



## Universal Design for Learning in private higher education: Bridging inclusion and innovation

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### ABSTRACT

This reflective paper explores the application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in private higher education settings, focussing on how inclusive pedagogical methods can foster innovation, engage learners, and ensure educational equity within the institution. Drawing on personal experiences as a senior educational leader in a private higher education institution, this paper examines how UDL has altered my practice as a leader and educator and impacted strategic decision-making in relation to curriculum design, digital transformation, and staff development; all of which are essential in order to achieve success in an educational institution. The reflective narrative highlights the barriers and opportunities which are linked with private higher education institutions, where the flexibility of policy implementation can aid or deter inclusive practices. Using scholarly literature on UDL, trauma-informed teaching, and inclusive leadership, the reflection connects lived professional experiences with wider institutional change. The aim of this narrative is to contribute to the discourse on inclusive education in under-researched higher education contexts and to offer support and practical insights into how to embed inclusive frameworks in teaching and leadership.

**Keywords:** Universal Design for Learning, Inclusive pedagogy, Private higher education, Educational leadership, Reflective practice

### Introduction

The current landscape in higher education has observed increasing awareness in relation to inclusive teaching approaches to address the diversity of learners' needs, experiences, and identities. However, much of the discourse when it comes to inclusive pedagogy has been focused around state-funded institutions, often overlooking the role and responsibility of private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in advancing this agenda. As private education institutions become important to the delivery of higher education globally, there is a critical need to examine how inclusivity frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can be integrated in these contexts to ensure students from these institutions are being delivered high-level student experiences. This is particularly significant given the rapid expansion of private higher education globally, with private providers increasingly serving international, mature, and non-traditional learners and offering flexible and accelerated routes into higher education (Office for Students, 2023; OECD, 2021; British Council, 2022).

UDL is a research-informed method which was developed by CAST (Centre for Applied Special Technology) and promoted by scholars such as Rose and Meyer (2002). It encourages educators to proactively create

learning environments which offer multiple ways of engagement, representation, and expression with the motive of removing barriers to participation before they arise. While UDL has been used and put into practice in compulsory education and mainstream universities, its integration and application in private higher education is often marked by commercial pressures, regulatory variability, and lack of resources in relation to inclusion infrastructure still remains an area which is under-researched.

As a senior leader within a private higher education institution, I have experienced both the potentials and limitations of integrating UDL-informed approaches. The absence of rigid governance structures allows for flexibility in relation to pedagogical experiments and agile curriculum development. However, resource constraints and a culture which focuses on performance and student outcomes can deprioritise issues such as inclusivity, especially when it is not linked directly to institutional metrics or market competitiveness. My journey has involved trying to navigate through these tensions while promoting a learner-centred approach that values emotional safety, cognitive flexibility, and differentiated instruction, as this will ensure not only student outcomes but also vitally develop skills and better student experiences.

This paper highlights a reflective analysis of how UDL principles have shaped my teaching practices, curriculum development, and staff development initiatives within the private higher education sector. This reflective narrative is rooted in real-life examples but is well supported by literature which focuses on inclusive education, trauma-informed practice, and educational leadership. This paper aims to bridge a gap between scholarly theory and institutional practice, while contributing to wider conversations on how inclusion can and should look in private higher education settings.

This reflection is not merely retrospective; it is also looking to the future and calling for reimagining educational equity in educational settings which are under-represented. It further explores how private providers cannot just have to replicate the public-sector policy but can act as modernisers of inclusive design, especially through digital platforms, modular curricula, and integrating learner-centred assessment models. By sharing my findings from within the sector, this paper invites educators and leaders to reflect on how inclusive frameworks like UDL can be both a pedagogical tool and a strategic imperative for ensuring better student outcomes but also for enhancing the student experiences, which should be at the forefront of any educational institution.

### **Narrative and literature-informed reflection: Bridging inclusion and innovation through UDL in private higher education**

My experience of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) did not initially begin in theory, but it was a response to the observation of unmet needs of learners within the private higher education (HE) sector. As a leader in a private institution, I found that traditional models of delivery were dominated by lectures, exams, and assuming all students are verbally fluent; as a result, this often-omitted students who had their struggles with neurodiversity, anxiety, or less conventional communication styles. These lived experiences resulted in me reflecting more deeply on the systemic inequities which are embedded in the curriculum and learning environments which made it difficult for learners with such needs to excel.

