# Briefing Document: Next Steps for Adopting ALTITUDE

Approx. one year after its initial launch in March 2024, which kick-started a national conversation about we can embed a universal design approach in tertiary education, a significant number of ETBs and HEIs are now ready to adopt the ALTITUDE Charter and commit to working towards its goals in the years ahead.

This briefing doc outlines:

1. a summary of the ALTITUDE Charter and how it was developed.
2. how ALTITUDE adoption can support your institution.
3. what it means for your institutions to adopt the Charter.
4. practical steps you can take to join the national call to action (Apr 9th) for institutions and agencies to work towards a more universally designed tertiary education system and publicly declare your adoption of ALTITUDE alongside other institutions.
5. answers to frequently asked questions about the adoption of ALTITUDE.

## 1 - Recap – what is the ALTITUDE Charter and how was it developed?

The learner population in tertiary education is becoming increasingly diverse, and students’ lives are also increasingly complex. The responsibility on educational institutions to provide equitable access for all is now strongly embedded in Irish legislation, and national tertiary education strategies contain more specific goals to implement a Universal Design approach, (SOLAS, 2020; Higher Education Authority, 2022).

The aim is to move towards a system where ‘Inclusion is Everyone’s Business’, where all staff play their part in delivering an inclusive educational experience.

Universal Design, or UD for short, offers us an evidence-based approach to engender this mindset, and is increasingly seen as a central tenet of our response to rising diversity, (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, 2022). But how can we embed a UD approach in our institutions?

That’s where ALTIT**UD**E – the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education - comes in to play.

Funded by the HEA under PATH 4, the ALTITUDE Project was 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 Further Education and Training sector. The Charter was launched in Spring 2024, alongside an accompanying technical report and implementation toolkit.

The ALTIT**UD**E Charter, and the associated toolkit and technical report, build on significant existing work on UD in the Irish tertiary education landscape (Kelly & Padden, 2018), and through these outputs, provides a clear roadmap for institutions to make progress.

Drawing from national and international literature, the Charter recommends key strategic enablers, which institutions should put in place over time to support the sustainable implementation of UD, and proposes collaborative action to work towards goals under 4 key pillars of our institutions:

* Learning, Teaching & Assessment.
* Supports, Services & Social Engagement.
* the Physical Environment.
* and the Digital Environment.

[**Go to the Charter webpage and download the Charter, Toolkit and Technical Report.**](https://www.atu.ie/administration/registrar/udl/ud-charter-path-4-information/)

## 2 - How can the Charter help your institution?

The vision of the ALTITUDE project looks to a future in tertiary education where ‘all learners are transformatively included through universal design in education’, deriving the name ALTIT**UD**E. It seeks to move us in that direction by supporting HEIs and ETBs to make sustainable progress towards systemically embedding a UD approach…. - one which places human diversity at the heart of tertiary education design, and fosters student success for all learners.

**Institutions who adopt it will over time benefit from:**

* a more unified language of and commitment to a universal design approach in their institution
* a greater culture of shared responsibility for UD, access, and inclusion, operationalising the ‘Inclusion is Everyone’s Business’ mindset.
* a more effective and learner centred approach to compliance with national legislation and policy
* and most importantly, the iterative development of programmes, services, and environments that enable equitable opportunities for all learners to thrive and be successful.

All of the actions and goals of the Charter are aimed at optimising your institution to create the most inclusive and successful educational experience for the increasingly diverse learner population you serve.

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## 3 - What exactly are institutions committing to by adopting ALTITUDE?

On an ideological level, adopting the Charter is an explicit commitment by the institution to pursue a universal design approach as an important part of delivering educational experiences that meet the needs of all learners. On a practical level, adopting the Charter commits institutions to:

* establish an implementation committee/working group (or adapt an existing one) that works best for their organisational structure and governance processes which will be assigned responsibility for working towards the goals and actions within the Charter. 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. See pg. 15 and 16 of the Charter for further guidance.
* ensuring this group oversees incremental progress to develop strategic enablers for a sustainable UD approach, and foster collaboration to advance related goals in the 4 key pillars – see pg. 17 and 18 of the Charter. Key to this effort will be using regular 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.

It should be noted, while adopting the Charter commits you to the above, you don’t have to have the working group structure already established at the point you adopt the Charter and declare so publicly. It is recognised that changes in governance structures can take some time to design and implement so it is expected that may come within a reasonable timeframe following adoption.

**See the FAQ towards the end of this document for more information.**

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## 4 - Practical Steps to Adopt ALTITUDE and Join the National Call to Action

On Apr 9th, 2025, we are encouraging all institutions who are ready to adopt/have adopted, to release a public web statement declaring:

* their support for and adoption of the ALTIT**UD**E Charter.
* their support for a national call to action for institutions and agencies to work towards a more universally designed tertiary education system.

This is essentially a mass communications exercise which will display a collective cross-tertiary commitment to universal design, raise awareness about ALTITUDE, and encourage other institutions and agencies to support this effort. We are working to engage with national agencies to echo this sentiment via statements of their own on Apr 9th.

