ALTITUDE

THE NATIONAL CHARTER FOR UNIVERSAL DESIGN IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

Published by
AHEAD Educational Press – ISBN: 978-1-916836-04-4

To cite this Charter

ALTITUDE Project. *ALTITUDE – The National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education*. AHEAD Educational Press.

A Note on Language

It is important to highlight that when the term 'tertiary education' is used in this document, it refers to all levels of further education and training (FET) and higher education (HE), and the institutions and agencies that deliver it.

Lastly, since the term 'learners' is more culturally prevalent in FET and 'students' more prominent in HE, these terms are used interchangeably throughout to be respectful and inclusive of all stakeholders. When we use these terms, we refer to all enrolled in FET and higher education programmes.

The ALTITUDE Project was funded by the Higher Education Authority through PATH.

PATH
Programme for Access to Higher Education

Introduction

Why Was the ALTITUDE Charter Developed?

The learner population in tertiary education is becoming increasingly diverse. Greater diversity in the student population, and a national and international policy emphasis on the right to an inclusive education for every learner, have drawn attention to the need for a more inclusive model of education across all sectors, and more inclusive educational environments. There is a growing momentum towards an inclusive, and more unified tertiary education sector in both policy and practice.

A universal design (UD) approach is increasingly seen as a central tenet of our response to ensuring all learners are included in the design and delivery of tertiary education, (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, 2022). This has led to the inclusion of specific objectives within FET and higher education policy to embed universal design in our institutions (SOLAS, 2020; Higher Education Authority, 2022). Equally, the Public Sector Duty and a range of national equality legislation mean that Ireland has a robust legal framework concerning equitable access to education which education providers must meet.

While research shows that engagement with professional development is increasing and pockets of institutional good practice are evident, a commitment to universal design is not as evident in the institutional strategies and policies of higher education institutions and education and training boards (Healy et al., 2023).

This represents a threat to the sustainability of the approach and raises concerns about how well-supported a universal design approach is at the strategic level of tertiary institutions. It is within this context that calls for the development of a National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education have arisen.

The cross-sectoral development of the ALTIT**UD**E Charter and its associated outputs represents a landmark moment for the tertiary education sector, signalling its intent to place human diversity at the heart of its design and delivery.

It makes a clear commitment to continue to work towards a system where all learners are transformatively included through a universal design approach, which fosters student success for all. Underpinning this, is an effort to further operationalise a culture of shared responsibility for universal design, access & inclusion, by supporting development of organisational structures which foster an 'everyone's business' approach to inclusion. Equally, implementing the Charter represents an opportunity for the sector to more efficiently meet existing and forthcoming legal obligations in a way which positively impacts on the learner and staff experience.

By adopting the Charter, tertiary education providers are invited to build on excellent existing policies and good practices across the sector, using it as a vehicle for greater coherence and collaboration on access and inclusion, both within and across institutions.

What is Universal Design (UD)?

'Universal design' is defined as the design of products, environments, programmes, and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design, (United Nations, 2006).

While the 7 principles of UD principles can be applied to the design of any product, environment, programme, or service, (National Disability Authority, 2020), over time, a range of frameworks have emerged which help us to situate universal design within more specific contexts.