This reflective paper draws on both my personal experiences and scholarly literature to examine how the UDL framework can be utilised to bridge the division between inclusive intent and institutional practice. Brookfield (1995) highlights that critical reflection needs educators to alter their mindsets and align

teaching with learner diversity to ensure each student's needs are being met. For me, this meant moving past surface-level differentiation to recreating learning design which will align to meet the needs of all students.

While mainstream HE institutions are the main focus of inclusive pedagogical reform, private HE spaces are positioned uniquely but commonly overlooked. Unlike public institutions, private HE providers are operating under immense pressure, such as market competition, accelerated programmes, and variable access to resources. Despite this, they also have the ability to respond and innovate swiftly. This creates an opportunity but still comes with challenges. The question, then, becomes: how can inclusion and innovation co-exist in a fast-paced, outcome-driven environment?

The theoretical foundation for UDL originates from the work of CAST (Rose & Meyer, 2002), who have promoted and raised awareness for multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression to support learners with diverse needs. When comparing UDL to traditional models of curriculum design, the contrasts are clearly visible. Traditional design is typically rooted in uniformity, which is one particular mode of delivery (e.g., lecture), one way of assessing learners (e.g., essay), and one dominant mode of participation (e.g., class discussion). UDL, on the other hand, identifies variability as the norm, and the purpose is to ensure flexibility and, most importantly, cater for all the learners.

For example, I observed that learners who were not very vocal were often seen as disinterested in my educational institution. This resonated with my own educational experiences, where my silence was misunderstood as apathy rather than anxiety and lack of confidence. By using the UDL-informed framework, I instructed staff to introduce asynchronous discussion boards, multimedia assessments, and low-stakes formative feedback; this offered learners accessibility in various ways to demonstrate understanding. These strategies align with Florian and Black-Hawkins' (2011) inclusive pedagogy, which highlights 'teaching all learners' and ensuring all learners within educational settings are met.

The lived narratives of learners confirmed how effective these changes were. One specific mature student who had previously struggled and failed in a traditional university setting due to anxiety shared that the ability to contribute in writing resulted in them being more engaged and led to more confidence in voicing their opinions. Another neurodivergent learner described how visual scaffolding in lectures allowed them to process and digest information more effectively. Cases such as these clearly highlight what the literature and research tell us about inclusive environments benefiting all, not just learners with specific identified needs (CAST, 2018).

Looking beyond individual success stories, these changes reformed the collective atmosphere of my classrooms. Group work, which was once a source of anxiety for quiet or neurodivergent learners, began to develop into a learning environment where students could take part in preferred ways that aligned with their strengths, whether this was curating research sources, producing visual summaries, or leading online forum discussions. This is supported by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), who highlighted the importance of creating tasks that ensure active involvement of all learners and valuing their contributions.

Redesigning group structures resulted in better, more engaging discussions, reflecting the various viewpoints of learners within the classroom settings. Burgstahler (2015) supported this and found that creating accessible, flexible group formats will ensure better peer learning and eliminate participation barriers that students may have. These changes align with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, where knowledge is better absorbed through working collaboratively. My belief was reinforced when I observed

the impact that being inclusive had on learners. It's not just about the extra help learners require, but about redesigning classroom settings. Novak and Thibodeau (2021) further support this by stating its essential that student voice is heard and valued to ensure positive learning experiences.

This period resulted in me reviewing my role not just as an academic leader, but as an organiser of cultural change. The change to UDL was essential because it allowed me to model vulnerability and recognise my own learning with digital tools and adapt how I teach based on the feedback given by students. Brookfield (1995) argues that this willingness to reflect through many lenses, which includes student voice, is imperative when it comes to responsive teaching.

Transparency during this process through clear communication appeared to reduce staff resistance. Colleagues started to experiment with low-risk inclusive strategies, such as introducing numerous assessment formats (Tobin & Behling, 2018) or using collaborative platforms like Padlet and Miro, which further enhanced multimodal engagement (Seale, 2013). These changes aligned with Fullan's (2001) viewpoint that sustainable change begins initially with slight changes, which show acts of innovation. By doing this, inclusion was not a disruption to the current established practice but further added to the teaching quality, learner satisfaction, and institutional resilience (Loreman, 2017).

