

## **Staying the distance: Using digital readiness tools to support effective transitions into higher education for flexible learners**

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The Student Success Toolbox project is a nationally funded research and technology development project focusing on facilitating effective flexible learner transition into higher education. The project targets programme teams/institutions with adults engaged in undergraduate, part-time or online/distance-learning during the initial stages of the study lifecycle. The project has developed a toolbox of eight digital readiness/preparation tools, leveraging digital technologies to establish approaches to assist advisors in helping applicants to assess their own readiness for flexible learning and in providing learners with relevant, timely feedback to enhance their chances of success. These are Open Educational Resources (OERs) with a Creative Commons Licence (CC-BY), made openly available to, and actively shared with, programme teams/institutions. Alongside the tools is a guide on using the tools as part of a strategic flexible learner socialisation program and, where appropriate, directions on technically augmenting the tools for a specific programme or institution.

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

### **Introduction**

The Student Success Toolbox project is funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Building Digital Capacity fund. It involves four project partners: Dublin City University, specifically the National Institute for Digital Learning (lead partner); Sligo Institute of Technology; Maynooth University; and Dundalk Institute of Technology. The primary aim of the Student Success Toolbox project is to provide a supportive resource for programme teams/institutions, in order that they can effectively support flexible learners during the key transitions in the initial stages of the study lifecycle. Thinking about study, making choices, registration and the first few weeks of the course represent these early stages. A premise of the project is that the foundations for student success are established in the earliest stages of the study lifecycle, and that there has been both a paucity of empirical research and attention within institutions toward the importance of the stages prior to flexible learners formally commencing their study. It is also assumed that this vital transition period may be aided by the ready availability of specially designed digital readiness and preparation tools, which support prospective learners and those about to commence part time or online study for the first time.

There were five phases to this project:

- *Phase 1* - Project establishment, including formalizing the project team, partner agreements and scope of the work packages;
- *Phase 2* - Analysis of relevant literature and audit of digital readiness tools currently available internationally to support successful transitions for flexible learners;
- *Phase 3* – Design and development of a strategically targeted suite of eight research-informed digital readiness tools for flexible learners;
- *Phase 4* – A series of pilot evaluations of the digital tools across the partner institutions to gather feedback on their fit for purpose;

- *Phase 5* – A guide for institutions on how to support flexible learners and effectively deploy the suite of digital readiness tools along with a series of dissemination events.

An iterative, Design-based Research (DBR) methodology (Reeves, 2006) was adopted to plan, develop and pilot a total of eight digital readiness tools. The project began in February 2015 with the design of the digital readiness tools phase commencing in August through the development of initial storyboards. These storyboards went through several iterations over the next few months as the wider project team peer reviewed proposed solutions and our design specialists provided expert advice on particular features within each tool. Based on both the Phase 2 synthesis of existing literature, and on the analysis of existing tools in use internationally, five overarching principles were adopted for the design of a suite of eight digital readiness and preparation tools for flexible learners: (i) self-regulation, (ii) personalization, (iii) customization, (iv) information at the point of need, and (v) language and framing of the tools in the world of the prospective learner.

Tool 1, ‘Am I Ready for Study?’, invites prospective flexible learners to self-assess if they are ready to commit to part-time online/distance study. The tool involves a brief quiz comprising six sections: (i) Previous Study, (ii) Work and Family, (iii) Study Intentions, (iv) Study Skills, (v) Computer Skills and (vi) Work Habits. The second tool, ‘Do I have Enough Time?’, provides a self-reflective ‘life calculator’ where prospective flexible learners are encouraged to think about the amount of time they can realistically spend on different activities during a typical week. More to the point this tool is intended to help people make better choices in terms of how much spare time they might have to allocate to study. The third tool, ‘Who can I Ask?’, offers prospective flexible learners the opportunity to think about their support network and how they might garner support to help them successfully complete their studies. In Tool 4, ‘Am I Computer Ready to Learn?’, prospective flexible learners are given guidance on the necessary computer skills needed in higher education. They are also informed of the technology they will need, and the computer services offered by colleges and universities. The fifth tool, ‘My First Assignment’, navigates through a narrative relating to what it is like to plan out and develop a first assignment in higher education. Advice on how to start an assignment, develop a plan, break down a research question is also provided, with key elements within a plan being presented. Tool 6, ‘Head Start Online: First Steps to Flexible Study’, is a five week openly available online course that provides prospective flexible learners with key tips and lessons about how to prepare for studying at higher education level. This tool, which is built on a new MOOC platform, incorporates a number of the other tools within its structure. The seventh tool, ‘Study Tips for Me’, is designed to provide support for flexible learners from crowd sourced tips and suggestions from other flexible learners. This tool is based on the Tumblr platform. Finally, Tool 8, ‘Online Orientation’, takes a different form in providing a guide for those who wish to create an online orientation for new online/distance learners. This guide describes the elements that should be present in an effective online orientation for their program or institution. The tools can be viewed on the [project website](#), and six tools can be obtained from the project’s [Github webpage](#). The project has also produced a [guide](#) (Brunton, 2016) for the sector detailing the tools, their uses, the level of customisation needed for each tool, along with advice on how the tools can best be utilised as part of a strategic flexible learner socialisation strategy. A [transition plan audit tool](#) (Brunton, 2016b), was also produced to compliment the guide.

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