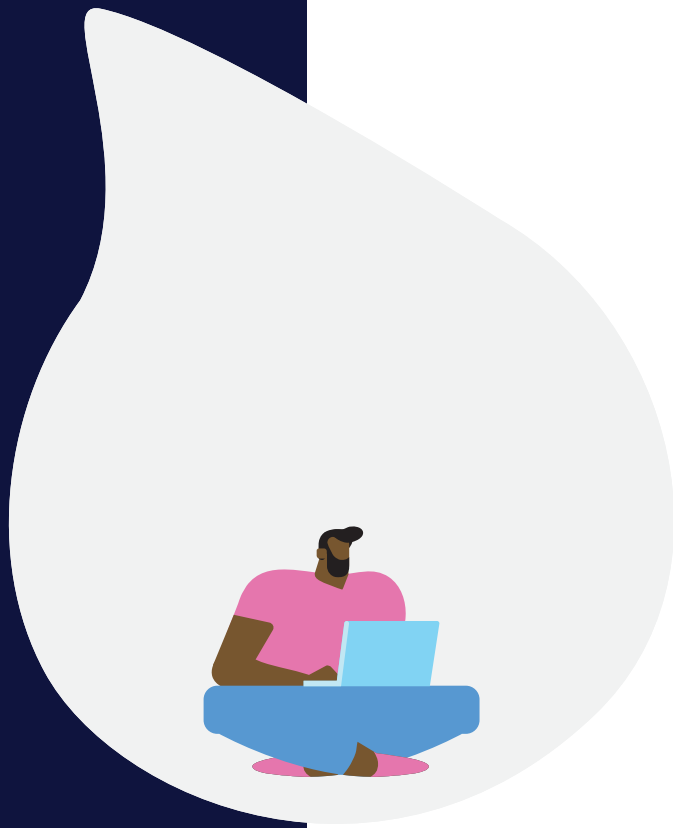
Considering Universal Design in Education

Universal design is more commonly associated with three domains: the built environment, products and services, and information and communications technologies (ICT). The literature on Universal Design in Education (UDE) helps us to take a whole systems approach to the application of universal design in educational contexts (Burgstahler, 2009), by incorporating relevant pedagogical frameworks.

The internationally recognised and evidence-based Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework (CAST, 2018) contributes significantly to this approach.

The ALTIT**UD**E Charter builds on significant existing work on this topic in the Irish landscape (Kelly & Padden, 2018), providing a clear roadmap for tertiary institutions to make sustainable progress towards systemically embedding a universal design approach.

About the ALTITUDE Project



Who's Involved in the ALTITUDE Project

Funded by the HEA under PATH 4, the ALTIT**UD**E Project is an extensive cross sectoral collaboration involving six national agencies, fifteen higher education (HE) institutions and six Education and Training Board (ETB) representatives nominated by Directors of FET to represent the FET sector. The project team comprised of fifty-two individuals from these institutions with a broad range of roles and universal design expertise. For a full list of participating agencies, please see the accompanying ALTIT**UD**E Technical Report.

