**ADCET AHEAD IRELAND PODCAST**

DARLENE McLENNAN: Thank you for listening the this ADCET podcast - We would like to acknowledge and pay respects to the traditional custodian of the lands and to the elders past, present and emerging on whose country this recording is taking place. This podcast is a part of a series we are doing that focuses on COVID-19 and unpacks global issues facing students with disability accessing tertiary education at this time.

Enjoy.

DARLENE MCLENNAN: Hi. This is Darlene McLellan from the Australian Disability Clearninghouse on Education and Training. Joining me is my colleague, David Swayn, from the National Disability Coordination Officers Program based in Northern Queensland, Australia, and Dara Ryder from AHEAD in Ireland. This is the second in our series of podcasts on what is happening around the world for disability practitioners in tertiary education as they grapple with supporting students with disabilities in the shift online.

Our guest today is Dara Ryder, the CEO of AHEAD in Ireland. AHEAD is independent non‑profit organisation working to create inclusive environments in education employment for people with disability. The main focus of their work is further education and training, higher education and graduate employment. So thanks heaps, Dara, for joining us today. Are you able to tell us a little bit about yourself, who you are and what you do?

DARA RYDER: First, thanks a million guys, for inviting us on. It's a really pleasure to be here, beaming across to Australia from Dublin, and I have a lot of actually, a lot of good friends from Australia who have spent time here in Dublin, so I've never actually been there, but much to the annoyance of said friends, I must say, but it's a place of a lot of fun, I suppose, thanks very much.

And let me say I'm not great at talking about myself, but I guess it's good to start with actually, the idea that I didn’t intend working in the area of disability and education, or work at all. When I went to college I studied music technology, and so it was my grand plan to record the albums of the great and good of the music world. That quickly got sidelined when I realised that to kind of head along that path and achieve that I'd have to spend all my days and years working towards recording some of the worst bands in the world, so I kind of ditched that idea quite early on.

After college I took a job teaching music an actually Further Education and Training college, we call it FET here in Ireland, I believe you call it VET in Australia, so if I say "FET" that's what I'm referring to, and yeah, I began teaching there and really that's where I became interested in disability and education, seeing the challenges some of the learners with disabilities were facing in the classroom, exploring what I could do to help, and also kind of seeing some of the amazing resilience and the creativity that those students brought to the table meeting those challenges.

So that was a real eye‑opener for me, and I realised really quickly, first of all, that I was actually quite ignorant about disability, even though I'd actually engaged in some volunteering when I was younger, but every day was opening up my eyes to sort of new information that I didn't understand, and changing my attitude. The penny also began to drop for me at that stage that it was actually me as an educator that was unintentionally putting up some of the barriers that these students were encountering. So that really got me interested and really got me excited then.

So the truth was really that I was far more interested in those issues that were raised around disability and education than I was in teaching music tech. So that's obviously a problem, and I wasn't very helpful for the students, so when I saw a short‑term contract for a graduate quantitative researcher, I’d done some quantitative research as part of my degree, I had to come in and help AHEAD on a research project, and I went for it, and I got the job, and that was in 2000, and I've actually been been there ever since.

So in January I've just been promoted to CEO after many years in working in different roles across AHEAD and my wonderful colleague, Anne Halen(?) retired as the executive director at the of last year. So I guess prior to that my most recent role was focused on producing the digital media and e‑learning content for AHEAD, so that's all of of our online professional development, all of the multimedia that we use to kind of influence people, to get people in HE to kind of I suppose get concisely the message across that we need to do.

So that's what I've been focused on for the last number of years, and one of the key assets in that role, the key factors in it, has been the promotion of Universal Design for Learning principles, UDL principles, so yeah, I mean that's a little bit about my background, and how I've come here.

DAVID SWAYNE: Thanks, Dara. You must have done a great job on the UDL work because one of the videos reached us here I think last year, I was looking through an animation that they had in Ireland had done that Universal Design for Learning, and we repurposed it, with your permission, if you remember, so we're appreciative of that, and I wonder, just listening to you tell that story, I wonder how many people have a direct path into this type of work, but generally when you meet people that work in this sector, they're very passionate about what they do, and many of them would have probably got there by accident perhaps. Who knows?

DARA RYDER: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I suppose that's the story of the world really, isn't it, it's not even just necessarily this, but I think it is, this area is an area that, you know, there's certain people who, it lights a fire in them, I think, you know, and once that fire is lit within them it's very difficult to put out, and they're generally like dogs with bones, so it's a really nice sector to work in, because generally speaking the people really do care about what they're doing, and they show that passion every day.

DAVID SWAYN: I'd say that would be borderless. So we did a little bit of reading on the website, and I noticed that AHEAD is relatively old, and I suppose I can say that with dignity, because it's about as old as I am. So I noticed that it's been around in one form or another since 1998. I’m wondering if you can give a bit of a history of the organisation and how it got to where it is now, because these things don't usually start the same way they are.

DARA RYDER: Sure, sure, yeah, but you've actually made us younger by a decade there. It's actually 1988 we've been around since, but I'll give some of the - the origin story really is, it's quite an interesting one 'cause we're very, we're born out of the needs of students themselves, so what happened is there was a student by the name of Jerry Ellis who was a visually impaired student in University College Dublin. His experience there at the time, you know, there was no structured support services really in Ireland within the higher education institutions at the time, so he was having to rely on really the goodwill of family and friends to actually provide that support.