Implementing UDL in private HE can come with its complications. A major obstacle is balancing flexibility with academic rigour. Some critics of UDL argue that too much customisation risks potentially impacting academic quality (Tobin & Behling 2018). In my experience having clear outcomes paired with flexibility in the means of achieving them further enhances rather than weakens rigour. For example, allowing learners the option to submit their work in the form of an audio reflection instead of a written essay did not compromise critical thinking; it revealed different modes of reasoning and articulation which allow learners to develop additional skills.

In my role as an educational leader, I recognised that embedding UDL in institutional practice could not be achieved through policy alone; it required a sustained program of professional learning. To this end, I designed a series of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) workshops that were created to build both awareness-raising and skill-building.

The workshop followed the stage model below:

**Stage 1 – Awareness and Foundations:** introductory sessions were introduced to provide staff an understanding of UDL principles, CAST guidelines, and the wider evidence base for inclusive pedagogy (Rose & Meyer, 2002; CAST, 2018). These sessions were delivered in two-hour blocks, and case studies were used in both public and private HE contexts.

**Stage 2 – Application to Practice:** interactive workshops were used for staff to examine their current teaching materials and assessments, looking through a UDL lens. Here, colleagues were being encouraged to trial multiple ways of representation (visual, auditory, and text-based) and to redesign one assessment task in order to allow for varied forms of student expression (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Tobin & Behling, 2018).

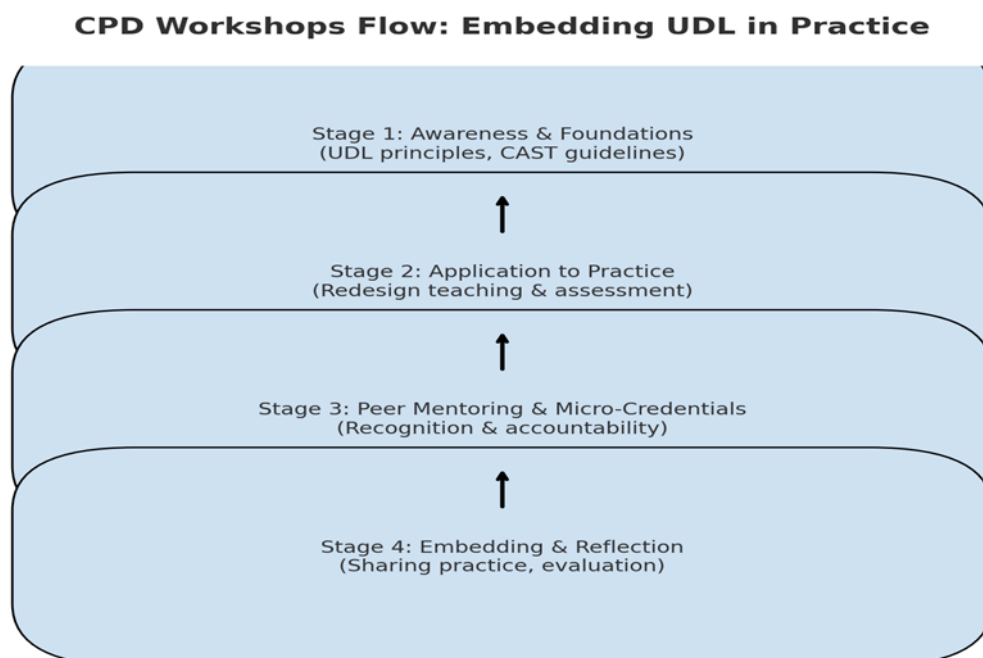
**Stage 3 – Peer Mentoring and Micro-Credentials:** staff were paired into peer-mentoring groups to ensure dialogue and accountability. Alongside this, a 'Design for All' CPD micro-credential pathway was launched.

This allowed staff to gain recognition for highlighting inclusive practice in their teaching portfolios, which also fed into institutional promotion criteria. Integrating reflective peer learning aligns with Brookfield’s (1995), which calls for educators to look to draw on multiple perspectives, and with Bovill’s (2020) promotion for collaborative, co-created professional development.

