Head Start Online: A MOOC for effectively supporting flexible learner transition into higher education

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Head Start Online is a five week, free, online course (MOOC) that is designed to support prospective and/or new flexible learners' transitions into higher education. Enhancing retention and completion rates of this group of learners, in order to facilitate successful widening of access, is a significant global challenge. Head Start Online is focused on the initial stages of the study-lifecycle, as the foundations for student success are laid early. Head Start Online has emerged out of the Student Success Toolbox project, a nationally funded research and technology development project that developed a toolbox of eight digital readiness/preparation tools. Head Start Online brings together a number of these tools together in a cohesive pre-induction socialization course that aids new/prospective learners to, for example: assess their readiness for flexible study; plan and budget their time; assess their computer skills; identify their sources of support; learn about the process of writing assignments.

Keywords: Flexible learning, study lifecycle digital readiness/preparation tools, student success, Open Educational Resources

Head Start Online: First Steps For Flexible Study

The [Head Start Online MOOC](#) 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.
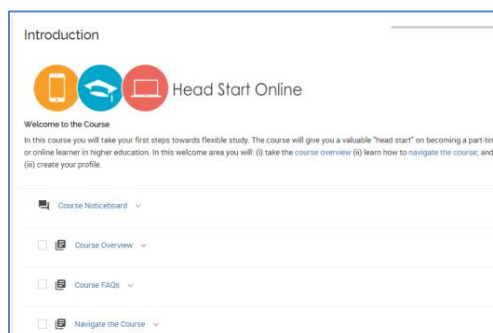
The particular focus of the Head Start MOOC is on early support for flexible learners: from thinking about study, making choices, the registration process and through to the first few weeks. A basic premise of the project is that the foundations for student success are laid early in the study lifecycle, 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. This MOOC utilises a number of the digital readiness/preparation tools developed as part of the [Student Success Toolbox](#) project. These tools were developed following an analysis of the existing literature relating to flexible learning, student success, and effective transitions into higher education, as well as an analysis of the existing tools in use internationally for socialising flexible learners into higher education. Each of these tools was developed using an iterative, design-based research methodological approach.

The Head Start Online course has been developed on a new Moodle-based MOOC platform, DCU Academy. The MOOC runs over five weeks with a welcome area, with a brief welcome/course overview and instructions relating to creating a course profile, opening a few days before the start of week one. The time commitment involved for participants is approximately two hours per week. In each week of the MOOC a new section of the course is made available to participants. While the sections of the course are released week to week it is acknowledged that that not everyone will want to take the course in the same way. If participants want to begin the course after it has started or work through the activities at their own pace then this is also possible, and is expected. There are five sections to the course:

1. A good beginning - What is this course about? Who else is here?
2. What to expect - What should you expect of part-time/online learning?
3. Time is precious - How much time do you have for study? What supports do you have in your life?
4. Skills for success - What computer skills do you need? What is required to produce a successful assignment in your first semester of study?
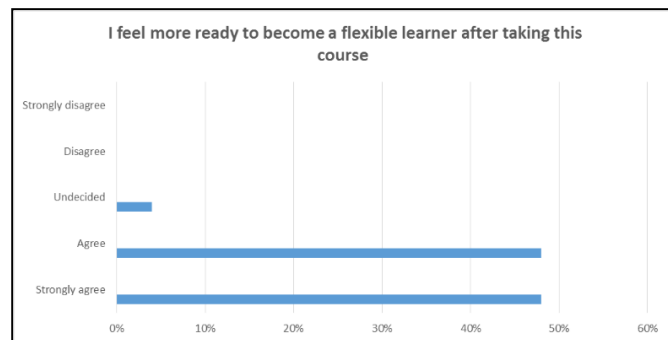5. Next steps - Where next? Is online learning for you? What will you decide to do?

Each section of the course involves videos, activities, and opportunities for participants to interact with the course facilitators and their fellow course participants. The video content includes key messages about what to expect from higher education and how to best prepare for flexible study from higher education staff who have experience supporting flexible learners and from graduates from part-time or online/distance education programmes. The activities within the MOOC are largely focused on the digital readiness/preparation tools, produced by the Student Success Toolbox project, that aid new/prospective learners to, for example: assess their readiness for flexible study; plan and budget their time; assess their computer skills; identify their sources of support; learn about the process of writing assignments. Other activities were developed within the Moodle-based MOOC platform to complement the content (text, video, digital tools). The MOOC participants are also encouraged to interact with the course facilitators and the other MOOC participants through typical discussion forums and also through a more informal 'Share With Others' chat-box-style discussion forum. Week five of the MOOC serves to 'outboard' the participants, with the key messages of the course being reiterated and advice/resources relating to making informed study choices being given to participants.

At the end of the MOOC a statement of completion will be issued to those participants who have completed a defined set of the core course activities over the five weeks.

A small pilot of the MOOC ran from the 15th Aug to the 19th Sept 2016, on a new MOOC platform called Academy built by Moodle HQ, and this was the first MOOC to run on the new, evolving platform. We had 150 people enrol on the course, 105 signed into the course and 50 of those went on to receive a certificate of completion. Those selected to take part in this small pilot were prospective flexible learners planning to start courses in Ireland in the 2016/2017 academic year, and also a cohort of approximately 70 learners from a German organisation, Kiron, who support refugees in gaining access to higher education. The feedback received indicates that a course such as this, that uses these digital readiness tools, has a positive impact on prospective flexible learners. When asked if they felt more prepared to become a flexible learner after taking the course 12 of 25 respondents agreed that they did and another 12 strongly agreed. The feedback also indicates that the tools do what they are designed to do, for example MOOC participants perceived that the time management tool helped them understand how to better manage their time. At the end of the course 8 of 25 respondents agreed that they felt better able to manage their time and another 15 strongly agreed.

I feel more ready to become a flexible learner after taking this course

Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.