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Title: Transforming Institutional Accessibility: The User-Led Accessibility Audit Tool (ULAA-Tool) as a Model for Staff Inclusion in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper presents the development and institutional impact of the disabled User-Led Accessibility Audit Tool (ULAA-Tool) at Trinity College Dublin (TCD), highlighting its relevance not only for students but significantly for staff with disabilities. Originally developed to identify accessibility barriers across campus, the tool evolved into a model of inclusive practice that can inform systemic change for disabled staff and students. The ULAA-Tool integrates universal design principles with the lived experience of disabled and neurodivergent individuals, including both students and early-career researchers or interns working in staff roles.

The paper explores how this user-led audit approach fosters collaborative engagement between Estates & Facilities, academic staff, and disabled auditors, leading to concrete environmental improvements and greater awareness of staff accessibility needs. In addition to improving physical and sensory access, the project offers a replicable model for building inclusive workplace cultures in higher education institutions. It highlights how employing disabled students and interns as paid accessibility auditors contributes to inclusive employability, leadership development, and institutional transformation. This paper offers practical guidance on how other universities can adopt similar tools to empower staff with disabilities and advance universal design beyond minimum legal compliance.

Keywords: Accessibility Audit, Staff with Disabilities, Universal Design, Higher Education, Inclusive Practice, Institutional Change

1. Introduction

Accessibility remains a persistent barrier for disabled staff and students in higher education, particularly in relation to physical environments and institutional culture. Despite growing discourse around inclusive education, much of the focus remains on students, with limited attention to the everyday experiences of academic and professional staff with disabilities. Common issues include inaccessible buildings, overstimulating workspaces, inadequate signage, and unclear accommodations processes.

In response, Trinity College Dublin (TCD) developed the **User-Led Accessibility Audit Tool (ULAA-Tool)**—a participatory, flexible, and modular framework that empowers disabled students, interns, and staff to assess and report access barriers based on lived experience. Originally focused on student spaces, the tool has evolved to support wider institutional planning, universal design implementation, and workplace accessibility.

2. Conceptual Framework: Universal Design and Lived Experience

Universal Design (UD), as articulated by the Centre for Universal Design (1997), and later applied to higher education by Meyer, Rose & Gordon (2014), underpins the ULAA-Tool's methodology. This framework emphasises environments that are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation. In higher education, this means removing barriers to full participation in teaching, research, and professional roles.

The tool also draws on critical disability studies, notably the slogan “Nothing About Us Without Us,” by embedding lived experience into planning processes. Rather than seeing disabled individuals as passive recipients of accommodations, the ULAA-Tool centres them as auditors and change agents. It addresses both physical and sensory barriers in ways that compliance checklists often miss, providing a richer, more quality and context-sensitive view of access.

3. Methodology: Participatory, Modular, and Replicable

The ULAA-Tool is built on a participatory methodology that centres disabled individuals as both auditors and co-designers. Developed at Trinity College Dublin, it was created not just to measure accessibility, but to redefine how institutions understand and respond to access needs.

At its core, the ULAA-Tool is a structured yet flexible spreadsheet-based system that combines regulatory standards with qualitative input from disabled users. It is designed to be replicable across diverse institutions and scalable depending on available resources.

How the ULAA-Tool Works

The tool is divided into three core components:

1. Standard Audit Sheet

This covers general accessibility features in shared campus spaces; entrances, corridors, lifts, signage, and pathways. It supports binary compliance checks (e.g.,

“Does this door meet minimum width?”) alongside space for open comments and lived-experience feedback, such as “Is there regular and readable directional signage?” and “Is the use of natural and indirect lighting causing glare and/or harsh shading?”

2. Modular Audit Sheet

This section focuses on space-specific features such as lecture theatres, staff kitchens, restrooms, and research labs. It allows auditors to tailor their assessments to different functional areas, evaluating both physical, visual, and sensory dimensions unique to each context.