**Stage 4 – Embedding and Reflection:** the final phase looked to focus on collective reflection and impact evaluation. The team shared examples of modules which were redesigned, digital innovations (such as the use of Microsoft Immersive Reader and Padlet), and strategies for integrating trauma-informed methods (Seale, 2013). Reflection was promoted throughout teaching journals, peer observation feedback, and student evaluations, which is in line with Fullan’s (2001) argument that sustainable institutional change needs both cultural and structural shifts.

These CPD workshops were intentionally multimodal, which combined online webinars, in-person seminars, and digital collaborative spaces (Miro boards, Padlet) to model the very principles of UDL being advocated. They were co-facilitated by senior staff, external experts in inclusive pedagogy, and in some cases, student “inclusive learning champions” who gave their perspectives on accessibility needs (Bovill, 2020).

The impact was visible. Staff reported enhanced confidence when using digital tools and alternative assessment strategies, and several modules introduced flexible assessment formats (e.g., a choice between essays, podcasts, or visual artefacts). Most importantly, the workshops have created a shared institutional togetherness around inclusion, which reduced resistance by framing UDL as both a quality enhancement and a competitive differentiator in the private HE market (Loreman, 2017).



**Figure 1** Staged model of CPD workshops for embedding Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in practice.

The current policy landscape also plays a major role. In public universities, inclusive education is considered a statutory requirement in regard to funding incentives. On the other hand, private HE providers lack this regulatory drive, but UDL can be used as a differentiator for both of which are ethical and competitive. Drawing insights from the work of Hammond (2015) on culturally responsive teaching, what I found was integrating UDL ensured the needs of our diverse student body, including international and first-generation students. This alignment between inclusion and institutional identity enhanced our strategic vision and our reputation as a college.

Based on my personal experiences, I believe UDL is a mentality instead of a checklist and a commitment to proactive design, empathy with learners, and being responsive rather than being reactive. My practice has changed from accommodating difference and not being reactive to being proactive, which has led to designing inclusively from the outset. This shift is not only pedagogical but also cultural, which puts the learner's best interest at the forefront.

To summarise, this section explored the benefits and challenges in relation to UDL within private higher education institutions; it was grounded in both personal practice and established scholarly literature. The pressure between standardisation and flexibility, performance and wellbeing, and tradition and innovation highlights the importance of frameworks like UDL that are vigorous but yet adaptable. For educators and leaders alike, integrating UDL signifies an opportunity to rethink the creation of learning environments by not having systems which are fixed, but ensuring dynamic spaces which meet the needs of all learners.

### Critical engagement with literature

In order to embed Universal Design for Learning (UDL) within private higher education (HE), it is imperative to investigate and critically engage with the scholarly literature in order to underpin inclusive educational practice. UDL, originally founded by Rose and Meyer (2002), is built on the foundation that learner variability is the centre of attention rather than an exception. This change in educational philosophy moves away from retrofitting accommodations for students with disabilities and towards a proactive, flexible curriculum design that looks to benefit all learners and improve student experiences. In this section themes will be identified in the literature and examined, contrasted, and evaluated by comparing practical application and lived experience within private HE settings.

### Defining Universal Design for Learning

The foundational framework for UDL, which was developed by CAST (2018), is based around three core principles: providing multiple ways of engagement, representation, and action in order to express oneself. This multilateral structure has gained considerable traction in educational policy and institutional strategy. However, there has been some criticism; scholars argue that UDL's generality can limit its ability to address systemic inequities in higher education settings. For example, Hehir (2005) critiques UDL for inadequately addressing the cultural and social barriers which can shape educational inclusion. However, Novak and Thibodeau (2021) highlight that UDL, when implemented correctly, allows for teaching which is culturally responsive, as it offers multiple pathways which are tailored to learners' backgrounds and contexts.

The application of UDL in private HE still remains an area which is under-researched in relation to public universities. Rao et al. (2014) observe that while UDL is widely promoted in K–12 (primary and secondary education) and public university settings, less empirical research is around in order to determine its efficacy

and scalability within tuition-dependent, for-profit, or private HE sectors. This gap highlights the need for critically informed research that will look to explore the barriers which exist and opportunities unique to these particular institutions. Burgstahler (2015) further adds to the conversation by highlighting the benefits of UDL in creating accessible and equitable learning environments, even within inflexible institutional systems, which can significantly improve student experiences.

