2020 Review of the Australian Disability Standards for Education acknowledged that the “integration of UDL and other accessibility principles (into tertiary education) would require the collaboration of many stakeholders, including governments, providers, regulators, and curriculum and assessment authorities” (Australian Government, 2021, p. 43). This statement was the impetus for convening the advisory group and initiating this project. Members of the team who conceptualised this project were motivated by the shared sense that Australian tertiary education institutions can and should do more to support the equal participation of students with disability. One specific problem that the advisory group was interested in addressing was a lack of preparedness and confidence on the part of educators with respect to implementing adjustments for students with disabilities.

Phase 2: Determining Potential Solutions

After the problem was identified and defined, the advisory group brainstormed potential solutions. To do so, advisory group members drew on their collective professional wisdom and reviewed information from several sources, including (a) international published research on strategies and tactics for building the capability of educators to address the needs of students with disability, (b) published Australian policy documents and reviews related to supporting students with disability in tertiary education settings (e.g., Australian Government, 2021; Kent, 2015; National Centre for Vocational Educational, 2022), and (c) publicly available tertiary education institution policy and practice documents pertaining to the provision of adjustments for students with disability (Jwad et al., 2021). Advisory group members acknowledged that no one solution was likely to be sufficient to address the range of needs of students with disability in tertiary education, and that, for a proposed solution to be successful, it would need to be realistic, achievable, and effective.

Phase 3: Selecting a Solution

The final report of the 2020 Review of the Australian Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government, 2021) recommended that UDL be explored as a potential way to increase access to education for students with disability in Australia. Collectively, the members of the advisory group felt that UDL was a suitable framework for supporting the participation of students with disability in tertiary education because it is flexible, adaptable, and can benefit all learners. In addition, UDL was highlighted as a potential approach for use in the tertiary education sector in multiple government reports (see Australian Government, 2021; Fossey et al., 2015). Members of the group also highlighted that UDL was advantageous because it offered a proactive approach for designing more inclusive educational experiences that reduced the need for students with disability to request individual accommodations and disclose their disability, thus addressing challenges associated with the more typical reactive approach commonly used. Thus, the identification of new ways to build educator capability in the use of UDL in practice (the solution) was determined to be important and needed.

Phase 4: Assessing Barriers and Facilitators to Implementing the Solution

Members of the advisory group were able to draw on their own experiences working in the tertiary education sector to identify some of the potential barriers to building educator capability in UDL. One commonly identified barrier for educators was time and another was pressure associated with ever-increasing workloads. Advisory group members noted that through adoption of the UDL framework, the time and workload associated with reactively addressing individual student needs might be reduced in the long-term. Advisory group members also considered barriers that tertiary educators might face when developing knowledge and skill in UDL. Barriers might include time to develop new skills in UDL, opportunities to participate in professional learning opportunities related to implementing UDL, cost of professional learning opportunities and supplemental resources, and assistance with putting the principles of UDL into practice on the job.

A UDL eLearning training program was determined to be a cost- and time-efficient way for tertiary educators to build their knowledge and skill in UDL. The members of the advisory group worked together to co-create a free, accessible eLearning program (Disability Awareness, 2022) to build workforce knowledge and skill in UDL (see Table 1). Several steps were taken to make the program as accessible

to as many educators as possible. First and foremost, the program was made available at no cost and is currently housed on an online, freely accessible learning management system. Secondly, the program was designed to be self-paced and modularised, so participants could choose when and where to complete it. The total duration of the eLearning program is approximately 2 hours to allow participants to complete it in one or a few sittings. Third, user testing was undertaken before the launch of the program to ensure it met accessibility standards (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0) and was easy to use and navigate. Finally, to facilitate knowledge transfer, the program illustrated the principles of UDL in action by providing multiple means of representation of content (for example, all videos are accompanied by captions and transcripts) and multiple ways for participants to engage with the content (video clips, practice examples, printable resources, links to external sources that provide more in-depth information, etc.). Providing multiple means of representation also allowed to ensure specific accessibility standards were met, such as providing captions and transcripts for video content, alternative text for images, and printable documents that could be read by screen reader software.

Phase 5: Creating Tools to Translate the Solution to Action

The eLearning program was created by the members of the advisory group. Subcommittees were formed to (a) develop and film video content for inclusion in the eLearning program, (b) build the eLearning program on the learning management system, (c) develop supplemental resources to accompany the eLearning modules, (d) undertake user testing of the eLearning program to ensure it was easy to navigate and accessible (this subcommittee included members of the group with lived experience of disability), (e) develop a framework for evaluating the eLearning program (user surveys and focus groups), and (f) planning a public online event (a free webinar) to correspond with the launch of the eLearning program and raising awareness about the program in the tertiary education sector via social media posts, an email to the over 700 practitioners on the Australian Tertiary Education email list, and by individual advisory group members sharing information about the program within their professional networks.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

Enrolment and completion data provide demographic information, module quizzes provide participants with formative feedback on their learning

Table 1

*Description of the Content Included in Each of the Four Modules that Comprise the Universal Design for Learning in Tertiary Education Elearning Program**