3. Criteria Setup & Mapping Outputs

A setup for outlining the criteria to be examined throughout the audit process, defined by the user, and guided by policy and best practice. These criteria and standardised collection of information allow for clear and direct outputs to inform reports and the TCD Sense Map, an interactive digital map system unique to TCD.

Audits are conducted by trained disabled students, interns, or staff, often using tablets or laptops during walkthroughs. For each item assessed, auditors record:

- The feature under review (e.g. door, signage, lighting)
- Relevant accessibility requirement or policy standard (e.g. door width, light level)
- Observational notes and comments based on lived experience
- Compliance status (e.g. compliant / non-compliant / partial)
- Issue priority (low, medium, urgent)

This combination of quantitative and narrative data creates a rich, holistic view of environmental accessibility. The results are compiled into structured reports complete with photographs and prioritised recommendations which are then shared with Estates & Facilities, Human Resources, and line managers to inform immediate fixes and long-term planning.

A key innovation currently underway is the development of an application, self-service version of the ULAA-Tool designed for use by all Trinity staff without the technical barriers of using the current spreadsheet-based system. This adaptation will allow individuals to carry out their own workspace assessments, document any access barriers they encounter, and collaborate with their managers on practical solutions integrating accessibility into everyday institutional practice.

4. From Student-Centred to Staff-Relevant: Evolution of the Tool

Initially designed to assess student accommodations and teaching spaces, the ULAA-Tool has evolved through internal advocacy and growing staff engagement to encompass staff environments such as offices, communal kitchens, restrooms, and academic workspaces. This expansion was driven by the involvement of disabled postgraduates and early-career researchers, who used the tool to identify barriers in their own environments. Faolán

Doecke-Launders, a co-author of this paper, extended the tool's application to research labs and shared staff facilities as part of his internship.

Case Study: Environmental Audit for the Inclusive Internship Programme

As part of Trinity's Inclusive Internship Programme, an environmental audit is conducted at the beginning of each intern's placement. Using the ULAA-Tool's methodology, these audits are led by disabled staff in collaboration with occupational therapists, combining lived experience with clinical and environmental design expertise.

Each workspace is assessed for factors such as lighting, acoustics, desk and equipment adjustability, signage clarity, circulation space, and proximity to accessible facilities. Sensory mapping is integrated into the process, particularly for neurodivergent interns. Occupational therapists contribute by developing individual sensory profiles and co-designing environmental adjustments tailored to each intern's needs.

Findings are shared with internship supervisors and HR partners, along with tailored recommendations. In many cases, this led to immediate action, such as relocation to quieter working areas, provision of noise-cancelling headphones, or installation of task lighting. These proactive audits made accessibility an embedded feature of the onboarding process and signalled a wider cultural shift. Several supervisors reported that they now view inclusion as *"proactive rather than reactive."*

The audit tool used in this programme is now being further developed to support a self-service model for all staff members. This enhancement will enable staff to independently identify environmental barriers and work with their line managers and College services to address them mainstreaming accessibility into routine workplace planning and fostering a culture of shared responsibility.

A parallel milestone was the recognition of the Trinity Ability Co-op as a Disabled Persons Organisation (DPO) under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). This recognition grants Trinity an officially endorsed, user-led structure through which disabled people can co-produce policy and planning decisions. The Ability Co-op is now a central actor in shaping inclusive policies, from curriculum to employment and campus design.

Staff feedback collected through the tool has revealed barriers similar to those encountered by students, such as inaccessible break areas, inadequate lighting, unclear signage, and unreliable lifts. Yet staff also highlighted challenges unique to employment contexts, including inaccessible HR offices, a lack of rest spaces for those with fatigue-related conditions, and exclusionary design in rooms used for performance reviews or recruitment panels.

By extending the ULAA-Tool to staff environments and embedding it within employment and internship processes, Trinity is modelling how accessibility can move from isolated compliance efforts to institutional practice. The result is not only a more equitable campus, but a workforce better equipped to design, lead, and sustain inclusive change.