### **Inclusive pedagogy and the UDL nexus**

Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) have proposed that the inclusive pedagogy model is rooted in the assumption that all learners have the ability to progress. This model aligns closely with UDL but puts a greater emphasis on teachers' beliefs and dispositions as central to ensure inclusion. Where UDL offers a more structural and design-based solution, inclusive pedagogy draws attention to the relational and ethical responsibilities of educators, which means these are part of an educator's job and not an additional responsibility.

The literature often overlaps inclusive pedagogy with special education strategies. However, Norwich (2013) cautions against this and argues that over focusing on differences in individuals can unintentionally support deficit models. UDL offers a more universalist substitute, but the issue of being able to recognise differences and avoid marginalisation still remains a concern and is debated within the field. In private HE, where diversity may include international students, mature learners, and working professionals, balancing flexibility with academic rigour becomes especially complex. Loreman (2017) further supports the notion that inclusive pedagogy must be rooted in human rights and social justice, while acknowledging that its implementation demands consistent institutional support.

### **Trauma-informed education and emotional safety**

Another crossing body of literature is trauma-informed pedagogy. Hammond (2015) asserts that trauma affects cognitive engagement and that emotionally safe classrooms are prerequisites for effective learning. This literature complements UDL's engagement principle, which prioritises affective learning strategies. However, trauma-informed approaches tend to emphasise psychological wellbeing and relationship-building, whereas UDL focuses more on structural design and access.

Brunzell et al. (2016) integrate these perspectives and propose a strengths-based, trauma-informed UDL model which looks to address both internal emotional needs and external barriers which are being faced in learning. The integration of UDL with trauma-informed practice is relevant in widening participation contexts where some learners struggle with hidden communication difficulties, socio-economic stressors, or mental health challenges, and these issues must be addressed in order to ensure learner wellbeing.

While evidence is being collected on trauma-informed UDL, studies conducted by Carello and Butler (2014) highlight embedding trauma-sensitive practices in HE can improve student wellbeing and academic performance. These findings are reinforced by qualitative accounts of educators like myself, who have seen how significant enhancements in student confidence and participation follow the redesign of the curriculum and assessment. Thomas (2012) further supports this by adding that trauma-informed environments can improve the determination amongst first-generation and non-traditional students, further supporting how adaptable UDL can be.

### **Communication needs and inclusive frameworks**

The literature on social communication disorders (SCD) offers another lens for understanding inclusion. Norbury (2015) differentiates SCD from autism spectrum disorder (ASD), emphasising that learners with SCD often go undiagnosed and unsupported despite facing substantial challenges in academic and social settings. Dockrell and Lindsay (2001) similarly report that students with speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN) are frequently overlooked if they do not present with behavioural issues.

These findings align with the reflective narratives presented earlier, which describe personal and observed experiences of students whose academic competence masks internal communication struggles. The SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) promotes a broader understanding of need that includes emotional and social dimensions. Yet, as Law et al. (2012) highlight, these needs are frequently overshadowed by priorities such as literacy attainment or behavioural management in policy implementation.

UDL's emphasis on multiple means of engagement and expression provides a practical avenue to address these communication barriers. Allowing students to contribute via written reflections, visual artefacts, or asynchronous discussions opens the door for learners who struggle with verbal fluency to succeed without being pathologised. Studies by Snowling et al. (2019) have shown that flexible assessment practices can enhance outcomes for learners with subtle language difficulties, which shows the benefit of UDL's customisable formats.

### **Critical reflections on implementation barriers**

Despite its strengths, UDL is not without limitations. This is stated by Seale (2013), who argues that UDL relies heavily on digital tools, which can result in new exclusions for learners without access to technology or learners with low digital literacy skills. This can be prevalent in private HE institutions.

Furthermore, Smith (2012) questions whether UDL's universalist assumptions can address the structural inequalities which are prevalent in education. For example, while UDL encourages flexibility, academic institutions will prioritise performance metrics, and standardisation may resist such changes. There is a need for leadership-driven cultural change, as suggested by Fullan (2001), in order to ensure UDL is not integrated in tokenistic or artificial ways.