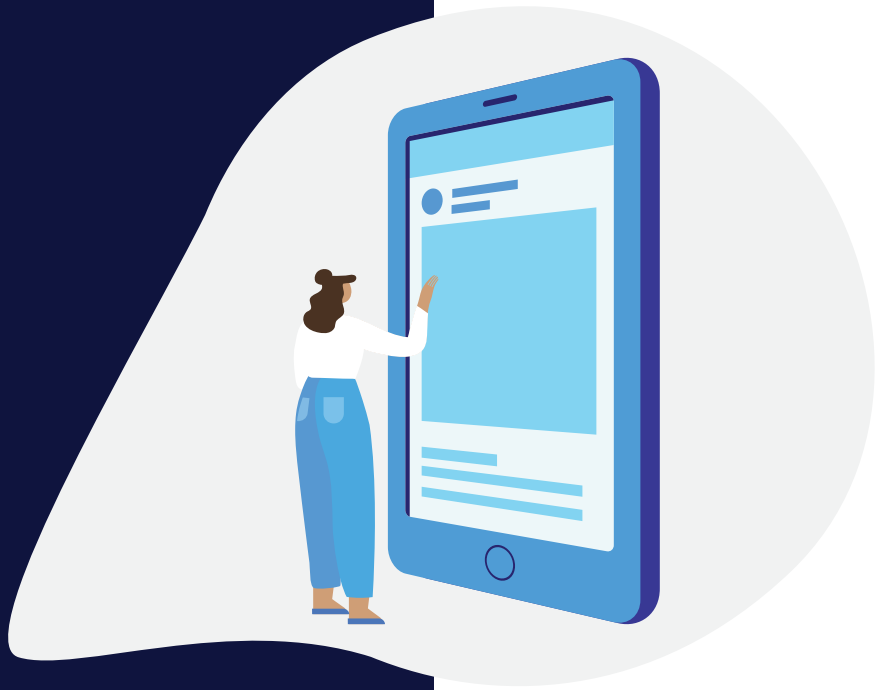
Vision of the ALTITUDE Project

'Tertiary education institutions where **a**ll **l**earners are **t**ransformatively **i**ncluded **t**hrough **u**niversal **d**esign in **e**ducation.' (deriving the name ALTIT**UD**E)

Mission of the Project

'To support HEIs and ETBs to make sustainable progress towards systemically embedding a universal design approach, which places human diversity at the heart of tertiary education design and fosters student success for all.'

ALTITUDE
Project Outputs



The ALTIT**UD**E Project has three core outputs as follows:

The ALTITUDE Charter

The vehicle for your institution to declare its intent to make incremental and sustainable progress towards embedding a universal design approach – Embedded in this document.

Implementation Toolkit

A practical toolkit with key guidance, self-assessment tools and case study examples of good practice in action, which support the implementation of the ALTIT**UD**E Charter.

Technical Report

Research report outlining the context for the development of the Charter, the evidence base that underpins it, the alignment of the Charter with legislation and policy, and recommendations on its implementation.

Developing the Charter

The development of the Charter was informed by an international literature review, and a deep national consultation process involving a national consultation event, more than thirty staff and learner focus groups, a survey of FET and HE learners (1,200+ respondents), and a national stakeholder dialogue process.

More detail on the development process and the full make-up of the project group can be found in the ALTIT**UD**E Technical Report.

Introducing the 4 Pillars

Drawing from the aforementioned national and international literature, the Charter recommends key strategic enablers which institutions should put in place to support sustainable implementation of UD across the learner experience and proposes collaborative action under 4 key pillars. Fundamental to its implementation is the collaboration between key functions working across the pillars.

Figure 1 – The 4 Pillars of the ALTITUDE Charter, supported by Strategic Enablers.

ALTITUDE – the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education

This section contains the main content of the ALTIT**UD**E Charter, describing how the Charter will support your institution, discussing what it means to adopt it, and highlighting key frameworks and areas of professional development which can support staff to implement it.

How this Charter can help your institution

Adopting the Charter will:

- **Provide a vehicle for your institution to declare its intent** to make incremental and sustainable progress towards embedding a universal design approach, in line with its resources, culture and strategy.
- **Promote the development and sharing of policies, structures, and strategies** in your institution which support the sustainable implementation of a universal design approach.
- **Support a culture of shared responsibility for universal design, access & inclusion** in your institution, by promoting development of organisational structures which foster an 'everyone's business' approach to inclusion.
- **Develop a more unified language of and commitment to a universal design approach** in your institution and across the tertiary sector, fostering greater opportunities for partnership, collaboration, and shared learning.
- **Support your institution to comply with Irish law and work towards goals in a range of key national and international strategies** concerning universal design, accessibility, student success, sustainability, and inclusion.

What it means for institutions to adopt the Charter?

Adopting this charter is a declaration of positive intent by your institution to make incremental and sustainable progress towards embedding a universal design approach in the systems and practices of the institution.

It commits the institution to establishing a standing committee or working group structure (or adapting an existing one) to advance this goal, using the Charter as a roadmap to foster collaboration, identify opportunities for progress and guide decision-making.

The Charter recognises that different institutions are at various stages of UD adoption and have differing levels of available resources. It encourages institutions to build on existing good work in the institutions, and make steady progress in line with their strategy, culture, and values. It prioritises a process of iterative transformation over time, rather than unsustainable attempts to transform culture and practice in a short timeframe.