5. Impact on Policy and Institutional Practice

One of the ULAA-Tool's most significant impacts has been its role in shaping long-term, structural responses to accessibility within the institution. This includes the co-creation of a **Five-Year Accessibility Enhancement Plan** in partnership with the Estates and Facilities Department. Backed by institutional funding, the plan outlines measurable actions, timelines, and accountability mechanisms. Early outcomes have included the retrofitting of priority academic and staff spaces with automatic doors, the installation of quiet rooms near staff areas, and revised wayfinding and signage strategies in campus libraries.

In parallel with these physical upgrades, Trinity has committed to embedding accessibility at a systemic level. A pivotal step has been the appointment of a dedicated Disability Officer for Staff, ensuring that disabled employees have direct representation and institutional advocacy. This role provides a structured pathway to raise and resolve access issues and marks a significant cultural shift toward inclusion in workplace planning.

Additionally, Trinity's Inclusive Internship Programme—initially focused on a small number of disabled students—has been scaled up to operate across the College, encompassing professional, research, and technical placements. As more interns and early-career staff enter diverse campus roles, the relevance and utility of the ULAA-Tool has grown. Audits now routinely assess shared offices, labs, staff kitchens, and rest areas, integrating both physical and sensory considerations into employment planning. This has positioned the ULAA-Tool as a core institutional resource—not just for identifying environmental barriers, but for embedding accessibility into staff onboarding, role design, and inclusive workforce development.

Audit findings have also been formally integrated into Trinity's Disability Action Plan 2025–2030, ensuring that access improvements for staff are embedded into the university's long-term strategic commitments. Staff who have benefited from these changes report greater ease navigating workspaces and increased confidence in engaging with managers about accessibility needs.

Beyond physical infrastructure, the ULAA-Tool has helped catalyse cultural change. Estates and Facilities staff now undergo training in universal design and disability awareness, and accessibility considerations are increasingly incorporated at the design stage of new campus developments, rather than as an afterthought or retrofit.

The synergy between the ULAA-Tool and Trinity's broader accessibility initiatives—particularly **TCD Sense**, which promotes sensory-friendly environments for neurodivergent users—has been central to this whole-campus transformation. Sensory mapping and occupational therapy insights from TCD Sense directly informed updates to ULAA audit modules, reinforcing the value of cross-initiative collaboration. Together, these efforts represent a layered, campus-wide model of inclusive design that goes beyond technical compliance and centres lived experience as a driver of institutional change.

6. Employability and Inclusion: Disabled Staff as Leaders

A critical feature of the ULAA-Tool has been its use as an employment pathway. Disabled students and early-career staff who serve as auditors gain hands-on experience in data collection, reporting, policy engagement, and communication. These are transferable skills relevant to a range of academic and professional roles.

Furthermore, involvement in institutional change processes fosters leadership identity among disabled staff and interns. Rather than being perceived solely through a needs-based lens, disabled auditors are recognised for their expertise. Several alumni of the audit team have gone on to secure positions in academia, civil service, or advocacy, citing their involvement in the tool as key to developing confidence and professional competencies.

Disabled staff and interns involved in the ULAA-Tool are not simply gaining skills, they are exercising architectural authorship. These audits are acts of institutional resistance. By embedding their lived expertise into infrastructure, disabled auditors reject the notion of being passive recipients of inclusion. Instead, they lead it.

This shift from tokenism to transformation is vital. Inclusion is not about inviting disabled people to provide feedback after decisions are made. It is about placing them at the centre of design and governance. The ULAA-Tool enacts this shift, offering not consultation, but co-authorship.

7. Case Studies and Testimonials

Wilson Williams, a visually impaired student and former Trinity intern, played a central role in developing accessibility metrics for lighting and sound in shared office spaces. His work led to changes in how Estates specified light fittings in refurbishments. He noted: “It was the first time I felt like my access issues weren’t just being tolerated, but were part of the design brief.”

