

Giving Flexible Learners a Head Start on Higher Education: Designing and Implementing a Pre-induction Socialisation MOOC

James Brunton^(✉), Mark Brown, Eamon Costello, Orna Farrell,
and Conor Mahon

National Institute for Digital Learning, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland
James.brunton@dcu.ie

Abstract. This paper reports on a five week pre-induction socialisation MOOC that facilitates successful transition into Higher Education for flexible learners. In this context a broad definition is adopted of flexible learners, which includes adult learners in part-time and/or online/distance education. A number of national and international reports have emphasised the importance of bringing more adult learners into higher education, and adult learners have a preference for flexible programmes. The MOOC targets prospective learners during early parts of the study life-cycle, when they are considering entry into higher education and may benefit from advice about how to effectively prepare. The MOOC utilises a number of the OERs developed by the Student Success Toolbox project, and combines these readiness tools with supporting materials in order to deliver a comprehensive pre-induction socialisation course. A small pilot ran from the 15th Aug–19th Sept 2016. 150 people enrolled with 50 going on to receive a certificate of completion. Those selected to take part in this pilot were prospective flexible learners planning to start courses in Ireland in 2016/2017 and a cohort of approximately 70 learners from Kiron, an organisation supporting refugees in accessing higher education. The feedback received, albeit limited by the numbers of respondents, indicates that a course that uses the OERs developed by the Students Success Toolbox project, can have a positive impact on prospective flexible learners.

Keywords: Flexible learner · Pre-induction socialisation · Student success · Retention · Digital readiness tools

1 Introduction

The Head Start Online MOOC emerged from the Student Success Toolbox (SST) project, which was funded by the (Irish) National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Building Digital Capacity fund. A suite of digital readiness tools were created through this project for use in preparing adults for online/distance or part-time study at higher education level, and Head Start Online utilized several of these tools to develop a unified, assistive resource for prospective

flexible learners. This MOOC aims to help flexible learners in the initial stages of the study lifecycle by addressing the salient issues of effective transitions and the bases for student success. Here flexible learners are represented by adults engaged in part-time or online/distance learning. Like many other MOOCs, Head Start Online is underpinned by an intention to widen access to education and be of assistance to higher education institutions [1].

Flexible learners are an extremely vulnerable proportion of the student population in that they have significantly lower completion rates than traditional on-campus students [2]. This highlights the need for Head Start Online to be readily available for higher education institutions worldwide in order to tackle this issue, as it poses problems on an international level. With many countries higher education student bodies consisting of up to 35% flexible learners [3], these disparities in completion rates represent a primary concern.

Head Start Online primarily aims to provide a useful, assistive resource for prospective/new flexible learners as they encounter key transition periods in the initial stages of the study lifecycle (i.e., thinking about study, making decisions, registration and the first few weeks of commencing study). Even though this period of time is vitally important for learners, it has been largely neglected in empirical research and relevant institution settings alike. Head Start Online directly tackles this pertinent issue through offering its target population expertly designed digital readiness tools alongside further resources as a support during these essential transitions.

2 Method

A design based methodological approach was harnessed in order to develop Head Start Online. This process is iterative in its nature; while evaluating an innovative intervention, it also systematically improves the innovation while providing design guidelines for succeeding relevant research and intervention formulation [4]. Further coinciding with the aims of this MOOC is design-based research driving to diminish the void between education research and practical real-world environments, be them online or traditional.

2.1 Literature Analysis

The first step was the conducting of a thorough analysis of the body of relevant empirical work; this was a necessity in order to discover what existing tools are working in relation to supporting flexible learners through the aforementioned important time period. Below are some of the key points from the full analysis of the literature [5].

Jones [6] notes that the literature indicates that students are most likely to leave in their year of entry. This is a long established fact [7–9]) but what has recently been added is the understanding that students who are actively supported over the course of this transition also develop the key academic skills needed to succeed in the longer run

[10, 11]. Given that students who exit will often not re-enroll [2], this highlights the importance of supporting students in the early stages of the study life cycle [12].

