

Forum Insights

STUDENT SUCCESS TOOLBOX FOR FLEXIBLE LEARNERS: Supporting Transitions from Thinking About Study to the First Weeks

Project Website

This project's website can be found at www.studentsuccess.ie. This website is being used to disseminate project information and publications and facilitate national and international discussions on the project, specifically through the use of the linked Flexible Learner Success twitter hashtag #FLSuccess.

Project Overview:

Introduction

The project seeks to address the problem of effective transitions and the foundations for student success during the initial stages of the study lifecycle with a specific focus on flexible learners. In the context of this project a broad definition is adopted of flexible learners, which includes adult learners engaged in part-time and online/distance learning. Enhancing retention and completion rates of this group of flexible learners is a significant problem both globally and within the Irish context. Although the number of flexible learners in Ireland is relatively low in comparison to many other countries, around 17% of all undergraduates (HEA 2012), there are increasing concerns about their ability to progress towards successful completion.

The particular focus of this project is on supporting flexible learners through key transitions in the early stages of the study lifecycle: from thinking about study, making choices, the registration process and through to the first few weeks. A basic premise of the project is that the foundations for student success start early in the study lifecycle, and that insufficient attention has been given in the literature and within institutions to the importance of the period before flexible learners formally commence their study. A related underlying assumption is that this crucial transition period may be enhanced by the availability of appropriately designed digital readiness and preparation tools, which help to scaffold both prospective students and those about to embark on part time or online/distance study for the first time.

Project Plan

There are five phases to this project.

- Phase One involves the project establishment, including formalising the project team, partner agreements and scope of the work packages.
- Phase Two involves an analysis of relevant literature and current digital readiness tools available internationally to support successful transitions during initial stages of the study lifecycle for flexible learners. The main deliverable of this phase is an analysis of the digital tools adopted internationally to enhance transitions to study for this unique sub population of learners.

- Phase Three involves building on the above synthesis to develop a strategically targeted suite of research-informed digital readiness tools. While they will have wider application across the sector, the tools will focus on facilitating adult learners who are transitioning to part-time undergraduate study. The major deliverable from this phase will be the development of a toolbox of eight digital tools that can be used and/or adapted by other institutions in the Higher Education sector to support student success at this crucial period of the study lifecycle. The final selection, design and appropriateness of the digital readiness tools is being informed by the analysis of the literature and institutional analysis completed in Phase Two.
- Phase Four involves a series of pilot evaluations of the digital tools across the partner institutions. Based on feedback gather during this evaluation phase, the digital tools will be adapted/augmented to ensure that they are fit for purpose.
- Phase Five will produce a Digital Guide for Supporting Flexible Learners, which will provide guidance for institutions and discipline teams on how to effectively deploy the suite of digital readiness tools. Another key deliverable of this phase is a series of workshops delivered in different higher education institutions on how to support transitions for flexible learners.

At the start of June 2015 the project is in phase 3, with the development of the eight tools being progressed by a number of sub-groups. The eight tools are (these are working titles):

Readiness for study self-assessment quiz	Student workload calculator	Student self-assessment support network mapping tool	Digital study/learning skills tutorials
Guide to Information literacy, digital literacy, and academic literacy	Guide to proactively preparing for study	A crowd-sourced guide to flexible learning	Online induction for flexible learners

Impact Evaluation Strategy

To assess the impact of the project, the project is using the Impact Evaluation Framework (IEF) for teaching and learning projects employed by both the Office for Learning and Teaching in Australia and the New Zealand National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence (Ako Aotearoa). The framework examines:

- Reach (generation and dissemination of project outputs)
- Impact on teaching practice
- Impact on learners
- Impact on the project teams themselves

Also, as part of the project's impact evaluation strategy, Professor Terry Anderson of Athabasca University (<http://cde.athabasca.ca/faculty/terrya.php>) will act as an international advisor on to the project.