Glen Wilkie, a wheelchair user, used the tool to audit academic corridors and teaching staff areas. His findings contributed to installing dual-height swipe access points and modifying kitchen counters in staff break areas. “I always say, it’s not just about ramps, it’s about dignity,” he commented.

Faolán Doecke-Launders, who is neurodivergent, designed the tool and refined the modular design system to ensure that sensory issues (e.g. noise, lighting, colour contrast) were embedded in all modules. He also led workshops with staff within, and external to Trinity, on how to use audit data to make grant applications for inclusive retrofits.

8. Limitations and Challenges

Despite the ULAA-Tool’s progress, it exposes the deep limitations of a compliance-driven model. Current accessibility standards, such as those in Part M of Ireland’s Building Regulations (2022), treat access as a technical hurdle rather than a human rights imperative.

In reality, many “accessible” environments are spaces of quiet exclusion, with kitchens too high for use, HR offices unreachable to wheelchair users, facilities too noisy for

neurodivergent staff. These may tick regulatory boxes, but they deny basic dignity and participation. This is not a design oversight—it is an ethical failure.

As long as inclusion is treated as an afterthought, universities will continue to construct environments that comply with law yet violate equity. Until we adopt frameworks built on user-informed justice, disabled staff will remain peripheral to the institutions they serve.

Despite the positive institutional shifts achieved through the ULAA-Tool, its emergence also exposes a broader systemic failure: the inadequacy of current accessibility standards as defined by Part M of the Building Regulations. While Part M outlines the legal minimum for accessible design in Ireland, it often falls short of addressing the nuanced, real-world barriers experienced by disabled staff. Its checklist-style approach frequently results in environments that are technically compliant yet functionally inaccessible, spaces that meet the letter of the law but not the spirit of inclusion.

The findings repeatedly revealed gaps where Part M compliance masked deeper exclusion. For example, staff areas passed regulatory audits despite having inaccessible signage for neurodivergent individuals or kitchen counters too high for wheelchair users. In many cases, so-called “accessible” rooms still presented multiple sensory and spatial challenges.

These failures are not accidental but systemic. They stem from a regulatory paradigm that treats disability access as a technical problem rather than a matter of workplace justice and human rights. Until institutions move beyond minimum compliance and adopt user-informed approaches, like those championed by the ULAA-Tool, disabled staff will continue to face marginalisation baked into the very architecture of their working lives.

Until legislation is strengthened, tools like the ULAA will remain essential not just as advocacy mechanisms but as stopgaps for systemic failure, workarounds in a framework that still treats disabled access as an afterthought.

9. Broader Implications and Transferability

The ULAA-Tool offers a model that is replicable across institutions internationally. Its strengths lie in:

- Centring the lived experience of disabled staff and students
- Using modular, adaptable audit tools for different environments
- Building institutional partnerships between disability services, estates, HR, and academic departments
- Empowering disabled individuals through paid, skill-building roles

Institutions looking to adopt similar tools should begin with a pilot, ensure leadership support, and build internal capacity through training and staff engagement. Partnerships with academic units (e.g., Engineering, Architecture) can provide technical support and embed accessibility within curricula.

10. Policy Implications: From Compliance to Legal Obligation

The experience of implementing the ULAA-Tool at Trinity offers a clear message for policymakers; minimum accessibility standards are not sufficient. As long as legal frameworks like Part M of the Building Regulations define access in narrow, structural terms, higher education institutions will remain only partially inclusive.

The ULAA-Tool has revealed how many Part M-compliant spaces continue to exclude disabled staff in ways the law fails to detect. These include environments that are navigable but disempowering, accessible by code but not in reality. Such gaps underscore a pressing need to recast universal design not just as best practice, but as enforceable standard.

This shift will require legislative change. Building regulations must be modernised to incorporate the full spectrum of human diversity, physical, sensory, neurological, and cognitive, and must be informed by lived experience. Universal design should no longer be positioned as an aspirational add-on; it must be embedded into law as a non-negotiable foundation of inclusive infrastructure.

