Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

What is Universal Design for Learning?

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn. UDL guides the creation of learning outcomes, resources and assessments that work for everyone. This approach is underpinned by research in the field of neuroscience and is designed to improve the learning experience and outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities, students from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, mature students and international students.

Source: CAST, UDL on campus

These short videos provide an introduction to what UDL is and why we should apply it, emphasising the importance of flexibility in teaching to support variability in learning.

What is Universal Design for Learning (UDL)?

How does UDL work?

How is UDL applied in higher education?

What are the principles of UDL?

UDL is based on the idea that there is no such thing as a ‘typical’ or ‘average’ student and that “when it comes to learning, variability is the rule not the exception” (UDL on campus). UDL is not about any single specific teaching practice. It is instead a combination of best practice approaches to engage students and challenge them to think critically. It helps instructors meet the learning needs of a diverse student body through a combination of instructional modalities, formats, and technologies.

When applying UDL to teaching, follow these three core principles that enable greater flexibility to meet individual needs. These principles guide the design of learning outcomes, assessments, methods and resources. UDL really is simply good teaching; many instructors at UNSW Sydney already incorporate practices that are well aligned with UDL principles.

- **Multiple modes of student engagement** that tap into learners’ interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn
- **Multiple methods of representation** that give learners a variety of ways to acquire information and build knowledge
- **Multiple means of student action and expression** that provide learners with alternatives for demonstrating what they have learned

### Why is UDL important?

Instead of a one-size-fits-all solution, courses designed with UDL offer flexibility so that students can customise and adjust their learning experience to meet individual needs. This is important because:

- **Students have varied learning preferences**
  While some enjoy reading a text, others are motivated by listening to a podcast. While some learn by doing, others are stimulated by visual representation of ideas. Their needs vary depending on goals and purpose.

- **Students use varied devices and technologies**
While some prefer to complete tasks manually with pen and paper, others engage with learning materials via their laptop or smartphone. Their needs vary depending on access and capability.

- **Students have varied personal circumstances**
  While some students live at home and receive family support, others live on campus or with flatmates. While some students work part-time, others have carer or family commitments. Their needs vary based on time commitments and available supports.

Source: Dr Alanya Drummond ([Profile](#))

**What are the benefits of UDL?**

**Teachers are likely to experience**

- Increased student satisfaction
- Increased course retention rates
- Increased diversity in student cohort
- Reduced need to apply individual educational adjustments
- Reduced need to develop individual alternative assessments

**Students are likely to experience**

- Increased motivation to learn, in their own way
- Increased ability to engage, through variability and choice
- Reduced need for support services
- Reduced need to request individual educational adjustments

Source: Dr Alanya Drummond ([Profile](#))

**Student perspectives on the benefits of UDL**

**What is our framework for UDL at UNSW?**

This framework is the result of a review of the current literature and practice materials conducted on the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in higher education. The results of the review indicated that students perceived that the use of UDL principles in their coursework enhanced and supported their learning. Instructors who received training and support in using UDL to design and teach their courses found it to be useful in supporting a diverse student cohort. The review also revealed strategies for best practice in UDL at the higher education level. These have been collated into a framework to help guide UNSW staff in more accessible course design and delivery. Much of this framework is adapted from and based on advice from the Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST), a non-profit education research and development organisation that works to expand learning opportunities for all individuals through Universal Design for Learning. CAST’s work is considered the gold standard in UDL. This framework contextualises the CAST principles of UDL to the UNSW Sydney teaching and learning environment, and forms the basis of the UDL Teaching Gateway content.

Source: [Disability Innovation Institute (DIIU) UNSW, 2019](#)
Download the framework [here](PDF).