Developing Your Implementation Committee or Working Group

Adopting institutions will develop an implementation committee/working group (or adapt an existing one) that works best for their organisational structure and governance processes.

The makeup of the group should aim to maximise the impact of the Charter, ensuring representation of senior management, heads of key functions relating to the Charter Pillars, student representatives and UD–knowledgeable staff members.

This group will oversee incremental progress to develop strategic enablers for a sustainable UD approach (see Fig 3), and foster collaboration to advance related goals in the 4 key pillars (Fig 4). Key to this effort will be using policy and strategy review cycles to embed UD at the strategic level, and to identify opportunities provided through national and local funding streams to advance goals within the pillars.

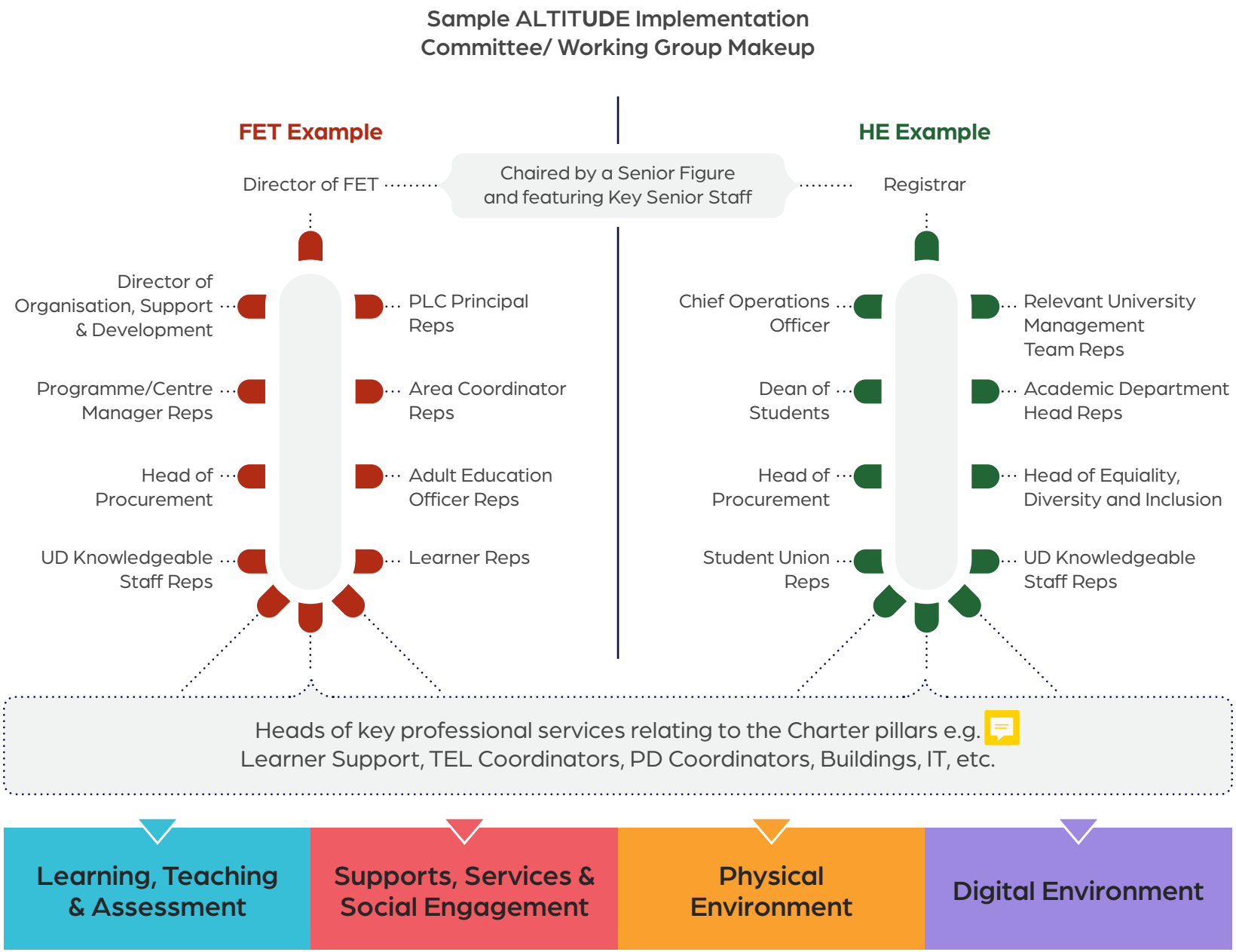


Figure 2 – Sample Implementation Committee/Working Group Makeup.

Strategic Enablers & Pillar-Based Actions

The established committee/working group will oversee incremental progress to develop and strengthen strategic enablers for a sustainable UD approach (see Fig 3), and foster collaboration between key functions in the institution to advance related goals in the 4 key pillars (Fig 4).