Another criticism which relates to the evaluative mechanisms when using them to measure UDL's effectiveness. Rao et al. (2016) further point out that while UDL frameworks are robust, many institutions don't have the clear tools in order to assess the impact on learner outcomes. This highlights a research and practice gap, especially in the private sector, where accountability pressures may differ from public institutions. Morris and Turnbull (2006) state the risk of surface-level inclusion policies not having the systemic backing or rigorous tracking.

### **Intersectionality and inclusive design**

Current literature also advocates for a more intersectional approach to UDL. Dolmage (2017) challenges educators to consider how disability, race, gender, and class intersect to create classroom settings which ensure unique experiences of inclusion and exclusion. He argues that in order to be inclusive, there must be an interrogation of the power dynamics, ensuring they are embedded in educational practices.

This perspective gives a deeper understanding of UDL by linking it to critical pedagogy and social justice. It also supports the need for student partnership in design processes, as promoted by Bovill (2020), and this is to ensure inclusion is not imposed from above but gives learners the opportunity to be involved in the process as they are who it intends to serve. Hooks (1994) further supports this notion by highlighting education as a practice of freedom and critical awareness, which is in line with UDL's goal to democratise learning environments.

To summarise, the literature which surrounds UDL, inclusive pedagogy, trauma-informed teaching, and social communication needs provides a rich theoretical and practical foundation in order to aid with transforming higher education. However, these frameworks must be critically and contextually applied, especially within private HE environments. While UDL offers structural guidance, its implementation must also have the backing of the institution, cultural change, and continuous evaluation to ensure it is meeting the needs of the students. Only then can the vision of being inclusive in education be realised. The literature points not only to best practice models but also to challenges which are still unresolved, especially in relation to institutional readiness, educator training, and student co-creation. These areas must be looked into to ensure UDL can be implemented effectively.

### Discussion of implications for practice

Implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in private higher education (HE) institutions needs a deeply integrated multi-layered approach that takes into consideration leadership, pedagogy, digital transformation, policy coherence, and student well-being and engagement. As the sector has become more diverse and is now a competitive space, especially in terms of private HE contexts, UDL provides an organised but flexible approach to promoting equality and academic excellence and ensuring learners' needs are being met.

This section will focus on these implications in depth; it will combine scholarly evidence, practitioner insight, and system-wide considerations.

#### Institutional leadership and strategic alignment

The integration of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) within any educational institution must begin with effective leadership. Educational leaders in private HE settings need to ensure clarity in regard to setting transparent visions and goals where being inclusive is at the forefront, not seen as an afterthought. This is supported by Fullan (2001), who explains that creating an impactful change in education needs deep cultural transformation, which requires mindset shifts of educators and policymakers. In this particular context leaders are not just implementers but visionaries who model inclusive behaviours, allocate resources, and need to ensure to integrate inclusive language within strategic plans which are developed. In private higher education contexts, such leadership is most effective when inclusion is positioned not only as a moral imperative but also as a strategic driver linked to student experience, quality assurance, and institutional sustainability.

In my educational institution I initiated the reform of the Learning, Teaching, and Assessment Strategy to ensure that UDL was at the forefront of higher education institutions. This began with the embedding of inclusive design language in our quality assurance policies, faculty development handbooks, and programme validation templates. This alignment ensured inclusive pedagogy was a major part with regard

to reviewing performance, peer observations, and curriculum design. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) emphasise that inclusion is not about adding separate tracks for students with disabilities but designing teaching to accommodate all learners from the outset. This philosophical orientation needs to be explicitly stated and championed from senior leadership down.

Furthermore, strategic alignment requires institutional buy-in at all levels, including finance, human resources, and marketing. If there is a lack of funding, then UDL initiatives risk being tokenistic. It is therefore imperative for leaders to embed UDL objectives into key performance indicators (KPIs) of the academic institution; this will ensure that inclusive practices are constantly checked and celebrated.

### **Faculty development and inclusive pedagogical training**

The result of the implementation of UDL is the development of staff to move from traditional didactic methods to inclusive approaches and flexible design. A vast majority of educators, especially those who were trained in earlier eras, are not acquainted with UDL principles or may blur it with special education. This is highlighted by Tobin and Behling (2018), who suggest that UDL adoption can fail not due to resistance but due to uncertainty or lack of capacity in how to adopt it.