So basically one day he said “enough is enough”, and he approached the registrar of the university and said, "Listen, I'm not having this, and something needs to be done." And luckily the registrar there at the time was a guy called Professor John Kelly, really important guy in the history of AHEAD, and one of the key drivers of the development of the organisation, and he was, I suppose, a friendly ear, and he immediately saw what was happening wasn't right.

So he helps the students with disabilities and actually to farm around the kind of student support group, initially just started, there was initially a bench where they would meet in the canteen where Professor Kelly would provide, you know, some drinks and snacks and things, and there would be a set time for them to meet and just come together to discuss the challenges, and I suppose in Professor Kelly, they had an ear to feed those challenges into and for him to do something about.

So that just kind of grew over time really, and it became, first of all a proper student organisation within the university itself and then spread to other universities and became a kind of national, eventually in the 90s, a national NGO. And so that that's really the origin story to it. I don't know how much you want me to go into our remit and how things have happened.

DAVID SWAYN: Yeah, I think we probably we should move forward to it having got the history and talk about what the aims and objectives are, what the current strategy and objectives are for AHEAD, if we can.

DARA RYDER: Our current remit is to create inclusive environments in education, unemployment for people with disabilities, and the focus of our work is mainly around further education and training and higher education and graduate employment.

So I suppose the space that we ‑ I mean there was other organisations at the time who would have focused on employment for people with disabilities, but generally speaking that was focused on school leavers, you know, it was focused on trying to get people with disabilities into work straight after school, so initially there was that big focus on, okay, well, higher education needs to be a proper option for students and that they need to be supported within that journey to access and enjoy their journey.

So I suppose the work part came in a bit later, and it was actually our first major work project came in 2005. That was really the success of the higher education work that we've been doing. We began to realise, okay, there's actually no point on doing this, if they come here with a further education and don't have that access to meaningful work on the other side which is going to provide them with everything they need to act as fruitful individuals in society and get what they need to out of their lives.

So yeah, the work program came then around 2005, and we've been building on that side ever since, and I suppose over that last kind of 10 or 15 years our work in the FET sector has grown along with that, too, you know. But there is a kind of ‑ I noticed ‑ I couldn't help noticing on your first podcast that you had someone from AHEAD USA?

DAVID SWAYN: Yeah.

DARA RYDER: I don't know if the podcast is out in the world yet.

DAVID SWAYN: Yeah, it is.

DARA RYDER: Yeah. So there is quite a funny story actually, this kind of origin story of the two organisations having very similar names. It's actually not a coincidence. So I was told the story by Professor John Kelly, so if somebody in AHEAD USA disputes it, you can take it up with had him.

His story is that, basically our organisation started with a terrible name, it was called NADSHE, which you can imagine is not a very nice acronym to say, which was I think the National Association for Disabled Students in Higher Education. I believe AHEAD USA had a similarly terrible name at the time, and basically what happened is John and the head of USA met on some kind of conference in the States and had dinner together, and they both collectively talked about how terrible their names were, and both collectively tried to come to a solution for these, and at the time of course, in the time of no Internet, everything was conducted by post, and they thought this would never be, you know, one would never get across the other side of the ocean to another ‑ they wouldn't be dealing with any of the same target audience at all, so it's quite funny when they ended up to decide to shake hands and agreed to use these acronyms going forward. So that was a funny one, but it's great to see that AHEAD USA are flourishing today, and they do fantastic work on the ordinary side of the planet as well.

DAVID SWAYN: That is a funny story, two podcasts we’ve released, one after the other, so maybe there's a bit of irony in that.

DARA RYDER: Yeah, absolutely, yeah. I think I got side‑tracked there a little bit, didn't I, with that story, but I should come back to, I suppose, give you a sense about our work and how we actually conduct our business and how we go about effecting change as well, so we kind of think of the student journey in kind of three phases, and we think of it as the accessing college phases, first of all, where we're providing information direct to students through our helpline, through our website, and that's information on things like the different access routes available to you, how to actually disclose your disabilities to a college, how to ensure you get the supports provided, so we do things like, for example, we do a national college for students with disabilities that has stands of all the colleges there, where you can go and ask questions about course information, but also, what kind of supports that it would provide and get more kind of detailed, in depth information around that side of things, we're doing a whole host of seminars on that as well.

And in the next phase when they're actually in college, we're again providing a voice for our email and telephone helpline for when things go wrong, so maybe support is not forthcoming or something like that from the college, they can contact us, get an advice about how to proceed, and a big part of our role also in this kind of phase is providing the professional development under resources through the FET and the HE sector to upskill their staff's capacity to be inclusive. That's a major, major part of our role.

We also do a lot of work training student bodies and organisations, that will be topics like things like how to make your clubs and societies more inclusive so that students with disabilities themselves can ask or be part of the student engagement process that happens, you know, so there's a whole piece around kind of advocacy, and if you like, activism around disability that happens on a local student politics level, that happens there too.

