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JOURNAL HOME » JOURNAL THE AHEAD JOURNAL » THIS ARTICLE »
INHEF SPECIAL FEATURE - LEARNER ADVOCATES: CO-DESIGNING DISABILITY
AWARENESS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION

INHEF Special Feature

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Learner Advocates: Co- Designing Disability Awareness and Civic Engagement in Inclusive Higher Education

Across Irish higher education, inclusive programmes for people with intellectual disabilities continue to expand. However, opportunities for learners to actively shape teaching, learning,

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IN ISSUE 19 - OUT NOW!

Advancing Equity and
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to inclusion and
opportunities for
change in Initial
Teacher Education

Bridging Sectors,
Shaping Futures: A
reflective exploration
of leadership in Irish
education

From Student Voice to
Institutional Change: A

and institutional culture remain limited. Disability awareness initiatives are often well intentioned, yet they frequently speak about disabled people rather than being led by them. The Learner Advocates project emerged from a desire to explore what becomes possible when students with intellectual disabilities are positioned as designers and leaders of disability awareness work within a university setting.

This article shares reflections from the Learner Advocates project, developed within an inclusive higher education programme in Ireland. It does not present research findings or theory but instead offers insights from practice, focusing on co-design, learner leadership, and civic engagement, and considers what these approaches can contribute to inclusive practice across further and higher education.

The Learner Advocates Project

The Learner Advocates project took place within the Arts, Science and Inclusive Applied Practice (ASIAP) programme at the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID), based in the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin. ASIAP is an inclusive university programme for adults with intellectual disabilities, with a strong emphasis on applied learning, university participation, and meaningful progression routes.

As part of a second-year Disability Rights module, students were invited to co-design and deliver a disability awareness event for a wider university audience. Rather than working to a predetermined brief, learners collectively decided what issues mattered most to them, how they wanted to communicate their message, and what an effective awareness event should look like in practice. As the project developed, students began to identify themselves as **Learner Advocates**, reflecting a growing sense of ownership, responsibility, and purpose.

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Collaboration sat at the heart of the project. Students worked together in planning groups to organise the event, share tasks, develop content, and manage timelines. For many, this was their first experience of working as part of a formal committee or taking responsibility for a public-facing event.

The co-design process brought real-world complexity with it. Planning did not always run smoothly, and learners had to respond to changes, time pressures, and unexpected challenges. Rather than shielding students from these realities, the project allowed them to experience the demands of collaborative work in an authentic way. Managing deadlines, adapting plans, and supporting one another through setbacks became integral to the learning.

This balance of challenge and support proved crucial. Learners were stretched, but not overwhelmed, and the shared responsibility of working towards a common goal strengthened group cohesion and confidence.

Confidence, Visibility, and Being Taken Seriously

A key outcome of the Learner Advocates project was increased learner confidence. Students took on roles that were new and, at times, daunting, including public speaking, facilitating discussions, and hosting elements of the event. Preparing for these roles required effort and courage but ultimately led to a strong sense of achievement.

Visibility within the university mattered deeply. Learners reflected on the importance of being listened to and taken seriously by staff, guests, and peers. When others engaged genuinely with their ideas and contributions, it reinforced a sense of belonging and legitimacy. These moments challenged long-standing assumptions about who is seen as knowledgeable or authoritative within higher education spaces.

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Network: Accessible
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Independent Living
Skills programme

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- University for
Everyone: Pathways to
Higher Education for
Students with
Intellectual Disabilities

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adventure in capability

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- Inclusive Education:
Cumasc at University of
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INHEF Special
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Designing Disability
Awareness and
Civic Engagement in
Inclusive Higher
Education

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- Learner Advocates:
Easy Read Version

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- Fostering Positive

By creating a platform where learners' perspectives were central, the project supported students to step into public roles not simply as participants, but as contributors and advocates.