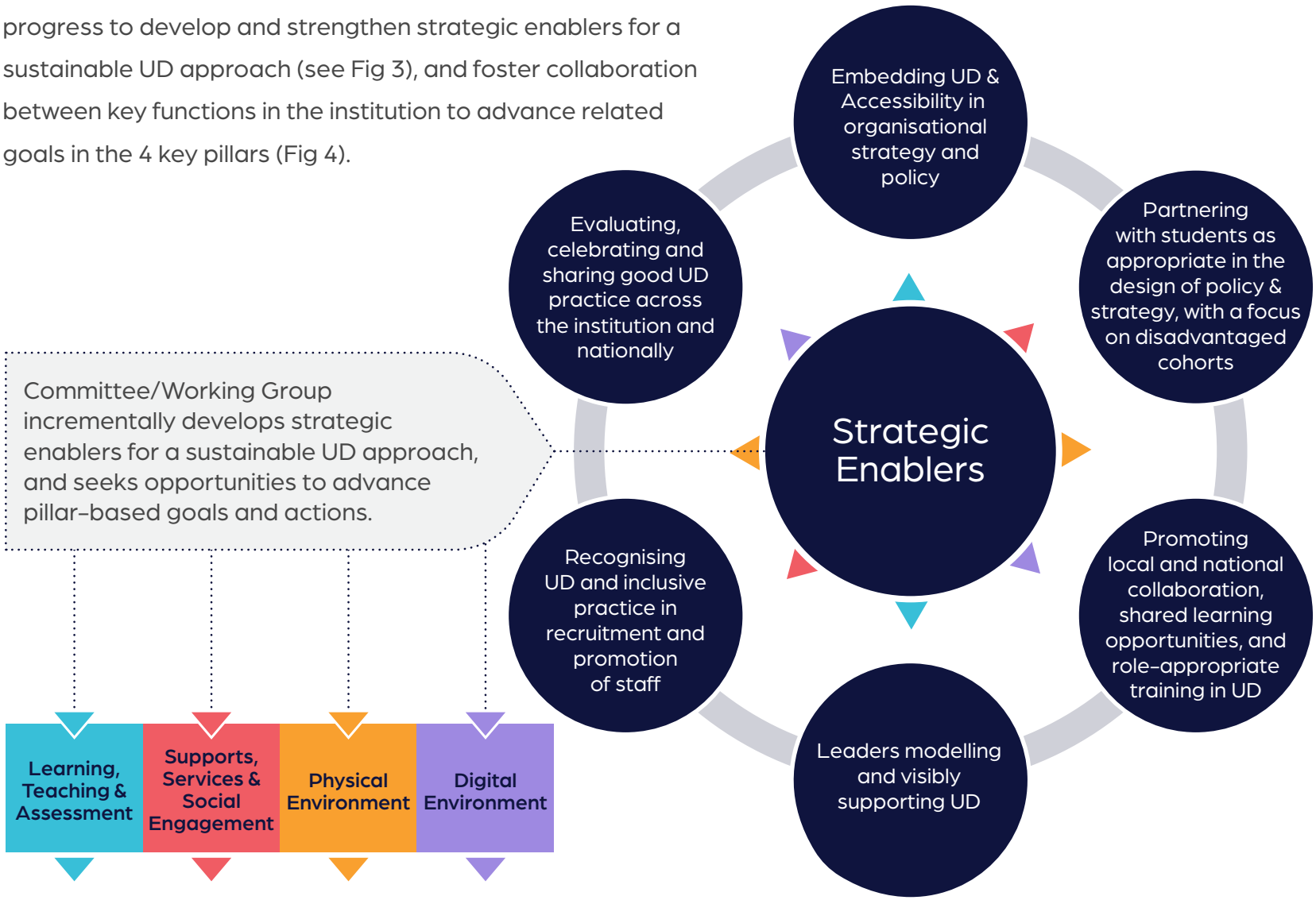


Figure 3 – Strategic Enablers for a sustainable UD approach.

The 4 Pillars	Learning, Teaching & Assessment	Supports, Services & Social Engagement	Physical Environment	Digital Environment
Goal	Reduce barriers to learning by building more flexibility, accessibility, clarity, learner voice and choice into how programmes are designed and delivered	Reduce barriers to student success by ensuring student services and extra-curricular activities are flexible and accessible for all learners	Reduce barriers in the physical environment by ensuring they are accessible, welcoming, and sensory-aware spaces that support flexible use	Reduce barriers to digital engagement by ensuring digital platforms & materials are accessible, easily navigated & understood by all
Related Actions	**Key staff across the four pillars collaborate to make incremental and sustainable progress on the following actions:**			
Embed UD in…	quality assurance, programme design and programme validation processes	evaluation processes for support services, facilitating diverse learner input	procurement criteria to deliver accessible and user-friendly built environments	procurement criteria to deliver accessible and user-friendly platforms, websites & apps
Invest in…	instructional design resources and tools which support inclusive educational practices	tools which support ease of access to and use of supports and services	inclusive, sensory-aware spaces for learning, social activity, prayer, and sanitary purposes	digital tools & assistive technologies which facilitate inclusion & UD practice
Provide professional development in…	digital accessibility, digital teaching tools, UDL and the scholarship of learning, teaching, and assessment	digital accessibility, accessible communications & UD beyond the classroom	universal design and relevant national building standards concerning accessibility	digital accessibility, relevant international accessibility standards, & UD principles