And then the third phase is the job search, what happens when it's all, you know, when you graduate, come out the other side. So here it's all about upskilling graduates to give them the best chance of success in their job search, it's working with employers to support them and making their recruitment practices more inclusive, maybe breaking down some of those kind of barriers around the misconceptions around people with disabilities as employees.

And then kind of underpinning all those three stages is like the research that we would carry on on a yearly basis and our work feeding into policy, and so we do it actually, we sit on several policy groups, and obviously we then feed into more typical ways like the public consultations and all that kind of stuff too. That's kind of the overview of how we go about our business.

DAVID SWAYN: It sounds really well thought out, and covers a number of bases under one roof, I suppose, and the most important point there is the policy point where you've got a number of ways to gather information, and that information's very valuable in informing policy, and you can do that yourselves, and I think that's a really interesting part of AHEAD. One question, and I know it's a bit of an interesting question, but I'm wondering how it's all funded and how you keep all this going?

DARA RYDER: Yes, well, I mentioned we are an NGO. We are an independent charity but we do get funded for certain remits by different state bodies, so the core funding for our education work comes from the Higher Education Authority here in Ireland, and that's a relationship that goes back to the 1990s. And the funding for our transition to employment work and our work placement projects, which we can maybe talk a bit about it later, and comes from the Department of Enterprise and Social Protection here in Ireland.

And then we get other funding, for example, we have a big project ongoing looking at Universal Design for Learning in FET and from SOLAS to FET governing body here, and the VET governing body here in Ireland. But we also operate a membership system for educational institutions and bodies, so most of the higher education institutions are members of ours, and also the kind of regional VET bodies would be members of ours too. And they pay a membership fee for that, and we're also quite resourceful and entrepreneurial in our ways, you know, we take fees for training, for profession development courses and for our face‑to‑face annual conference, whenever that is, when it doesn't get cancelled by a pandemic.

So we would as well, we'd work for example to participate in EU projects from time to time, things like that as well, so you know, we try to have, I suppose a variety of different funding streams, and as an NGO that gives us strength in times of sustainability as an organisation.

DARLENE McLELLAN: That's amazing. Thanks Dara for, yeah, clarifying all that. Just with the COVID‑19 pandemic, and you're talking about it impacting on the further education across the sector, and we noticed that AHEAD in Ireland has released a survey that's going to investigate the impacts of the crisis for disability practitioners over there. Can you tell us a little bit about the survey, and have you got any sneak peaks, or early findings from that survey that you could share with us?

DARA RYDER: Sure, yeah, but there's actually two surveys we're conducting. We're conducting, one is looking at the FET practitioners themselves, and so how they're adjusting to teaching remotely, and there's quite a well - higher education here in Ireland there's a very well organised kind of network of disability practitioners, and that means it's quite easy for the information to be collected and fed in, whereas at the moment that doesn't really exist to the same extent in the FET side. So that's why we have a FET survey, and rather than having an HE survey, because just we've found that some of the voice was missing there in those policy discussions that we were sitting in, and for example, we sit on a COVID response group twice a week, and that's the Department of Education COVID response group that's focused on mitigating educational disadvantage for learners, you know, who potentially have additional challenges to others.

So yeah, we're conducting two surveys. So one is the FET practitioners, and the second one is learners themselves, because that's a really important part of AHEAD's workers to ensure that we are attentively representing the learner voice in those discussions. And I suppose by the time, just to say that those two surveys are closing, have closed on 27 April, this is yesterday in recording time, but I'm sure that it will be in about a week or so's time, by the time your listeners hear this.

So the findings we have are very much preliminary. We haven't had a chance to real delve deep into the analysis at this stage, but we have put together our preliminary findings at the halfway point, which is just to feed into those groups that we talked about.

So the results across the two surveys, really, they're just a reminder of how extraordinary difficult it is. You know, from the practitioners' side, you're having this great difficulty suddenly being thrown into the deep end trying to teach remotely on‑line when they may never have before, trying to teach when they have kids hanging out of them, and having all the family demands that come with that, and often with technological challenges as well, you know, some of them are working off shared laptops, maybe their broadband connections are either very bad or non-existent.

So there's a lot of really big challenges there, and I have to say I've been really impressed from the FET practitioners' survey with the creativity shown and the innovation shown by the practitioners in trying to continue to keep their learners engaged, and the FET system here is so diverse that it goes, and it deals with learners that have really really unique challenges, it goes right here from things like literacy to programs specifically for migrants, English language courses, things like the apprenticeship programs, the more sort of traditional ones that would come post skill, post‑secondary skill.

So it's a very diverse sector, and that means there's a real diversity of challenges there, but I can see that FET practitioners are really, really trying to do their best to engage their learners, but unfortunately I think there's also reports of a lot of learners just totally disengaging in this situation. Maybe there's a range of reasons why that is, you know, and the learner survey, I suppose can shine a light on some of that too.

So the learner survey, what we found really is that a lot of students are struggling. 64% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "I am coping well with learning from home." I think it's a reflection of both the challenges that they're having themselves, but also that what they're experiencing is not just online learning, it's sort of emergency learning, you know, that this isn't necessarily well thought out, well crafted on‑line learning, that it is often just, put what you have on‑line and try as best you can, and that's not any slight on the educators who are doing this, they are working in these difficult circumstances, and as with everyone else, you know, it's just a reflection of the reality of the situation.

