

UDL for FET Practitioners

Summary Version



This document is a summary of UDL for FET Practitioners: Guidance for Implementing Universal Design for Learning in Irish Further Education and Training Programmes (SOLAS, 2021).

You can download the full UDL for FET Practitioners guidance and associated resources and tools from [the online Resource Hub that accompanies the UDL for FET project at ahead.ie/UDLforFET](https://ahead.ie/UDLforFET).

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Background

Our Further Education and Training (FET) learners are more diverse than ever. They come to us from all different socio-economic backgrounds, levels of preparedness for study, language groups, gender identities, cultural groups, and ability profiles—to name just a few of their diverse characteristics. This variability is a strength of the sector in many ways, and it presents challenges in others.

As FET practitioners, we now serve more learners who don't fit easily into the traditional models of teaching and learning which many of us experienced in our own schooling. As practitioners, we need to know how best to respond to learners with autism, learners whose first language isn't English, learners with work and family responsibilities, learners with disabilities, or learners with previous home-life and school-life issues.

Many of us will have experienced the reasonable accommodations process for learners who have documented disabilities. You've made one change, one time, for one learner—and those changes likely helped those learners to have a better chance at being able to learn, study, and show their skills in your FET courses. But those changes were also probably made with little advanced notice and required a lot of effort on your part, too.

Although we can never eliminate the need to accommodate learners with disabilities, there is a design approach that reduces the need to make those individual-support accommodations in the first place—and also maximises everyone's learning opportunities. By thinking and working according to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), you can lower barriers for all of your learners—and for yourself. UDL allows more of your learners to feel “a part of” rather than “apart from” their learning.

This approach helps them to do their best work and to thrive in your FET programmes.

This summary will introduce you to the three principles of UDL and the guidelines underpinning them, and will also highlight some key good practices associated with each guideline. It will also explore the importance of implementing UDL as a FET community and show you how you can build your network. For a more in-depth look at these topics and a range of case examples of UDL for FET in action, download the full UDL for FET Practitioners guidance and explore the associated resources and tools from [the online Resource Hub that accompanies the UDL for FET project at ahead.ie/UDLforFET](https://ahead.ie/UDLforFET).

What is Universal Design for Learning?

UDL is a set of principles and guidelines that aim to develop expert learners by using a variety of teaching methods in order to lower barriers to learning and give all learners equal opportunities to succeed. By applying the principles of UDL in our FET programmes, we build in flexibility that addresses learners' strengths and needs. The neuroscientists at CAST¹ who developed UDL define its three core principles this way:

- Provide multiple means of engagement.
- Provide multiple means of representation.
- Provide multiple means for action and expression.²

There is also a simpler way to think about UDL: the “plus-one” approach. Think about the interactions that you want your learners

¹ The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) created the UDL framework. See <https://www.cast.org>.

² CAST. (2018). *Universal design for learning guidelines*. Version 2.2. Available at <http://udlguidelines.cast.org/>.

to have—with materials, with each other, with their instructors, with support staff, and with the wider world. Is there only one way that those interactions can take place right now? Create just one more way: this is the plus-one approach, and it helps you to narrow your scope and effort when you apply inclusive practices like UDL.

Foundations in Research and Practice

The guidance you are reading is part of the Universal Design for Learning for Further Education and Training project from SOLAS, ETBI,³ and AHEAD. It follows the Conceptual Framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for the Further Education and Training (FET) Sector in Ireland – the first output of the project which explores the development of UDL, key concepts for its implementation in FET and the legislative and policy context. The practices of UDL are grounded in decades of research in neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and applied learning science about the ways in which humans learn.

The traditional model of teaching, in which practitioners lecture and learners take notes, ignores the vast variety among our learners. Because we serve such a variety of learners among our FET programmes, we need a way to teach them that can keep them motivated, offer them flexibility in how they learn with us, and grant them choices and control over their learning experiences.

UDL is embedded in the policies, guidelines, and strategies of key national bodies, including the Department of Education and Skills; the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research,

3 An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (SOLAS), Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI).