Develop Communities of Practice around…	inclusive educational practices such as UDL	delivery of barrier-free learner supports and services through a UD approach	system-wide approaches to inclusion in the built environment	digital accessibility across the institution
Foster Cross Departmental Collaboration on…	the availability of core programme materials in accessible formats	managing the volume of communications sent to learners	flexible layout and use of learning environments	consistent use of the virtual learning environment
Support…	programmes to consider assessment load and embed inclusive educational practices such as UDL in design	student services to embed flexibility and options for engagement in how and when learners utilise services	development of clear mechanisms for learners, staff, and visitors to report physical accessibility barriers	development of clear mechanisms for students, staff, and visitors to report digital accessibility barriers
Nurture diverse student partnerships to support…	evaluation of course accessibility, co-creation of curricula & assessment design	promotion of accessibility & inclusion in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.	evaluation of indoor and outdoor spaces for accessibility, usability, and ease of navigation	the development and evaluation of digital platforms, websites & apps for accessibility and ease of use

Figure 4 – Pillar–based goals and related actions.

Supporting Implementation with Key Frameworks, Guidance and Professional Development

The key frameworks and guides outlined below can guide staff in each of the pillars on key aspects of implementing a universal design approach. Providing role-based professional development in the areas outlined will support staff to build rounded expertise to apply to their practice and help institutions to operationalise an 'everyone's business' approach to inclusion.