Personal circumstances are frequently and consistently listed in the literature as one of the top reasons flexible learners withdraw from study [13–15]. They may withdraw due to various reasons including employment demands, the needs of their dependents, workload, problems with finance, and organisation issues [15]. Poor course choice and poor support from friends and family are identified as triggers by McGivney [16], though older learners are less likely to pick the wrong course [17] and more likely to cite external circumstances and financial reasons for non-completion [16, 17]. Learners who drop out typically found study to be more work than expected [13, 15], and/or had believed that flexible study was going to be easier than attending an ‘on-campus’ programme [18]. To be successful, flexible learners need to be able to manage their time and self-regulate effectively, in order to both structure their study around their other responsibilities effectively, and make the most of the time available to them. If they cannot, they will fall behind in coursework. [19]. Ashby [19] found the top reason for withdrawal at the UK Open University was falling behind with coursework, followed by personal/family or employment responsibilities. It seems highly likely that the two are related, and the challenges around them could perhaps be better prepared for during the pre-entry period, for example by helping students to “calculate what is personally realistic during the path to enrolment” [13] (p. 12). The importance of time-management has also been emphasised by [20], who developed a simple time-management tool in the form of a ‘progress bar’ for students’ online learning activities. Flexible learners also need to be helped to appreciate the benefits of having good support networks as part of their studies [13, 21].

This process saw the discovery of several relevant tools. The usefulness of support measures (e.g., compulsory support surveys, orientation course, general messages of support, personal contact/interaction with students) is established [15]. Another suite of effective tools identified were discussion forum platforms, active emails, and time-limited lecture postings [22]; these were demonstrated to increase student satisfaction and enhance their chances of successful progression. Murphy et al. [23] stressed the beneficial impact of offering the necessary information to help course choice, early access to timetables, and activity based learning to improve academic ability for mature learners in the initial stages of the study lifecycle. In addition they stated providing entrants with a suitable digital environment to interact with their peers and existing mature learners has a positive impact on their experience. While some interesting tools emerged from the analysis, the amount of relevant tools identified was limited.

2.2 Database of Existing Tools

The next stage of the approach was the development of a database of existing digital readiness tools. The database was compiled from analysing websites of international universities in order to detect the readiness tools they provide for their prospective learners. Following this the identified tools were thematically coded according to their main function; this resulted in the following themes: (1) Course match; (2) Preparation for higher education; (3) Orientation; (4) Addressing personal circumstances;

(5) Community and (6) Satisfactory student experience. Evidently, the themes coincide with Jones' [6] principle factors that prevent student progression and lead to drop out when lacking.

2.3 Creation of Digital Readiness Tools

The digital readiness tools to be included in Head Start Online were then developed by academic teams working, in many instances, with a Dublin-based digital design company Fluid Rock. 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 (iv) language and framing of the tools in the world of the prospective learner. In terms of this last principle it was noteworthy that we found most of the existing tools to help facilitate successful transitions for flexible learners were couched in institutional language.

3 Structure of Head Start Online

A number of factors contributed to the presentation of this MOOC, including existing knowledge of creating credit-bearing online courses, alternative MOOCs that team members had participated in as learners, guidance from a contact in Moodle HQ, a design workshop delivered by Yishay Mor, and trial and error development while constructing the MOOC. Head Start Online was developed on a new MOOC platform called Academy, created by Moodle HQ. The development process embodied a design based approach, however reflection on the best methodology for developing the MOOC was needed. The core of the course involved the students engaging with the digital readiness tools developed by the Student Success Toolbox. Other resources were also specifically created for the MOOC, i.e. text and video content, Moodle activities, and discussion forums. Two examples of this content were videos of flexible learning graduates telling their stories of higher education, used to reinforce messages contained within the readiness tools, and a 'complete the sentence' Moodle activity that facilitated participants reflecting on who they were and their motivations for study.