So yeah, I think what's happened really is that we're seeing a big strain on people's mental health, and for those with diagnosed mental health difficulties, that's particularly evident, and the interruption to crucial counselling services, there is coming out as a strong finding as being a major concern.

I think the lack of structure provided by the lack of the typical college schedule that they would engage with every day is proving really difficult for students with disabilities to cope with. And again a lot of these findings are findings that all students are struggling with, but maybe might be more pronounced with students with students with certain types of disabilities.

So the key findings to flag really, would be the lack of access, or shared access to technology or broadband, so just like the practitioners, the students have those challenges too, so about 25% rate their connection as below average or very poor. About 25% said that they don't have a private space in their home where they can engage with learning with minimal distraction, and a further 32% said they only sometimes deal - and in the comments there, there was a lot of learners saying that they're actually conducting their learning from their beds; that's the learning space that they're doing, so you can imagine trying to sit on your bed for seven, eight hours every day to do that, to engage with learning, you know, it's not exactly an ideal situation. 23% highlight as one of their mainly concerns as some kind of disruption to disability support provided by the college or centre. 36% said they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that "My lecturers have considered accessibility in the on‑line materials they're providing me with." I think that's probably a reflection of (a) that we still have a lot of work to do with regards to professional development there, and that's, you know, making educators aware of what they need to do to be, to provide accessibility, peon the ground as well, but also as well about the emergency nature of this, this has just happened overnight, you know, and some things are going to get missed in this, and unfortunately accessibility seems to be a factor of that.

There are some major concerns that are coming out as well around the final assessments, so real worry about the new assessment types that the students are going to have to undertake, you know; will my assisted technology work, will my broadband hold up, will my laptop crash during an exam, will I get my exam accommodations in the final assessments, some of that I think is to do with maybe just making sure that we as a system are clear, you know, that as institutions we're clear with our students about that they will get their accommodations, that this is how it's going to operate, maybe to offer demonstrations of any new assignment, exam types that might be, you know, demonstrations or trials that students can try that out beforehand.

I think one of the major messages for me coming across is that we need to provide absolutely as much flexibility as absolutely possible to give students every opportunity to complete the year. And because assessment, one of the things that's coming out is actually maybe the only way to be equitable in this situation is to offer people choice of assessment where possible, because the reality is if we don't, people are going to fail, and the reasons for them failing will not necessarily be anything to do with their capabilities as as student, and that's just not fair.

So yeah, I think that's some of the preliminary findings coming out, but I think maybe by the time this podcast lands there potentially could be a more deeper analysis available through the AHEAD website.

DARLENE McLELLAN: Yeah, we look forward to reading that, and I think we found this fascinating when we spoke to Jamie the other week, yeah, we're all experiencing the same issues, no matter what country we are in. And I mean we're hoping that with that flexible approach, those are the learnings we can take away. You know, previously it's been quite difficult to be flexible around assessments and exams, and now suddenly academics or teaching staff have to be, and it's been great to see that. Hopefully they'll remember that in the future.

DARA RYDER: That's it, yeah, I mean that's it, 'cause sometimes like I feel like, you know, I'm a real downer at the moment with conversations feeding into those groups, so I'm raising the issues that need to be addressed just because of the emergency nature of this, we need to make sure that students don't get left behind.

But you know, there is definitely massive potential here for the sector to sort of change indelibly going forward, and I think there's real opportunities for also, certainly one of our key strategic aims is to look at the embedding of Universal Design for Learning Principles, and I think this situation offers real opportunity there for us to have, I suppose, a door that's more easy to open than it was before, I suppose, that's probably the best way of putting it.

DAVID SWAYN: It's kind of hard to put into words, isn't it, that this particular crisis could present some information that would help change things for the better. But it's something that we had discussed, and how would we go about here in Australia collecting the information that we need to demonstrate that, and use that to change things towards Universal Design for Learning as well. So probably we need to talk about it at some point.

DARA RYDER: Yeah. There's been a lot of learning for us in it as an organisation too, and you know, it's highlighted some key areas where we have to be better at too, you know, so I think the system is looking at itself across, you know, across the whole system, and that includes the bodies, like independent NGOs like us, you know, and we all have to take a long, hard look at ourselves in this situation and make sure that the next time something like this does happen, or hopefully it never happens, but if and when it does, that we are more flexible, we are more nimble and we are ready to react and respond and make sure that students, as I say, don't get left behind.

DAVID SWAYN: Yeah. And I suppose it's sort of one of those crisis situations where you wish you knew what you don't know, hence we're having these conversations, I suppose, to try and share the learnings as fast as we can in any way that we can. Something that I'm particularly ‑ it's an area of interest of mine ‑ but something I'm particularly concerned about is about employment in the future for students with disabilities and what that looks like. So in Australia, and the data that I'll talk about is just 2018/2019 general information, graduates with disability in our higher education, et cetera, the second lowest performing equity group when it comes to getting work, and the overall employment rate between students with disability and students without disability is been 7%, so it's significant. In our VET, so vocational Education and Training, which is equivalent to your FET, I suppose, the situation's arguably worse, so if you're a student with a disability in VET you have a 53.5% likelihood of working after training. If you're a student without disability you have a 79.1% chance of working after training. So that's a stark difference. So this is a global issue. I suppose with COVID exempt, and maybe can you talk about it a bit, can you tell us a bit about what AHEAD is doing to support graduates with disability with regards to work at the moment and then maybe any thoughts about the future?