Innovation and Science; SOLAS; Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI); and the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD).⁴

It is also now an explicit goal for the entire FET sector. All FET programmes should provide “consistent and integrated support offered to all learners in all FET settings” by “applying good practice guides and toolkits on inclusive practice across the system, adopting a universal design for learning (UDL) approach in shaping its future provision.”⁵

Implementing UDL does not negate the legal requirement for the provision of reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities, but it has the potential to reduce the need for many accommodations in the first place.

UDL Principle 1: Provide Multiple Means of Engagement

The first of the three UDL principles is to provide learners with multiple means of engagement. Regardless of our learning preferences, circumstances, and what we bring to learning interactions, we don’t learn or retain anything unless we have a reason to learn it. Providing engagement that “clicks” with various learners helps them to answer the “why” question about learning.

4 For more info on policy context, see - Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD). (2020). *Universal design in education and training—Policy landscape in Ireland*. Available at <https://bit.ly/32qMWLg>.

5 SOLAS. (2020). *Future FET: Transforming learning: The national further education and training (FET) strategy*. Available at https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf.

Principle 1 simplified: engagement works best when it is built in collaboration with learners. Ask them.

Learners come to FET programmes for a wide range of reasons. Their needs, motivations, goals, ability profiles, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds are very different. When we design our learning environments to be welcoming and flexible, learners perceive that the learning we have to offer applies to them.

Provide Options for Recruiting Interest

- **Be clear about your learning outcomes and programme goals.**
Not all learners have recent academic experience. Ensure that learners know what they are meant to do and understand the learning outcomes on which their work will be assessed. Use practical, real-world stories to illustrate why your learners should engage with you, and then help them to define for themselves why they should pay attention, care, and learn with you.
- **Make space for listening to your learners.** Make sure to give your learners more than one way to join this conversation: speaking out loud, free-writing, recording a quick mobile-phone video, creating word-processed text, and so on.
- **Create a safe learning environment.** One of the biggest barriers that many FET learners have relates to their confidence in their learning skills. Ask your learners to collaborate on a



code of respectful learning behaviours for your classroom, and encourage them to feel comfortable expressing themselves, asking questions, and clarifying uncertainties—all in various formats. Use schedules and cues that increase the predictability of recurring tasks so that your learners know what's coming next.

Provide Options for Sustaining Effort and Persistence

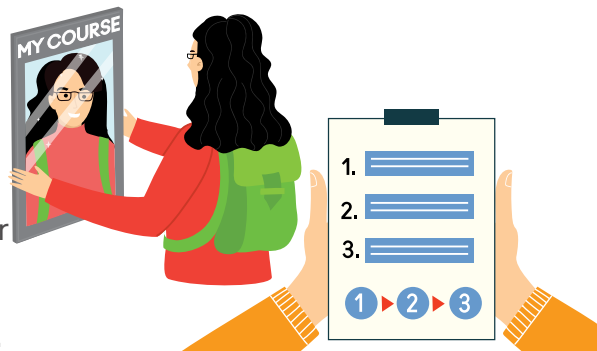
- **Check often for understanding and progress.** Throughout your activities, units, and modules, ask your learners to communicate in their own words what they are supposed to be doing—and why. Review the lesson outcomes together.
- **Encourage learners to set up and run groups when they value them.** Set up group activities as possibilities, not mandatory structures. Create safe environments for peer mentoring, discussion forums, and cooperative learning.
- **Give formative feedback frequently.** Formative feedback is given while a project, assessment, or assignment is still in progress. Focus on showing how learners are meeting milestones and building new skills on good foundations. Suggest how learners can productively address challenges and gaps.



Provide Options for Self-Regulation

- **Reflect your learners.**

Use stories and images of learner success from a diverse range of learners. Even better, collect learner work now, and then share it with your future learners.



- **Show struggles.** Show how you, as an expert in your FET subject, go through the process from not-knowing, to curiosity, to experimentation, application to practice, and eventual expertise.
- **Chunk learning.** Practitioners understand complex ideas by grouping related elements and steps together. Break up your lectures into their smallest pieces. Show the connections and logic among those pieces. Pause after each discrete element to check with learners. Provide learners with scaffolds such as templates, to-do lists, and exemplars—in more than one format.