The course is designed to run over a total period of five weeks. A welcome area is made available to those enrolled on the course prior to the official launch of week one. The welcome area consists of a course overview and provides guidelines to setting up a course profile. The estimated time commitment for participants is two hours per week; this varies according to the learner as there are also optional, additional activities that can be accessed. Every Monday during the five week period a new section of the course is launched and becomes accessible to participants. While this method is maintained for the duration of the course, participants do not have to adhere to this timing. They can complete the course at their own pace, or commence the course at a later date than its original launch. The course content remains accessible for two weeks following the end of the course's fifth week.

The five sections of the course are as follows: 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?

3.1 SST Digital Readiness Tools

Am I Ready for Study? Participants encounter this tool during Week Two, enabling them to self-assess if they are ready to commence flexible study. A quiz is presented to students, entailing the following six sections tackling pertinent issues: (i) Previous Study, (ii) Work and Family, (iii) Study Intentions, (iv) Study Skills, (v) Computer Skills and (vi) Work Habits. Participants are provided with personalised feedback upon completion of each section and the quiz in its entirety (e.g., “you probably need to talk with your close family and friends. It’s really important that they understand why you’re thinking about undertaking further study...”). Two forms of feedback are given from differing perspectives (i.e., the higher education institution and a past/present flexible learner).

Do I Have Enough Time? Situated in Week Three of Head Start Online is a self-reflective ‘life calculator’, assisting the learners in assessing the time they spend on certain activities during a typical week. This assists the participants on gaining a realistic perspective of whether or not they will be able to manage their time effectively to include study amongst life, work and family commitments. The ‘life calculator’ consists of six sections: (i) Work, (ii) Family, (iii) Household, (iv) Hobbies, (v) Leisure and (vi) Sleep. Finally participants are provided with feedback on whether they have adequate time to include study or if they may have to make some necessary adjustments. (e.g., You can probably go ahead and register for your course but don’t forget to talk with the staff and check the requirements for the particular programme of study you wish to undertake).

Who can I ask? Another tool placed in Week Three aims to get learners thinking about their available support network, and how they may receive the necessary support through their higher education degree. They are presented with advice on gaining support from Friends, Family, Employers, Universities and Other Students, and examples of student stories detailing individuals who are supported and other lacking in support are accessible. Furthermore, numerous typical student support boundaries matched with potential solutions and assistive support outlets are also demonstrated. (e.g., Problem: I am struggling with the technology on this course. Other Students Solution: Other students may be a good source of help with technology problems as they may have experienced similar problems themselves. However be careful not to share your user name and password with anyone.)

My Computer Skills: Am I Computer Ready to Learn? With this tool, placed in Week Four of the course, students hear from student voices in relation to the computer skills required for higher education. Upon commencing their interaction with this tool, the participant indicated their prior levels of computer skills, which influences their subsequent pathway. Information is provided regarding both the typical technology services offered by higher education institutions and the technology flexible learners tend to use. Student stories detailing first encounters with email services, online reading materials, Microsoft Word, and Microsoft PowerPoint are also provided. The main element of this tool is the quiz. The first section involves three fundamental questions yes/no questions, should a participant answer no to any of these they are directed to additional online resources designed to develop computer skills. The remaining students who answer yes to all three of the questions follow a different pathway and face questions regarding word processing, file management, and using the internet.

My First Assignment. The second tool contained within Week Four sees participants being guided once more by a student voice, however this time it relates to tackling that very first assignment in higher education. This tool also contains multiple navigation pathways based on participants' prior experience with higher level assignments. The development and planning of an assignment is covered and other students' views are provided in quotes throughout the tool. My First Assignment aims to allow prospective learners gain a sense of what it may be like to face an assignment early in their studies.

4 Learner Feedback/Results

In order to the gain knowledge of the efficacy of Head Start Online, participant feedback was sought from those enrolled during the soft pilot phase of MOOC development. As verified below, it is highly likely that learners will be positively impacted through their engagement with the course.

The pilot of Head Start Online was carried out over a five week period in 2016 from the 15th Aug to the 19th Sep. This was achieved through the utilisation of a new MOOC platform called Academy, created by Moodle HQ. This partnership resulted in Head Start Online being the first MOOC to be carried out on the new, developing platform.