DARA RYDER: Sure. Yeah. I mean I suppose the first thing is to say that, yeah, this is a global issue, you're right, and although we don't have maybe great statistics with regards to those sector by sector stats that you have there, in Ireland you're about half as likely to be working if is you're at working age if you have a disability than if you don't. So it's a major, major issue our in Ireland as well.

What I have seen, I suppose we have two major projects that focus on this, the first is our get AHEAD project, which is focused on the kind of transition from college to work. So there's two kind of sides to it. The first side of it is working with colleges to ensure that the extracurricular activity that employers like to see on CVs are actually inclusive in the place in college, so things like your participation in your clubs and societies, things like the Erasmus exchange opportunities that you would have here in Europe which is basically your study abroad exchange programs. So that's one major part of the work.

The second major part of Get AHEAD's work is in providing training to students themselves on graduation, just before and on graduation, and that's really all about job readiness, upskilling them in their job search. So there we look at, particularly we look at the general stuff that you would get in job readiness programs for our primary students but we also then focus on the disability specific issues too. So things like “How do I go about disclosing, should I disclose my disability to an employer, and how do I go about doing so if I do want to do so? What are the implications one way or the other, and how can I bring perhaps a solutions‑focused pretty much to the disclosure process as well?”

So that would be one major element, and it would be end up we have a whole series of events that would be run throughout the year. We have a lot of job skilling smaller workshops, and we also have a major careers fair that we run every year for graduates with disabilities. And that's basically in conjunction and partnership with a whole host of major Irish employers who would come to be table, and they'd be there to speak to the graduates after jobs, and the employers themselves actually take part in then, for example, we have CV clinics, where HR staff from the employers actually engage and say, “Look, looking at your CV, these are the areas you need to work on, because this is what as an HR professional, this is what I'd be saying in here, and I'd be going, I'm not too sure about that, whereas you need to push this part of your CV more or you need to pull back on that, you're providing too much information.”

And we'd also do within that, we would mock interviews so they actually have a chance to experience the real thing, because often students with disabilities don't have the opportunity to participate in the market, and incidental employment that you would as part of your college experience, maybe to, maybe retail, maybe working part‑time in an office, or whatever it might be, just to make up your finances, to close the gaps.

So yeah, that's a major part of what Get AHEAD does, and I suppose the second huge program that we would work on that's a major problem for AHEAD is our WAM Work Placement Program, and that's where we are for graduates with disabilities, paid, mentored, work placements of between six to 12 months, they're usually six month or nine months, but some kind of thing, up to 12 months, and we work with them, they get paid at a graduate level, like they would anywhere else, but the major Irish companies that work with us, and only are for these placements through AHEAD, and as part of that process what would happen is that we would basically ‑ we would put the jobs back out in our own graduate database, which holds, there are 1,500 graduates in Ireland, and our graduates, then it's only open to those graduates to apply, there's a competitive recruitment process within those graduates, and once the employer makes a selection on the candidate, we ensure that the process is inclusive all the way throughout that recruitment process.

Once they select a candidate, then we undertake a needs assessment, and make recommendations to the employer about what needs to be put in place, if anything, to support that graduate in their role that's based of basically conversations with both the employer on the demands of the role, conversations with the graduate themselves, about their own disability and the impact of it, and kind of marry in those two to see, okay, what is it, what are the potential areas where the impact of disability might affect the demands of the job, and how can we mitigate against any of that.

So, yeah, that's a really successful program, and it has kind of two prongs to it; one is offering graduates a foot in the door to employment, and we have great statistics from that, about 80% of the graduates who complete that program are in full‑time employment within six months of the program. So it's very, very good outcomes from it. And the second part is then actually, which is a really important part too, is about working with the employers to generally affect their mainstream recruitment process, so a natural order thing that takes place within that process about how they go about their business and making sure that in the future they're more inclusive in how they go about their recruitment for all graduates.

Yes, so there are two major employment programs that we would work on.

DAVID SWAYN: The most interesting thing in that for me, I think, is that work in the social capital space of things, so the student clubs and the experiences on the resume, and there was a piece of research done in Australia and the researcher would be mortified because I'll probably misquote the stat, but I'll be close, but they found that for students in disability in higher education who engage in paid work, you're 11 times more likely to be working, or thereabouts. So you know, that's something that we'd considered as well is that paid opportunity, and that capital on your resume is research backed but also really important to be approached and worked on. So just interesting to hear that you're doing that.

DARA RYDER: Yeah, it's one of the major things that we would deal with in the inclusive recruitment process is to try and get employers to look more holistically at those CVs when they come in the door, and to realise that if there are gaps in CVs that they're not always gaps that are I suppose there because of any, you know, lack of initiative or enthusiasm or willingness to participate in these options, that they might just not be there for some students, that's a big message that we do. In terms of the social capital piece, I couldn't agree to more, and that's ‑ I mean there's clubs and societies playing a massive role on that as well, and not just in the actual piece that ends up on your CV where you can say “I participated in X, Y and Z,” but also literally in the social connections that you make. We all know that the more connections that you have, I think LinkedIn is the classic example of the digitalisation of reality there, with the more connections that we have, the better opportunities that we are likely to have in life as well.