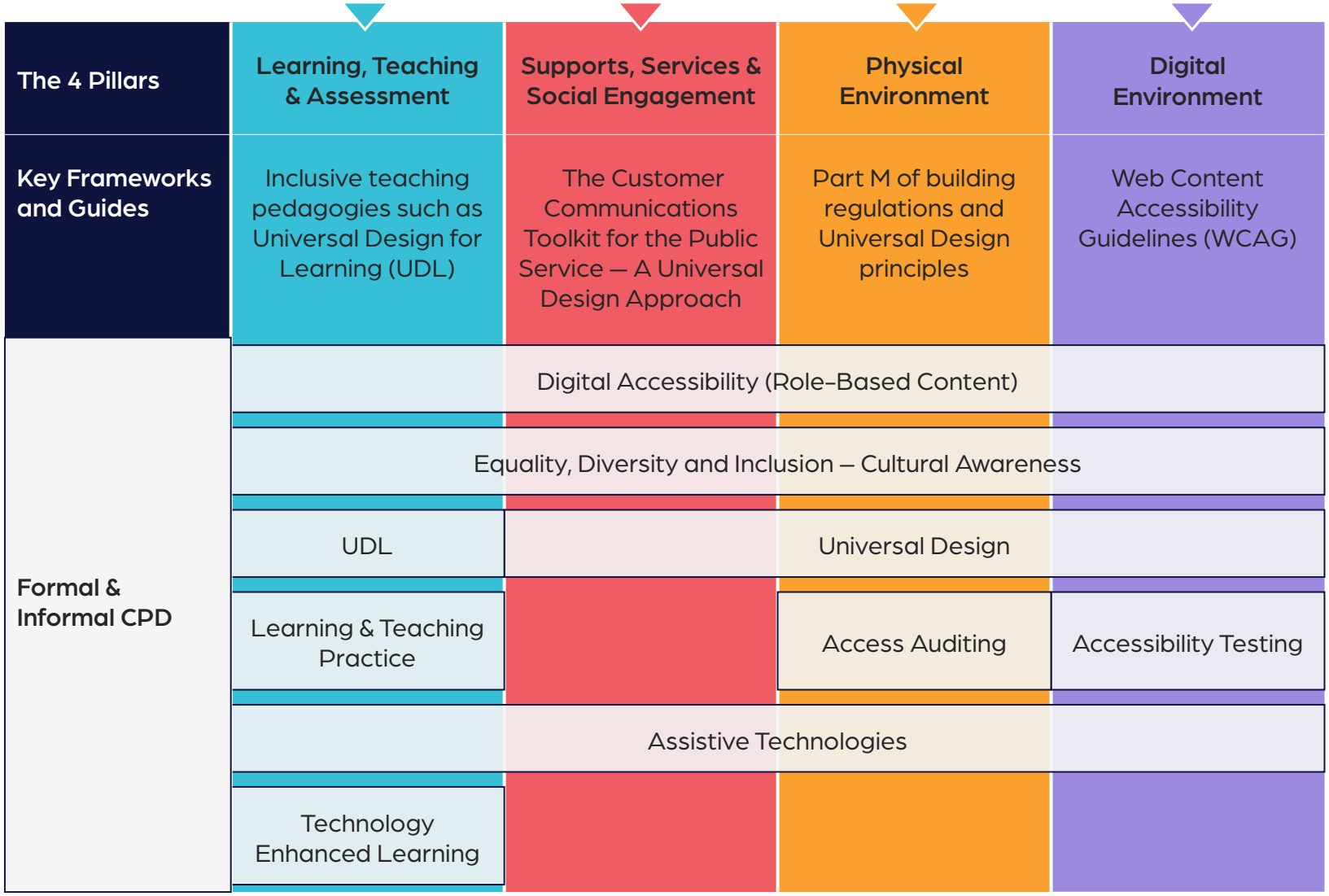


Figure 5 – Supporting implementation with key frameworks and guides, and relevant professional development.

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