Policies must also account for sensory accessibility, which remains largely absent from current regulatory frameworks. Projects like TCD Sense show how critical sensory-friendly design is for neurodivergent inclusion. Despite their success, these innovations remain outside statutory obligations. Future iterations of building regulations and national accessibility policies must address sensory environments explicitly, ensuring all users, including those with invisible or fluctuating needs, are protected under law.

Additionally, new policy instruments should:

- Require the inclusion of disabled individuals in all stages of the design and audit process.
- Fund and mandate periodic accessibility audits using user-led methodologies.
- Extend universal design obligations to cover not just public-facing areas but all staff workspaces and facilities.
- Provide clear timelines and accountability mechanisms for implementing accessibility improvements.

Tools like the ULAA-Tool can guide this transition. They prove that embedding lived experience leads to more accurate, effective, and just accessibility outcomes. But without legislative backing, even the most innovative tools will struggle to shift institutional norms at scale.

Policymakers must confront a sobering truth: compliance has become a hiding place. Legal minimums allow institutions to appear inclusive while failing disabled users daily. If we are serious about equity, universal design must be redefined, not as best practice, but as enforceable law.

This includes sensory environments, fluctuating access needs, and invisible disabilities, all of which are currently ignored by statutory frameworks. Legislation must no longer treat these as optional extras but as core elements of accessibility.

We ask: *What does it say about a system when progress depends on local champions, short-term grants, or the unpaid labour of disabled staff and students?*

11. Conclusion

The ULAA-Tool represents more than a successful campus initiative—it is a provocation. A challenge to higher education institutions to stop asking, *“Are we compliant?”* and begin asking, *“Are we just compliant?”*

By positioning disabled staff and interns as auditors and change agents, the tool reframes accessibility not as a technical fix but as a matter of institutional ethics, shared responsibility, and structural equity. It demonstrates that meaningful inclusion emerges not from policies or metrics, but from lived expertise, accountability, and collaborative action.

Yet the tool also exposes the failures of the current system. Spaces that meet Part M regulations often remain unusable or disempowering, technically compliant but practically exclusionary. These are not accidental oversights, but symptoms of a legal and institutional framework that treats access as a minimal obligation rather than a human right.

Systemic change requires moving beyond compliance. Universal design must be redefined, not as an aspirational ideal, but as a legally enforceable foundation. Without this shift, progress will remain inconsistent, reliant on short-term funding and local champions.

The alignment of the ULAA-Tool with initiatives like TCD Sense shows that real inclusion demands layered, sensory-aware, and campus-wide strategies. Sensory accessibility is not a luxury, it is central to creating environments in which disabled and neurodivergent staff and students can thrive.

We call on university leaders, lawmakers, policymakers, architects, and disability services to move from performative inclusion to structural transformation. Tools like the ULAA can guide this work, but no tool, however powerful, can replace institutional will.

If your accessibility measures vanished tomorrow, would your institution still serve its disabled community? If the answer is no, the real work is only beginning.

Appendix A: ULAA-Tool – Structural Overview

Component	Purpose	Key Features
Checklist Sheet	Audit preparation & basic guidance	Includes prompts to document audit team, location, and summary of findings
Standard Sheet	General access (entrances, corridors, lifts)	Uses compliance fields (e.g., door widths), with space for comments/photos
Modular Sheet	Space-specific assessments (e.g., toilets, kitchens, labs)	Adapts to different room types; supports multi-dimensional barrier identification
M-Setup Sheet	Predefined modules for teaching, rest, external, social	Feature-based structure aligned to sensory and physical access
Sensory Mapping	Embedded in Modular/Setup Sheets	Supports neurodivergent access through acoustic, lighting, and spatial profiling
Progress Tracker	Dashboard summary (visual progress indicators)	Automatically aggregates issues and compliance data

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