So I think often those friendships that are formed within clubs and societies prove very valuable to us, not just in a personal capacity but also as a professional and later down the line. So I think it's really important. I think the other side of it again is the study abroad piece, which is actually shown within research to have again very significant impacts about graduate outcomes in regards to their actual performance in college and also employment outcomes as well.

So that's a massive one there, that's a big piece of work that we're focuses on at the moment. We're partnering in a major EU project study that is focusing on that particular issue right now, which is looking at it from the level of the ministries of education across the countries that are involved in it, the institutions themselves, and what the practice is there, and also the students, so it's getting input from all those three angles, trying to collate, I suppose, into one place what are the key issues and to provide resources tool kits and a framework to address some of the challenges at an institutional level and a state level.

DARLENE McLELLAN: Thanks Dara. Changing course I suppose a little bit now is in Australia we, similar to probably AHEAD we run a national conference, we do that every two years, which kind of funds our peak body, the Australian Tertiary Education Network in Disability and this year we were going to have it in Darwin in the Northern Territory, and we were all looking forward to going there, but we've now had to cancel that and we're looking at going on‑line, which is quite terrifying, so we've been looking at your current conference, Through the Looking Glass. How did this come about? I mean it's probably halfway through now, so this might be an opportunity to promote to people in Australia, because you can actually kind of go in and see previous presentations and so forth, but maybe people can catch the end ones, but as we're looking at a virtual conference, is there any learnings or ideas from the experience that you're currently going through that you can share with us?

DARA RYDER: Yeah, well, I mean, I suppose we talked a little bit before about how this crisis has made us all have to shift and made us all have to think about things differently and hopefully we can retain some of that learning, and certainly this is one of the things that has really been great learning for us, because we are absolutely forced into this shift, so we originally were due to have our in‑person conference on March 26 and 27, we have an annual conference, it's an international conference, and the largest one in Europe that's focused in and around Universal Design for Learning and disability, the support provision in HE and FET. So we were due to house about 250 people in Dublin from five continents of the world, and within about two weeks of that happening, two to three weeks of that happening, we were forced to change course.

So we had begun to make some contingency in the background, because the mutterings around the coronavirus were beginning to happen in quite a serious way in Europe towards end of February, and so we were having those conversations in the office, but really up until about two or three weeks beforehand we were awaiting the government advice, we were listening to what they had to say, and what they had to say was that at the moment as it stands, nothing like that will be ‑ is not due to be cancelled.

So we had to move very, very quickly, and basically our solution was it take as much of the program as possible to move it on‑line, but not just to move it on‑line, and then, “Okay, now you do what you were going to do there and you do it on Zoom.” That's not ‑ again, it's like part of this whole thing about the on‑line learning, what we didn't want it to be was total emergency response, we wanted it to be something that was still engaging and fruitful, and might be looking at the strengths of on‑line, seeing how we can capture the feedback from the room through digital tools available to us in Zoom and things like that and feed that into discussion and make the presentations a little bit more sort of discussion-based and a bit more engaging that way.

So that was one of the key things we learned very early on really in the process, is that, you know, it's just not really feasible to have a 40‑minute presentation that you would have had in a face‑to‑face setting, and just do that on‑line. That's not going to result in a good experience for your audience. So that was the first thing.

The second thing is just, first of all, we've been blown away by the response. We would have only, as I said, been hosting 250 people maximum in Dublin, and we've already ‑ I think we're in week 6 this week and we've already reached thousands of people, thousands of unique individuals. So it's enabled us to connect with a whole bunch of people that we just wouldn't have seen before, and again it's making me reflect a little bit on how we go about our professional development.

I'm thinking in Ireland, for example, the FET sector in particular, you know a lot them are in quite rural locations, makes the travelling to Dublin quite difficult, the expense of travelling, we have to charge conference fees when we do those physical conferences, because they're very, very expensive for us to run, so actually, there's a lot of access barriers to those kind of events too. And that's not to say we want to remove those events, because they hold a very, very important place too, but it's just kind of opened up our own eyes in that the flexibility offered by this is actually increasing the engagement that we're having with the conference in terms of how many people we can reach.

It's also I suppose storing a bank of resources for us to use in the future, because all of this material is now available to us, and how we use that is another challenge, because we all know, and you can end up with millions of videos, and if you're not actually putting some thought into how you disseminate and kind of organise those resources, then it's not much use to you.

Yeah, but I'd say if I had advice, the one thing would be make sure you make it as interactive as possible, make sure you engage the audience as much as possible, and make sure that when are lining up your presenters, that you have check‑ins before then to really plan the session out well. I mean it isn't just that it is just a kind of sage on a stage approach, you know, that it is maybe that you're breaking up the, maybe typically, in a face‑to‑face conference you might have those questions at the end of the session, make sure you a role to maybe jump in and discuss with the presenter something that's happening, whether it's something that's coming up in your own mind, or whether you're saying that reflected in the chat box, in the Q and A box, and yeah, as well not to over load people, you know. Remember that people's capacity on‑line is actually less than it is in a face‑to‑face setting. Research shows that.