Professional development needs to improve and go beyond one-off training sessions. A culture of continued reflection and inquiry-based CPD must be achieved through:

- Working in teams focusing on inclusive practice.
- CPD pathways that look to embed UDL and trauma-informed pedagogy.
- Student-led workshops which offer accessibility needs.
- Digital tool training which focuses on accessible platforms.

In my own institution, we have created “Design for All” CPD micro-credentials; this allows staff to build their inclusive practice portfolios. Brookfield (1995) agrees and supports this approach and argues that reflective practice, when aligned with teamwork and student feedback, can transform teaching.

Furthermore, faculties need to be encouraged to reflect on their positions and mindsets on these issues. This is brought into context by Ladson-Billings (1995), who highlights that culturally responsive teaching is imperative when it comes to inclusion. Embedding training that will address unconscious bias, intersectionality, and inclusive language is essential to fostering a safe environment which is a representative classroom environment.

### **Curriculum and assessment reform**

Traditional methods of assessment in HE, such as essays, high-stakes timed exams, and oral presentations, often exclude learners who struggle with communication challenges, processing difficulties, or anxiety. UDL offers these learners a means of expression, where learners can highlight their knowledge in ways that they prefer and match their strengths.

This has meant a change in redesign in our institution:

- Giving preference to students to choose their preferred method of presenting information.
- Introducing scaffolded assessments with formative feedback checkpoints.

- Developing content in various formats to allow digesting content in their preferred style.

Sambell et al. (2012) state that assessment should not only focus on or measure learning but also look to support it. Inclusive assessment practices don't lower standards but look to ensure excellence. Furthermore, diverse assessment caters to all learners and promotes creativity, reflection, and collaboration.

Furthermore, by integrating authentic assessment tasks that are in line with real-world scenarios, learners are ensured to be gaining transferable skills, which enhances employability. Boud and Falchikov (2006) advocate for assessment that looks to contribute to lifelong learning instead of solely focusing on academic performance.

### **Digital inclusion and EdTech integration**

By using technology, it can enhance UDL implementation. However, if not designed and delivered appropriately, digital tools can also result in the widening of the inclusion gap. Rose and Dalton (2009) highlight these digital tools need to be evaluated not just for delivery of content but to ensure accessibility, flexibility, and learner control.

Private HEIs, which generally operate with hybrid or digital-first models, must:

- Look to invest in platforms that allow easy accessibility features (e.g., screen readers, captioning, dyslexia-friendly fonts).
- provide assistive technology and digital literacy support for learners.
- Audit VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments) consistently to ensure compliance with WCAG 2.1 accessibility standards.

In our education organisation we use Microsoft Immersive Reader to ensure flexibility in regard to the submission of work to support diverse learners. This approach not only aids learners with disabilities but also ensures wider digital equity in the institution.

Seale (2013) highlights that digital inclusion is not only about the tools which have been provided but also about how staff and students are guided to ensure efficient use. Providing training is as imperative as the platform itself. Furthermore, ensuring mobile accessibility is essential, especially in relation to the students from low-income backgrounds who may have no choice but to rely on smartphones instead of laptops for their studies.

### **Embedding emotional safety and trauma-informed practice**

Emotional inclusion is an important part of UDL. Hammond (2015) highlights when there is no emotional safety, cognitive engagement is overlooked. For students who struggle with hidden communication barriers or past trauma, classroom settings can feel exclusionary for such learners.

Trauma-informed pedagogy suggests:

- Consistent habits and safe classroom norms.
- Avoidance of public shaming

- Building trust through relational teaching and mentorship of the learners (Hammond, 2015; Brunzell et al., 2016).

Our institution has incorporated 'silent participation' strategies such as written reflections, live polls, and private chat responses, and this was done in order to ensure anxious students are also able to contribute without being exposed verbally. There was also an integration of wellbeing checks into tutorial systems.

Brunzell et al.(2016) note that trauma-informed strategies can be associated with academic resilience and reduced disengagement, which make them more relevant in widening participation contexts. These strategies must also account for neurodivergent learners, including those with autism spectrum conditions or ADHD, by offering sensory-friendly spaces, extended deadlines, and flexible attendance policies.

### **Policy and regulatory frameworks**

Although private HEIs can at times operate outside certain national frameworks, it is imperative to align institutional policies with inclusive law such as the Equality Act (2010), and the QAA UK Quality Code is a must. This alignment ensures credibility and also in taking accountability internally.