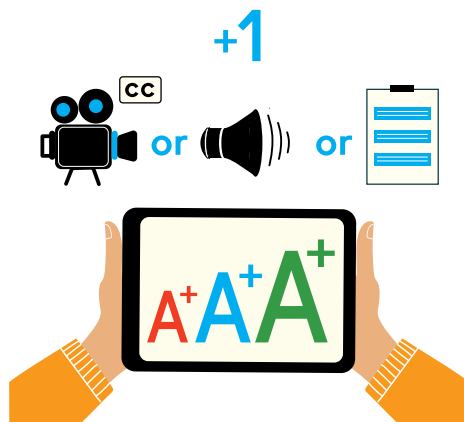
UDL Principle 2: Provide Multiple Means of Representation

The second of the three UDL principles is to provide multiple means of representing information. This is what most of us think about when we say “accessibility”: providing alternative formats for information and content, such as captions for videos, transcripts for audio files, and alternative text to describe images.

Principle 2 simplified: information is no good if it isn't used. Give learners choices for encountering data, facts, and ideas.

Fortunately, our FET programmes don't need to cover every possible way that learners could use materials. Just two formats will do quite nicely: the plus-one approach again. Here are strategies that help learners to know what they are studying, to take in information effectively, to understand what it means, and to connect it to their existing knowledge.

Provide Options for Perception

- Provide alternatives for visuals and audio.** When you present or share information with your learners, give them at least two formats from which to choose. If this sounds like a big task (if you are retro-fitting existing materials, it can be), start by creating plus-one alternatives to support interactions where things consistently haven't gone the way you had planned, and then expand from there in future offerings.
 
- Offer ways to customise the display of information.** Many of the tools we use routinely, such as web browsers, the learning management system (LMS), our mobile devices, and common software, have alternative-access features. Find out how to change things like fonts, colour schemes, playback speed, and volume for the materials you share with your learners, and then give them step-by-step directions for how to make such changes.

Provide Options for Language, Mathematical Expressions, and Symbols

- **Clarify syntax and structure.**

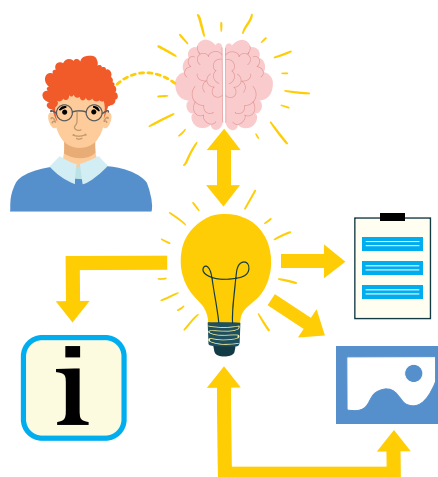
For complex ideas and practitioner jargon, use simpler language at first, then tie it to deeper and more complicated ideas and terms as the group moves forward together. Show the structure of information, and share how you created it.



- **Clarify vocabulary and symbols to be used.** Because we are experts and practitioners in our fields, we assume knowledge that beginners and early practitioners don't have yet, and we do so unconsciously. Highlight new vocabulary and symbolic concepts for learners.
- **Check for understanding regularly.** Ask your learners to explain your assignment directions, for instance, in their own words. Where you find gaps, have the conversation with your learners and re-write, re-frame, or add context.

Provide Options for Comprehension

- **Activate or supply background knowledge.** Give your learners options that supply or activate relevant prior knowledge, or link to the pre-requisite information elsewhere, such as "anchoring" instruction by using both spoken



and visual content, or by establishing concept mastery routines (“do this in order to study this idea”); using advanced organisers like concept maps and KWL (Know, Want to Know, Learned) inquiries; demonstrating or modelling critical foundation-level concepts; and bridging concepts via analogies and metaphors that relate course content to the real world.

- **Highlight patterns, critical information, big ideas, and relationships.** Explicitly map out the connections between class activities and learner expectations. Remind learners how the day-to-day activities connect with the course learning outcomes and with their individual and occupational goals. The more you are able to pull back the metaphorical curtain to show learners connections, the more they will look for them as you progress through your interactions.