So keep them somewhat short and sweet. You know, we found somewhere between an hour and an hour and a half, and that's with multiple sessions, multiple different topics discussed in one session, not just a single presenter. So we found that that generally works quite well.

DARLENE McLELLAN: Was the decision to go over the 14 weeks a difficult one, or you thought that was a way to keep that engagement and not wear people out?

DARA RYDER: Yeah. No, it wasn't a difficult one at all, and it was driven by ‑ there is not a chance in hell that I would sit in a room and watch a two‑day conference all in a row, so it was quite an easy one. To be honest as well, just from an organisational point of view, although it meant that we had a very serious workload over 10 weeks, you know, we weren't having to try to react as quickly as we needed to be, so for example, we could still host our first two conference sessions on the first two days that they were supposed to be on in the physical space, and then having that space allowed us to develop the schedule over the following two or three weeks.

So yeah, we've got some really exciting sessions, I think, still left in the program, if your Australian listeners would like to join us, we'd be absolutely delighted to have them, and for example, week 7, which is Friday, 8 May, we're looking at including diverse learners in FET, and that's a FET‑focused one, and we're looking at student perspectives, that's on May 15th, that's all student contributions entirely, so that's about initially the topics of those were solely focused around how students are positively contributing to the inclusive cultures in their own colleges through activism, through direct engagement with the university.

There's a little bit of a shift with regards to, we can't totally ignore the coronavirus, so we kind of discuss maybe some of the survey findings with the students too and get their own experiences there as well.  May 22nd is one focused on developing inclusive cultures in HE and FET. The final session, Friday May 29th, we're looking at inclusive mobility and student wellbeing.

And we're also examining, which might be of interest to you, one of the things that we did grapple with is, one of the really nice parts of the conference is you get to have a nice drink with people that you work with, and it opens up your kind of horizons a bit, it maybe makes you a little bit more likely to joke around and to have a bit of a crack with them, and so we decided that had we would have an on‑line conference reception as well.

And so we're having that actually Friday 1 May, probably your listeners unfortunately might miss that, but one of the things we're doing is we're hosting a student exhibition on craft work, on what it means to be a disabled student, that was actually originally supposed to be presented in, you know, in a physical ‑ in the physical place we were having the conference, we're doing a kind of virtual tour of that where we have a guided tour done by a student and an academic together, discussing this art work, taking their own reflections on it, and then we'll follow it up with a place where we're actually going to separate people into break out rooms, and we've asked them to bring a nice glass of wine with them, and given them some nice chat options so that they can go about networking and making those connections they would at a normal conference.

DARLENE McLELLAN: Well, that's fantastic. It's given us ‑ yeah, it's making my brain work over time in how we ‑ because that was one of the things, I think the professional development is amazing, but the networking and the relationships you build at those conferences is something that I think we're all grieving, because ours is only every two years, it's like catching up with your old friends, so I think we'll certainly look at how we can kind of bring that social into it as well.

DARA RYDER: Yeah, well, it's interesting, Darlene, this is actually building out, like what I'm saying happened, we're engaging with people that we never would have engaged with before, so there's people who might be, for example, people like from examinations offices, people from libraries, where they might be interested in one specific topic that might be on the schedule but would never make the commitment to go to a physical conference to pay the fee, and they're dropping in for those sessions, and what we're seeing is actually a kind of community of practice almost evolving naturally out of this, and you’ve seen on Twitter there's a lot of back and forward now from individuals who maybe have never engaged with each other before as a result of this conference, so it's actually interesting that we have ‑ there's pros and cons, I suppose is what I'd say to both approaches, and we need to, ourselves, as an organisation look at that and when we're looking at it, okay, what is our strategic aim with these events, and in that case then what is the best approach to take; you know, is it a mixture of on‑line and off-line, is it a totally on‑line, is it totally off-line, and all of those are valid approaches to take, we need to I suppose tailor it to what we're trying to achieve with the units.

The other thing I say is that there is professional development from AHEAD which is coming up in the next couple of weeks which is kind of unrelated to the conferences, it's actually more related to the kind of COVID response stuff that we're doing, so two in particular on May 5th, next Tuesday, I'm not sure if this will out in time for your own listeners, but we're dealing with an introduction to accessibility in Word, because actually what we're saying from the learner surveys is there is a lack of some of the basic skills required to do some of that accessibility, just the knowledge isn't there, and the practitioners actually want to provide accessible materials, they just don't know how, so we're kind of going back to basics with that one on May 5th, and we cover the basics of accessibility in Word.

And then there's one that's actually a work‑focused one, which is taking place on May 13th, and that's focused on accessibility in virtual recruitment. So we're looking at how employers are moving their recruitment processes on‑line and trying to explore some of the challenges around them and making sure that accessibility is being considered within that process too. So they might be too that your own networks might be interested in.