Project Partners:

Project Partner	Partner Contact
National Institute for Digital Learning, Dublin City University	Dr. James Brunton, (<i>Project Lead</i>) james.brunton@dcu.ie
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Key Outcomes of the Project (June 2015):

- Phase 1 – This phase involves the project establishment such as formalising the project team and agreement on the format of the digital toolkit to be produced in Phase Three.
 - o Output: Project plan. Status - Complete
- Phase 2 – This phase involves an analysis of relevant literature and current digital readiness tools available internationally to support successful transitions during initial stages of the study lifecycle for flexible learners. The main deliverable of this phase is an analysis of the digital tools adopted internationally to enhance transitions to study.
 - o Output: Analysis of literature and current digital readiness tools. Status - Complete
- Phase 3 & 4 - A toolbox of eight digital tools that can be used and/or adapted by other institutions in the Higher Education sector to support student success at the early (crucial) stages of the study lifecycle.
 - o Output: Toolbox of digital tools. Status - Ongoing
- Phase 5 - A digital guide for supporting Flexible Learners which will provide guidance for higher education institutions and discipline teams on how to effectively deploy the suite of digital readiness tools. Another key deliverable of this phase is a series of three workshops delivered in different HE institutions on how to support transitions for flexible learners.
 - o Output: Digital Guide and Project Dissemination (workshops, a publication(s) and a project webpage). Status – Phase yet to begin

Benefits to the Higher Education sector nationally

This project will produce both a guide for the sector on how to improve flexible learner readiness, and a suite of digital readiness tools for the initial stages of the study lifecycle that

will aid programme teams/institutions in facilitating part-time, flexible undergraduate learners to transition into Higher Education. The project will leverage digital technologies to establish new approaches to assist advisors in helping new applicants to assess their own readiness for part-time, flexible learning and in providing learners with relevant, timely feedback to enhance their chances of success. The digital tools developed through this project will impact on the ability of part-time, flexible learners to make a successful transition into Higher Education. The utilisation of these digital tools to increase student readiness, both by the learners who engage with certain tools and the discipline teams who will access the guidance tools and also choose, adapt and deploy tools for use with students as required on their programme, will aid in the fostering of a culture that fully embraces digital learning and digital innovation.

Benefits to students

While the principle target for this project are programme teams/institutions that wish to support their flexible learners' transition into higher education, there are clear benefits to students where the tools are used effectively. In such a context, before students start a course of study the student success toolbox will enable them to:

- Assess their readiness for study as a flexible learner
- Assess their computer skills and study skills (e.g. digital literacy, information literacy) and receive advice about how to prepare in these areas.
- Assess their capacity to take on a study workload, and evaluate their personal support network(s)
- Understand how to proactively prepare themselves for study, as well as what will be expected of them as learners in Higher Education.
- Access study tips given by staff and other existing students.
- Experience a digital orientation of a Higher Education institute.
- Understand the grammar and expectations of Higher Education institutions.

The result is a student who is well informed about their choice of study and who has access to a suite of supports that facilitates their transition into Higher Education.

Other national/international development work that complements this project:

The National Forum's first enhancement theme is "Teaching for Transitions", and as such there are currently a number of other funded projects that are also focused on aiding different learner types such as school leavers and international students transition into Irish Higher Education, for example the project led by IT Sligo that focuses on how a MOOC can improve the transition from 2nd to 3rd level (see <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/priority-themes/building-digital-capacity-projects-2014/>). There are also a number of seminars taking place in 2014-2015 with a focus on transitioning different learner types into Irish Higher Education, for example the seminar held by University College Dublin in May 2015 "Challenging Assumptions: Transitions and Widening Participation" (see <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/national-seminar-series-2015/>).

Phase two of the Student Success Toolbox project involves an analysis of relevant literature and current digital readiness tools available internationally to support successful transitions during initial stages of the study lifecycle for flexible learners. As part of this a number of international initiatives were identified, for example the range of tools in use in other institutions internationally that are used to support flexible learner transition into Higher Education. The phase two report will be available from the project website (www.studentsuccess.ie) in July.

Next Steps:

- Phase 3 - Development of the toolbox of eight digital tools
- Phase 4 - Piloting and evaluating the digital tools across the partner institutions. Based on feedback gather during this evaluation phase, the digital tools will be adapted/augmented to ensure that they are fit for purpose.
- Phase 5 - Production of a Digital Guide for Supporting Flexible Learners. Delivery of a series of workshops in different higher education institutions on how to support transitions for flexible learners.