If your institution is ready to publicly declare its adoption of ALTITUDE, here's the steps you need to take part:

1. If not already complete, **go through whatever internal procedures your institution requires in order to adopt the ALTITUDE Charter** (e.g. getting senior sign-off) and join the national call to action between now and Apr 9th.As well as any internal formalities you need to complete, you can either:
	1. Plan an institutional adoption event and/or institutional communications to socialise the Charter with staff and share what the institution’s plans are around it. We recognise it is difficult to pick a specific date for adoption events due to availability of leaders and of venues, so feel free to do this any time between now and Apr 9th. You may if you wish to copy or adapt the ALTITUDE slide deck in the comms pack and present it to support understanding of the Charter if running an institutional event.
	2. Or - wait till Apr 9th and use this as the date to both support the national call to action an declare your adoption and ALTITUDE plans with both your staff and the public.
2. **Prepare external communications declaring your support for the national call to action and your adoption of ALTITUDE on Apr 9th**, using the draft comms pack provided as a guide. It doesn’t matter if you’ve already done some comms around the Charter in your institution, we would still ask that you release a statement on this day to project a collective response and increase the communications impact of the national call to action. The pack features a template statement to be released on your institutions website on Apr 9th, as well as a web banner image, adaptable social media images and social media post text and alternative text for associated images. You may use any of these you wish to join the call on Apr 9th.
3. **Share your intention to adopt with AHEAD by emailing** **altitude@ahead.ie** **and let us know that you are supporting the call on Apr 9th** - we will be sure to retweet and amplify your comms on the day to share the good news. We will also feature your institution on a page we intend to curate on which institutions have adopted ALTITUDE. Please provide a contact point for any ALTITUDE queries (not published), details of your social media handles and a logo for your institution to include on the webpage.
4. **On Apr 9th, release a prepared statement on your website declaring your adoption and supporting the national call to action** using the draft statement and social media posts in the comms pack.
5. **Reach out to altitude@ahead.ie** **over the coming months if you need guidance and a bounce board for your institution's approach** to setting up an implementation structure or getting started with implementation.

## 5 - Adoption FAQs

### Is there an external reporting or oversight mechanism for the Charter at this stage?

No, ALTITUDE is currently working through a self-adoption and self-monitoring model. The Charter was developed by the sector, for the sector, and was intended as a value-add to the work of the institution rather than a new oversight mechanism. Throughout the consultation process, stakeholders expressed the need for ALTITUDE to add value and greater coherence to a variety of sometimes disconnected strategic efforts in the access and inclusion space, without adding a significant level of additional reporting to an already overburdened sector.

The further embedding of UD adds enormous strategic value to institutions in their efforts to reach a range of national/international goals concerning student success, accessibility, public sector duty, learner retention, widening participation and sustainability. Because of this, we anticipate that institutions will use their adoption and implementation of ALTITUDE to provide evidence of progress in a range of existing reporting obligations.

However, it should be noted that both SOLAS and HEA have shown significant support for the Charter development and implementation to date, and future talks are planned with senior system stakeholders to see how existing funding criteria and reporting mechanisms can be tweaked to incentivise and provide greater accountability on UD/ALTITUDE implementation into the future.

### Do I need to have already established an appropriate implementation committee structure to adopt?

No. Adopting the Charter is the commitment to establishing the implementation structure and using it to oversee/drive implementation of the charter actions and goals in a sustainable fashion over time.

For some institutions, this will involve establishing a completely new committee, while for others at a difference stage of their journey, there may be a suitable existing committee/working group structure which just needs to be reviewed, and/or its membership/responsibilities updated in line with the guidance within the Charter.

Remember, ALTITUDE prioritises slow and steady transformation rather than unsustainable attempts to embed UD in a short period of time. So, take some time to bring everyone along with you when planning your implementation structure, and look to see where you can use efforts already in the workplan (e.g. upcoming policy reviews, ongoing strategic planning efforts) to more strongly embed UD as your first 'easy wins'.

### Are there timeframes associated with the goals and actions associated with the Charter?

Since universal design itself is a process rather than an end point, adopting ALTITUDE is a commitment to the journey of embedding UD, rather than a specific destination at a specific point in time. The Charter was designed to be suitable for ETBs/HEIs of varying sizes across FET and HE, with varying levels of local and national resources to draw from, so it prioritises iterative transformation over time rather than unsustainable attempts to overhaul practice in a short period. Equally, the Charter recognises that different institutions are at different stages in their embedding of a universal design approach, and through adoption and implementation, encourages them to build on their strengths and make iterative progress on areas for improvement.

### What if we are not ready to adopt now? Will there be further opportunities?

For now, ALTITUDE is operating on a self-adoption model, and institutions can do it any time. Apr 9th, 2025 is the first national call to action and several institutions will declare their adoption on this date in a show of collective commitment to a UD approach across the sector, but this briefing will be updated after that point with guidance for institutions ready to adopt at a later date.