Module Name	Module Content
Introduction to Universal Design for Learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction to inclusive education 2. Principles of Universal Design 3. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) 4. Benefits of UDL 5. UDL and reasonable adjustments
The Universal Design for Learning Framework and Guidelines	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Universal Design for Learning framework 2. The Affective, Recognition and Strategic networks 3. UDL principles, guidelines, and checkpoints 4. Multiple means of engagement 5. Multiple means of representation 6. Multiple means of action and expression
Universal Design for Learning in Practice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Design, development, and delivery considerations 2. Course design 3. Unit, topic, and session planning 4. Development of materials and resources 5. Learning tools and technologies 6. Facilitation of learning 7. Assessment 8. Evaluation and feedback
Getting Started with Universal Design for Learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can I start? 2. Try the plus-one approach 3. Additional considerations to support UDL 4. Identifying and addressing implementation challenges

Note. * The full eLearning program can be accessed at <https://disabilityawareness.com.au/elearning/udl-in-tertiary-education/>

and provide program administrators with information about the degree to which participants are demonstrating new knowledge, and a post-program survey provides qualitative and quantitative data about participant learning and confidence with UDL, intention to apply their new learning in their practice, and overall satisfaction with the eLearning course. The course was launched in December 2021. As of 30 June, 2022, 644 people enrolled in the program. Of these, 409 people partially completed the program and 255 people completed the program in full. Whilst 61.6% of participants are yet to complete the training in full, many of these program participants continue to log in either regularly or sporadically, taking advantage of the self-paced nature of this program to complete the course in their own time or access learning materials as needed. Additionally, completion of the program is currently entirely voluntary.

Seventy-one participants also completed the post-program survey. Preliminary survey data suggest that participants who have completed the program have improved their understanding of UDL principles and are likely to make changes in their practice to implement and apply UDL. Before completing the course, only 34.9% of participants reported having a good or excellent understanding of UDL principles. After completing the course, 90.4% of participants reported having a good or excellent understanding of UDL principles. In addition, 92% of training participants reported feeling mostly or very confident to apply UDL practices and approaches to their work following completion of the course.

Implications and Transferability

By bringing together an advisory group, we were able to draw on the expertise and lived experiences of individual champions of UDL from across Australia to explore new ways to build tertiary educator knowledge and skill in the use of UDL. The design of a free eLearning program allowed us to disseminate information about UDL and how it can be used to deliver inclusive and accessible education in the tertiary education sector to tertiary educators, administrators, and learning designers. The eLearning program promotes a stepped approach to UDL, in which small changes may be introduced by individual educators that are gradually expanded as educators gain confidence (Moore et al., 2018). This might be considered a “bottom-up approach” to promoting practice change; that is, it relies on individual educators to complete the course, decide how to incorporate UDL into their own practice, and then share the impact of their implementation efforts with others to raise awareness of

benefits and facilitate wider adoption of UDL within their local context.

However, a “top down” approach driven by policy change may also be required if the tertiary education sector is to embed UDL into practice in more systemic ways. Members of the advisory group discussed the importance of serving on committees or working groups designed to influence institutional policy change or working collaboratively with others within their institution (including students with lived experience of disability) on projects and initiatives around the provision of inclusive education for students with disability and articulating the role of UDL in action/strategic plans.

Limitations and Future Directions

The development of the UDL eLearning program was a first step towards building awareness of UDL in the Australian tertiary education sector. At present, we do not have much information about how individuals who have completed the program are translating their new learnings into their professional practice, or the barriers they encounter when doing so. We identified several future directions to continue to build on the work completed to date. First, we will supplement the eLearning program with a community of practice to support educators to translate their new learnings into their practice. This will provide a way for educators to access ongoing support from community of practice leaders and from other educators who are implementing UDL. Through these sessions, we will be able to identify barriers to implementation and generate potential solutions to these barriers. We will also gather practical examples of how UDL is implemented in Australian tertiary education institutions, develop new resources to support implementation, and share new resources through newsletters, social media groups, presentations, institution-specific professional development events, and the media. To extend this work and contribute to a growing body of international research on UDL, we plan to conduct focus groups with participants who completed the eLearning program to explore their perceptions of the barriers and enablers to using UDL in practice. We also plan to identify and describe examples of successful implementation of UDL looks like in Australian tertiary education institutions through the collection and analysis of case studies.

Some members of the advisory group had lived experience of disability (a strength of this project), which allowed us to capture the perspectives of people with disability during all phases of the project. However, we recognise that, in the development of

the eLearning program and resources, the voices of students were mostly heard second hand, through the stories of their educators (although students do feature in some of the videos included in the program). We recommend centring the voices of students with disability, as the major stakeholders, as part of future efforts to integrate UDL into tertiary education classrooms. It is important to identify if and how UDL addresses the needs of both students with disability to identify if there are areas that students need more support. This might be accomplished by inviting students with disabilities to participate in focus groups and communities of practice to provide feedback on resources and to share their lived experiences. In addition, students with disabilities should be invited to participate in the planning and user testing of new program materials and technologies to ensure they are accessible and usable. The active involvement of students with disabilities should be an integral part of future efforts to implement and evaluate UDL in the Australian tertiary education sector and education systems worldwide.

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