DAVID SWAYN: One thing that came up there is about who attend, right, and this is an interesting thing to grapple with, is that it's not just equity practitioners that you'd like to talk to about accessibility for students with disability, it's the entire institution, and so you raised that some people who would really benefit from being a part of a conference have sort of stumbled in for whichever reason, and I think that you've made us hopeful, I suppose, Darlene and I were smiling in the background there about the possibilities of what we could do in that space. So yeah, just an interesting thing.

DARA RYDER: Yeah, look, I think AHEAD's approach now, like we've just had a new strategic plan launched in January, and in that strategic plan, one of the key pillars is the promotion of Universal Design for Learning principles, but in that really is the kind of concept of the whole college approach to inclusion, and one where inclusion is everybody's business, so it's basically you're looking at everybody from the librarian to the porter, to the academics in the classroom.

So a lot of their work actually in the last couple of years has been focusing on the academic side in building those networks and relationships and providing professional development in that space, so we've had a very successful initiative, which is the official badge for Universal Design for Teaching and Learning, and that's really taking root now, it's beginning to grow legs, and every time we launched, we run the course twice a year, and every time we launch it it's sold out within 24 to 48 hours, and so there's huge demand there for it, and the system that we are actually implementing there is one of training people on the course itself, but also adding a kind of train the trainer add-on, so for people who are in those teaching and learning departments on a local HE level, they can do a five‑hour add-on to this course which enables them to run the course themselves, and we make all the learning materials available to them as part of that.

So that's kind of been a really nice approach, and that's I suppose enabled us to reach a lot more people than we would have. We don't have the resources to reach thousands of people every time we do that, but by doing that we're enabling them to conduct local CPD, helping them to meet their own remit actually as teaching and learning centres of excellence, because professional development is part of that role, and helping them to do it as easy a way as possible by putting it kind of on a plate for them and saying, "Here you go, we're here to support you in rolling it out." At the end of the day they'll actually achieve a national recognition from the Teaching and Learning forum, which is the national body for excellence and teaching and learning and higher education here. So that's been a really nice approach to take, and I couldn't agree more that that concept that you raised there, and the different roles that need to be involved in this, and that's definitely going to be one of our major focuses in engaging with those stake holders that we perhaps haven't done enough of in recent years.

DARLENE McLELLAN: Was it a difficult decision not to charge, like that's the other thing we're kind of grappling with this end?

DARA RYDER: Yes, it was, it was kind of difficult in one sense, and easy in another. The easy part of it was I kind of felt that people aren't necessarily ready for that yet, you know, ready to make the commitment of charging to an on‑line, their experience is so limited of what an on‑line event is, that's what I find, you know, when I say their experience, I'm generalising massively, of course some people have a lot of experience engaging with on line events. But the average person, I think, is probably only really experiencing a lot of them for the first time in these recent weeks.

So the first decision was, will the people that we need in the room to hear these key messages be there if we charge, and the answer was probably not, probably not enough of them at least. So obviously, look, there's budgetary impacts for us as an organisation, but having said that, there is also a lot of costs that weren't there from the conference. We were lucky in that the venue that we worked with refunded us, because it was a government order to lock down, not ours, wasn't our decision, it was taken out of our hands, so we are lucky in that a lot of the suppliers that we had already engaged and returned that money to were sort of, the money that we lost on that side wasn't as significant as it might have been, and that enabled us to make the decision a bit more easier, I suppose.

DARLENE McLELLAN: That's brilliant. Well, looking at the time, it has got away from us, and I think both David and I are so passionate, and I can tell that by you talking too, that you're as passionate so we could probably be here for a few more hours, because of the wealth of knowledge and your passion and thumb is certainly shining through, and I could listen to you all night. Is there any final comment you would like to make, Dara, before we kind of wrap this up?

DARA RYDER: No, just to say, like, first of all thanks to you guys so much for reaching out and having a chat. I think it's so important that we build international networks around the topics of inclusion and disability support. For us, for example, we have a network called the NIC(?) network, which is a network of organisations similar to our self in Europe. Those discussions that we have when we come together are so valuable for us as an organisation, so much learning to be had, so I think it's really nice that you're reaching out, and I'd love to see maybe further connections happening in the future, where maybe we can help to lift each other's messages and share what's happening in our countries, and you know, I think there's a lot of happening as well in the US in this space too and in South America too, so I think it's really nice that you're looking at, you have a broad view of this, and you are looking at international perspective.

And yes, just to say to your listeners really, that we'd be delighted to engage with you as much as possible in terms of through our on‑line, I know the timing ‑ I'm not sure how the timing is going to work out of the webinars, you can always catch up if it doesn't suit you to get up in the middle of the night, and it's certainly something that we'll look at going forward.

We actually scheduled in the timings based on our presenters and based on what works the most for our presenters, so that's how it happens, but it it's something that we might consider and we can maybe get your advice on, about how timing might work on that side of the water.

Yeah. No, I'm just really, really delighted to join you, I've had a lovely chat, and even the pre‑podcast recording, just to hear about your work, I'm definitely going to have a lot of homework myself now to go away and check your resources too. So thanks to you guys for all the work that you're doing.

DARLENE McLELLAN: All right. So thank you once again for your time. It's been fantastic to listen to you, and yeah, all the very best. Thank you.

DARA RYDER: Thanks guys, thanks a million.

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