Civic Learning in Action

As the project progressed, students chose to focus their awareness event on voting and civic participation. This decision emerged from group discussion and was shaped by learners' recent experiences of engaging in a national referendum. Approaching voting through lived experience, rather than abstract information, allowed students to explore both their rights and the practical barriers that can limit participation.

Learners identified challenges such as complex language, unclear instructions, and limited access to support within the voting process. Importantly, they also developed practical suggestions for improving accessibility, including the use of Easy Read materials, clearer explanations of voting systems, and more consistent supports for voters with disabilities.

Through this work, civic learning became tangible and relevant. Students were not only learning about democratic rights but actively examining how those rights are experienced in everyday life, and how systems could be improved if disabled people were involved from the outset.

What This Means for Inclusive Practice

The Learner Advocates project offers several lessons for inclusive practice in further and higher education. First, co-design fosters ownership and engagement. When learners are trusted to shape content and direction, learning becomes more meaningful and relevant. Second, learner leadership shifts power dynamics, challenging assumptions about who leads, teaches, and informs disability awareness work.

The project also highlights the value of experiential learning grounded in real outcomes and real audiences. Working towards a public event created purpose and motivation that extended

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beyond the classroom. Finally, the work reinforces the importance of relevance. Learners were most engaged when the focus connected directly to their lives and experiences.

Concluding Reflections

The Learner Advocates project demonstrates what can be achieved when inclusive higher education moves beyond access towards active participation. By supporting students with intellectual disabilities to co-design and lead a disability awareness initiative, the project created space for confidence, civic engagement, and meaningful voice.

For practitioners across further and higher education, this work offers a reminder that inclusion is not only about adapting systems, but about rethinking roles. When learners are trusted as advocates, educators, and contributors (rather than having their credibility quietly questioned), inclusive education becomes not just a principle, but a lived and visible reality.

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IN ISSUE 19 - OUT NOW!

- 01 Advancing Equity and Innovation in Practice Placements: Insights from CORU's national mixed-methods study
- 02 School Placement, Agency and Partnership: Barriers to inclusion and opportunities for change in Initial Teacher Education
- 03 Bridging Sectors, Shaping Futures: A reflective exploration of leadership in Irish education
- 04 From Student Voice to Institutional Change: A fourth space, user-led accessibility audit in higher education

The ADHDvantage: Transforming Workplaces Through Neurodivergence

05

06

Impact Through Research - A synopsis of AHEAD's Research and Policy Team activities for 2025

07

From Pilot to Practice: A three-year review of the Inclusive Internship Programme

08

Do we practice what we preach?

09

Knowing Me, Knowing You... An autoethnographic perspective on autism research from the inside out

10

WAM Celebrating 20 Years

11

Autism training and perceived misconceptions about autism in support workers

12

An Education in Empathy – The impact a teacher has in the classroom lasts a lifetime

13

Access All Areas: A participatory board game for DARE students at National College of Art and Design

14

Welcome to INHEF Special Feature

15

INHEF Special Feature - The INCLUDE-ID Network: An Overview

16

INHEF INCLUDE-ID Network: Accessible Summary

17

INHEF Special Feature - Technological University Dublin celebrates inclusive education with the official launch of the Certificate in Independent Living Skills

programme

- 18 [INHEF Special Feature - University for Everyone: Pathways to Higher Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities](#)
- 19 [INHEF Special Feature - EmpowerEd: An adventure in capability](#)
- 20 [INHEF Special Feature - Inclusive Education: Cumas at University of Galway](#)
- 21 [INHEF Special Feature - Learner Advocates: Co-Designing Disability Awareness and Civic Engagement in Inclusive Higher Education](#)
- 22 [INHEF Special Feature - Learner Advocates: Easy Read Version](#)
- 23 [INHEF Special Feature - Fostering Positive Student Experiences in Co-Learning Environments: An educational staff officers framework for relational and academic support](#)
- 24 [INHEF Special Feature - Project WAVE](#)
- 25 [About Issue 19 - Out Now!](#)
- 26 [View Other Issues](#)

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Working with and for disabled people to shape inclusive and empowering environments in tertiary education and employment

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