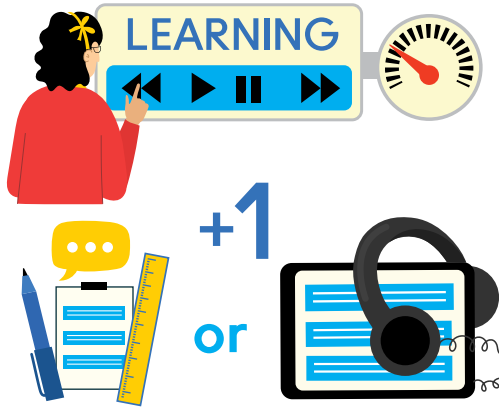
UDL Principle 3: Provide Multiple Means of Action & Expression

We can make the mistake of thinking that there is only one “best” way our FET learners should use to show the knowledge and skills acquired on our courses. Providing multiple means of action and expression entails giving our learners voices, choices, and control wherever we can do so.

Principle 3 simplified: learners who have choices, context, and a sense of control are more engaged and learn better.

Design interactions, activities, and assessments so that learners have plus-one choices for how to be part of our conversations and how they share their new learning with us and their classmates.

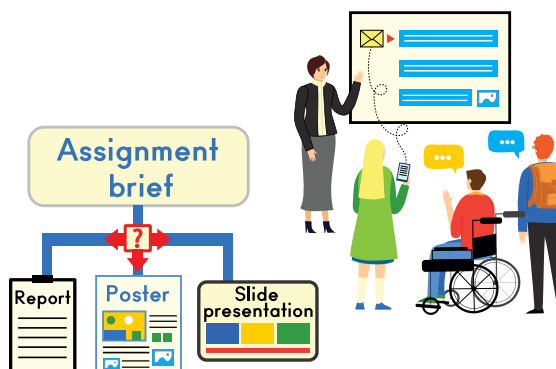
Provide Options for Physical Action

- **Add options that allow for different physical responses and flexibility in pace of learning.** Especially on drafting or practice tasks, offer learners a plus-one option like writing their thoughts digitally or quietly recording them via the audio recorder on their mobile phone.
- **Support learners to use no-, low- and high-tech options.** Not every FET learner has a smartphone: plan for no-tech or low-tech options for class activities to supplement tech-based interactions.
- **Be intentional about what you're actually asking learners to do.** In test and assessment design, there is a concept called “construct relevance.” In plain language, when we ask our learners to demonstrate their skills, we should test only those skills that we wish to test. When activities or test items use words and concepts with which learners are unfamiliar, such questions are actually probing learners’ language-comprehension skills along with their subject knowledge. Review your examples and samples, creating at least a plus-one alternative that gets at the tested idea, concept, or practice in the simplest possible expression. Don’t “dumb down” your content: keep the rigour high; lower the barriers for access to the skill itself.

Provide Options for Expression and Communication

- **Provide alternatives to pen, paper, and talking.**

Traditionally, we ask our learners to tell us how they are doing in only three ways: writing, talking, and taking tests. Look beyond the assignments



and think about the interactions that you have with learners in the classroom. Provide plus-one options for expressing ideas or asking questions, such as asking for either raised hands or responses to a quick anonymous poll—low-tech: paper slips and a box; high-tech, polling software and mobile phones.