Dockrell et al. (2006) support a systemic approach, where SEND and communication needs are embedded into academic organisations' self-assessment reports, validating courses, and student surveys to gather important data which can be used to enhance the organisation.

In the inclusion policy it is now compulsory that all new course proposals state how UDL principles are being met. This has elevated inclusive design from a 'nice to have' to a compliance requirement and, without reducing innovation or staff autonomy. Further, regulatory bodies could play a stronger role by including UDL-related metrics in TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework) or NSS (National Student Survey) evaluations, thus incentivising sector-wide adoption.

### **Student partnership and co-design**

UDL places importance on student agency. Involving students as collaborative partners in relation to the curriculum and designing policy which fosters relevance and engagement and ensures shared responsibility. Bovill (2020) explains this as a change from "students as consumers" to "students as co-creators". Our institution has student-staff curriculum review panels, and these give the learners the opportunity to contribute to design decisions on how they prefer to learn and digital tools. The feedback has improved assessment formats, lecture recordings, and group work expectations and, most importantly, has left students satisfied.

Furthermore, we have introduced peer mentoring schemes and 'inclusive learning champions' where students are trained so they can advise on accessibility and feedback loops. These aim to improve learner experience and enhance inclusion through a collaborative approach. Co-design must look to include learners from disadvantaged backgrounds; this ensures that the problems highlighted are not only reflective of the common issues. This approach enhances both inclusivity and innovation.

### **Monitoring, data, and impact evaluation**

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In order to ensure UDL is effective, data must show continuous improvement. Disaggregated data by disability status, gender, and ethnicity will be able to identify and help academic institutions close achievement gaps. In addition, qualitative data such as student narratives, focus groups, and reflective journals aid in providing more content in order to fill these gaps.

Snowling et al. (2019) highlight this by explaining how essential it is to carry out longitudinal research to comprehend the long-term impacts of hidden communication needs. This will further reinforce how essential internal evaluation mechanisms are and how imperative it will be to contribute to broader educational research.

At our institution, we ensure the use of alternative assessments, allow flexible deadlines for extenuating circumstances, and promote digital tool uptake together with academic achievement and satisfaction scores. It is essential to ensure transparency in sharing data and action plans with staff and students, as this builds trust and collective responsibility.

### Cultural change and shared ownership

The main implication is cultural: there has been a shift from compliance-based inclusion to values-driven inclusion. Inclusion should not solely be the responsibility of disability services or “inclusion champions” alone but should be a part of all academic life. Gee (2005) states that communication and participation are fundamentally cultural. Therefore, inclusive education must attend to the norms, values, and assumptions embedded in everyday classroom practices to ensure learners are getting the best learning experiences.

Regular cross-departmental meetings, inclusive teaching networks, and leadership encouragement will all help support this cause. Recognition awards, reflective teaching portfolios, and showcasing inclusive practice in faculty newsletters will help show ownership. Finally, inclusive culture cannot be created by policy alone but by improving relationships, dialogue, and sharing the same values. Institutions must create environments where all students feel heard, respected, and valued to increase confidence to contribute.

## Conclusion

This paper explored Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in private higher education, emphasising that inclusion must be a systemic and cultural priority rather than a set of isolated teaching adjustments. UDL's strength is the recognition of learner variability and the design of curricula that anticipate barriers, which makes it proactive rather than reactive.

In private HE contexts, where pressures of performance, efficiency, and market competitiveness are particularly strong, UDL presents challenges and an opportunity. Its successful integration needs strong leadership that looks to prioritise inclusive values, ensuring staff are equipped with the adequate skills and confidence to apply them, and policies which embed equity within the institutional strategy. Trauma-informed approaches and student partnership are essential to strengthen UDL by ensuring that psychological safety, voice, and co-creation remain key focuses of educational practice.

The key takeaway is that UDL is not only a pedagogical tool but also a major part when it comes to changing the culture in academic institutions. It redefines how participation, assessment, and success are conceptualised in ways that benefit all students, including those whose needs often remain invisible. For

private institutions, embracing UDL represents more than compliance with good practice: it is a chance to modernise, differentiate, and lead in shaping inclusive higher education.

## Biography

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