

UNIVERSAL DESIGN

AND THE ACCESS RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

What is Universal Design? It is simply 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. ‘Universal Design’ shall not exclude assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities, where this is needed ¹.” The definition can extend to “a process that enables and empowers a diverse population by improving human performance, health and wellness and social participation ².” In short, Universal Design is meant to make life easier for everyone.

Realistically not all products, services or environments can be entirely usable by every person. Still, Universal Design proactively increases the potential to serve the needs of diverse people better, thus ensuring a better quality of life and inclusivity.

Universal Design means that one proactively considers the diverse characteristics of all potential users, namely persons with disabilities, as well as incorporating age, gender, learning preferences, size and native language. It aims to include any challenges the user may experience when engaging with a product, service, workplace or environment.

Universal vs Accessible Design

Universal Design differs from Accessible Design, as demonstrated by way of the following examples ³:

Example 1: A building is accessible if it has a ramp at the side that is out of the way for all visitors, but allows wheelchair users side access. A no-step building entry that everyone can use easily and together is based on Universal Design principles.

Example 2: A hotel can have a limited number of accessible rooms used for guests with disabilities, in contrast to a hotel with 100% universally designed rooms of various types, meeting the needs of diverse guests.

Universal Design is typically viewed as a ‘good thing’ from this perspective. Two areas of its application, namely the workplace and education, are further addressed in the eight goals of Universal Design. Principles governing Universal Design were developed in the 1990s to address discrimination and are still widely used today, which are laid out as follows ⁴:

- > Equitable use means the design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities, thus avoiding segregating or stigmatising any users; for example a website accessible to everyone, including people with visual impairments.
- > Flexibility in use means the design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities, giving a choice in the methods of use. Learning material in an accessible format that allows the learner to read or listen to it employs this principle.
- > Intuitive and straightforward means the use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user’s characteristics. Easy-to-use and straightforward buttons on the control panel of equipment is an example.
- > Perceptible information, meaning the necessary information, is effectively communicated to the user regardless of their sensory abilities. An emergency alarm system with visual and auditory characteristics is an example, as is video captioning.

- > Tolerance for error means the design minimises hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental errors. Instructional software that provides guidance when the user makes an inappropriate selection employs this principle.
- > Low physical effort means the design can be used efficiently, comfortably and without unnecessary strain on the user. Automated doors employ this principle.
- > Size and space for approach and use means the design is appropriate regardless of the user’s body size, posture or mobility. Adjustable workstations serve as an example.

Notwithstanding the implementation of these design principles, one needs to bear in mind that some products, services and/or environments will remain inaccessible to some individuals. Therefore, provision should be made for reasonable accommodation needs, taking into account persons with disabilities.

Universal Design in the workplace

It is a critical consideration when designing workplace environments, as it can assist in increasing the participation of persons with disabilities in the workforce. It reduces the need for reasonable accommodation measures to be put in place later if the employer wants to employ a candidate with a disability or wants to retain a current employee who becomes disabled. High levels of usability reduce health and safety risks for all employees, increase task efficiencies and, generally speaking, are good for employee morale. They can assist in attracting and keeping a diverse workforce by meeting the needs of all people. Common workplace features include:

- > Workstations with adjustable height to accommodate a range of statures and visual abilities;
- > Noise-controlled work areas;
- > Systems to adjust light levels in workspaces to the requirement of specific tasks depending on individual abilities and/or preferences;
- > ‘Sit-stand’ workstations; and
- > Directional signage.

Universal Design for learning

It can influence learning by proactively meeting the needs of all learners, whether at school, tertiary institutions or in the workplace. Environmental barriers to learning address the equal opportunity to succeed, including learners with disabilities. Flexible options and variability are key factors.



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The following are examples of how Universal Design can be incorporated in this context ⁵:

Known goals

Learners should have express goals upfront to know what they are working to achieve, and these should be reinforced continuously during the learning process.

Assessment Options

There should be various options for learners to complete assignments other than a formal exam or test, such as writing an essay, creating a podcast, or making a video to show what they have learnt.

Flexible workspaces

As far as possible, flexible workspaces should be provided, like quiet spaces for individual work vs group instruction.

Regular Feedback

Giving learners regular feedback – even daily – is encouraged to constantly reflect on the learning process and adapt, when necessary, to ensure they can achieve the learning goals.

Digital and Audio Text

If learners cannot access information, they will not learn, thus not progress. Therefore, learning materials should be available in an accessible format, including print, digital, text-to-speech and audiobooks. There should be options for text enlargement, screen colour and contrast. Videos should have captions and audio should have transcripts available.

The advantages and limits of Universal Design

Developed as part of a social movement to create equal access, Universal Design can ensure a barrier-free built environment. It evolved out of the need to avoid discriminatory design. Under the social model of dealing with disability, it is known that impairments in interaction with various barriers, including environmental barriers, may hinder persons with disabilities in full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. Creating enabling environments is an important objective.

Universal Design supports the inclusion and mainstreaming of persons with disabilities, but is not the wand that magically removes all access barriers experienced by persons with disabilities.

Some writers caution that a disproportionate focus on technical innovations and design outcomes should be avoided, as the implementation and success of Universal Design may still inadvertently have an impact in specific social and cultural contexts. Redressing design discrimination is no guarantee of access for persons with disabilities. Value and attitudinal changes remain prerequisites to facilitate equality of accessibility in specific environments.

For example, a person using a lift for their wheelchair to access public transport can still be subject to prejudice and the unaccommodating attitudes of the bus or taxi driver and their fellow travellers, causing an unpleasant journey.

Critiques have expressed the fear that the intrinsic rights of persons with disabilities can undermine the commodification of access as promoted by Universal Design. The design may become no more than a product or service sold or acquiring market share, rather than the politics necessary to ensure equal access for persons with disabilities. The proponents and practitioners of Universal Design and their understanding of disability, design and access cannot be accepted at face value. There is a need to interrogate further, discuss and critique “universalism” and its practical implementation. There are finite resources and competing cultural claims about what accessibility is or should be and how it practically addresses the needs of persons with disabilities.

To support equal inclusion and to avoid new barriers from arising, an organisation should closely consult with persons with disabilities and their representative organisations.

Accessible, usable and inclusive

Generally speaking, Universal Design supports the attainment of social justice and ensures access to housing, education, healthcare, transportation and other resources for diverse people. It aims to enhance independence, dignity and purpose for all people and is thus definitely worthy of consideration when designing products, services and the built environment.

The aim is accessibility, usability and inclusivity. There is value in it for all stakeholders, including persons with disabilities. Universal Design indeed plays an essential role in addressing design discrimination for persons with disabilities, but it does not provide the solution for all sources of disablement within our society.

Source of reference:

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5. CAST Updated 5 Examples of Universal Design for Learning in the Classroom available on www.understood.org.
6. Imrie, R. 2011 Universalism, Universal Design and Equitable Access to the Built Environment in Disability and Rehabilitation available on www.researchgate.net.



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