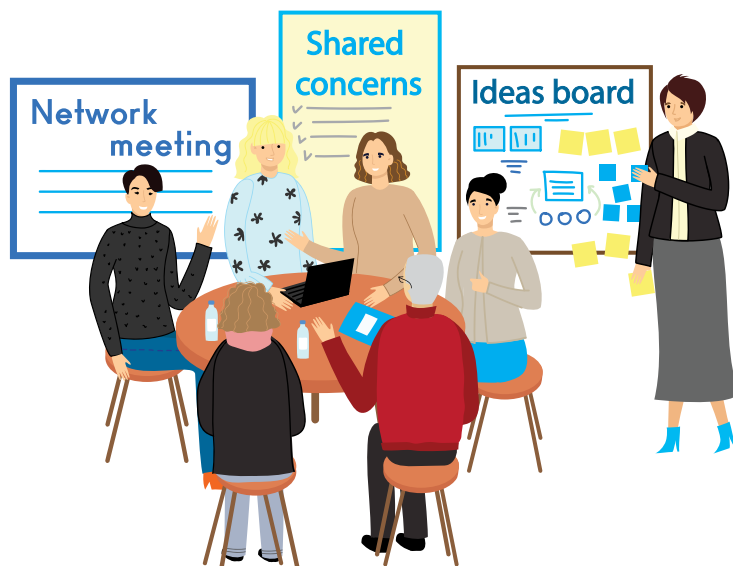
- **Allow and support learners to use tech-help when expressing themselves.** And not just your learners with disabilities, either. All of your learners will benefit from having the option to use things like spellcheckers, grammar checkers, and word-prediction software; speech to text (voice recognition), dictation, and recording tools; calculators, graphing calculators, and pre-formatted graph paper; outlining and mind-mapping tools; and music or mathematical notation software.
- **Create multiple paths for learners to show their skills.** When it is time for learners to actually do the work and show their skills, provide them with at least two ways to take those actions—and design all options so learners demonstrate the same learning outcomes. For your tests, examinations, quizzes, written assignments—for anything that counts toward the course grade—allow learners choices in how they show what they know.

Provide Options for Executive Functioning

- **Guide learners to set and express goals.** Ask learners to predict the outcomes of their practice efforts in goal statements in some fixed format (e.g., a written document or a video comment).
- **Support planning and strategy development.** Break learner tasks and processes into component parts. Ask learners to share how they are approaching their study and practice tasks over the coming days and weeks toward more complex projects and activities.
- **Provide scaffolds for performance.** Ensure that learners can visualise and understand the end results of activities. Provide templates for how to plan, carry out research, introduce, make arguments, or perform processes.
- **Give rubrics, guides, and opportunities to perform peer- and self-assessment.** As often as you can, share the steps of the processes that you employ to assess your learners' learning and performance. Many learners (and not just the ones who struggle) have never understood how the marks on their papers, projects, and exams came into being; help them to become self-graders.



UDL is a Team Effort



The most successful UDL efforts are those in which FET practitioners like you reach out to your learners, your peers, and the wider community to create connections, discover options, inspire creative learning methods, and learn best practices from—and with—one another.

UDL lowers barriers for a wide range of FET learners, is worth time and effort to implement, and can be enacted most effectively when we come together to create collaborative responses that address common barriers for the learners whom we serve.

Once your individual conversations with colleagues identify a larger need, the most effective way to foster that sense of creative collaboration and support is to create or join a professional learning network (PLN). A PLN is a “group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and who learn how to do it better by interacting regularly.”⁶

⁶ Wenger-Trayner, E. (2011). What is a community of practice? *Wenger-Trayner Consulting*. <https://wenger-trayner.com/resources/what-is-a-community-of-practice/>.

At their core, PLNs all share two characteristics. They are focused on a single issue, concern, or idea. And they are conversations that take place regularly.

There is No UDL without You

By providing multiple means of engagement, you give your learners voices and real choices in their learning activities, leading to a deeper understanding and motivation for learning itself. Some learners who were previously antagonistic or tuned out responded positively when their instructors and FET centre support staff reach out to them in ways that give them agency and respect.

All learners learn differently. Making course materials available through multiple means of representation addresses the access needs of a wide variety of learners. All learners have greater options in how they take in and process the course. By observing learner difficulties, we can design just one more way of delivering content where learners always struggle—the plus-one approach—in order to lower barriers and give learners the best chance of understanding the subjects we teach.

Perhaps the most powerful UDL principle is to provide multiple means of action & expression. When you give your learners options for how they express themselves and demonstrate what they know, they will flourish. This works because giving your learners an active role in their own learning produces agency: a sense of ownership and a stake in the learning process itself.

Want to Explore Further?

For more a more in depth look at these topics and a range of case examples of UDL for FET in action, [download the full UDL for FET Practitioners guidance and explore the associated resources and reflective tools in the online Resource Hub that accompanies the UDL for FET project at ahead.ie/UDLforFET.](#)