4.1 Participants

In total 150 individuals enrolled on the course, with 45 of them failing to take further action in signing into the course. Of the remaining 105, 50 fully completed the Head Start Online pilot, receiving a certificate of completion. Participants in this soft pilot consisted of prospective flexible learners planning or thinking of commencing higher education course in Ireland in 2016 or the near future. Additionally, a cohort of roughly 70 prospective learners were recruited through collaboration with a German organisation Kiron, who are dedicated to supporting refugees in gaining access to higher education opportunities.

4.2 Procedure

Participant feedback was gathered through two separate methods.

Weekly Digital Readiness Tools Quiz. Firstly upon completion of the individual digital readiness tools within the five sections of the course (i.e., Am I Ready?, Do I have enough time?, Who can I ask?, My Computer Skills, My first assignment, and Study Tips for Me), participants were prompted to complete an optional feedback quiz assessing three aspects of the tool: (1) the usefulness of the resource, (2) the assistance it provided in preparing the learners, (3) how likely they are to follow the advice provided. A five-point Likert scale was used to gather responses (Strongly disagree-Strongly agree), where participants indicated their level of agreement to relevant positively worded statements (e.g., “I found this resource useful”).

End of Course Quiz. Additionally, participant feedback was sought at the end of Head Start Online. Participants were prompted to complete the quiz within the MOOC platform upon completion of the last week’s activities. The same five-point Likert scale method was harnessed here, with this concluding quiz assessing nine different aspects of the course: (1) decision to become a flexible learner, (2) readiness to become a flexible learner, (3) recommending the course to others, (4) time management ability, (5) awareness of sources of support, (6) appreciation of necessary higher education computer skills, (7) readiness to tackle a first assignment, (8) usefulness of graduate videos, (9) assistance in interacting with other prospective learners.

4.3 Results

Overall the feedback received was positive; indicating that Head Start Online, and its digital readiness tools, have a positive impact on prospective flexible learners.

Weekly Digital Readiness Tools. Response rates varied for each tool with a peak for “Tool 1- Am I ready?” in week one ($n = 28$), and the lowest for “Tool 7- Study Tips for Me” in the last week of the MOOC ($n = 11$). This is explained by the dropping out of some participants as the course progressed. Participants’ favourable reactions were observed consistently toward every tool (see Table 1).

Table 1. Percentage of participants reacting favourably (Strongly Agree or Agree) to digital readiness tools

Tool	Usefulness	Preparation	Follow advice
Am i ready?	96	79	100
Do i have enough time?	100	78.95	84
Who can i ask?	92	83	92
My computer skills	72	61	89
My first assignment	94	83	100
Study tips for me	82	82	100

End of Course Quiz. Of the 50 participants who completed the course, half ($n = 25$) provided overall feedback data. Again, positive feedback was received indicating the course is achieved the desired learning outcomes (see Table 2). Similarly, positive feedback was received in relation to the items relating to whether the course helped participant's decide to become a flexible learner, and whether participants would recommend the course to others.

Table 2. Percentage of participants reacting favourably (Strongly Agree or Agree) to end of course quiz questions ($n = 25$)

Question	%	Question	%
I feel more ready to become a flexible learner after taking this course	96	The course helped me appreciate the computer skills I would need for higher education	92
I would recommend this course to others	84	I now understand better how I would do an assignment in my first year	92
I now feel better able to manage my time	92	The videos of graduates helped me understand the flexible learning experience	88
The course developed my awareness of different sources of support	92	Helped me interact with flexible learners	60

The majority of respondents to the end of course quiz also indicated that the course developed their awareness of the different sources of support they may access as flexible learners. Respondents also indicated that the course helped them appreciate the skills that they would need to succeed as a flexible learner in higher education, for example computer skills and the academic skills needed to produce assignments. With regard to the additional content created for the MOOC, beyond the digital readiness tools developed by the Student Success Toolbox project, participants who completed the quiz responded positively towards the video content of flexible learning graduates used in the MOOC. There was a mixed response on the question of whether or not the course helped participants to interact with flexible learners, with only 60% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement and 16% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

5 Discussion

There is an indication, from the evaluation of the Head Start Online MOOC pilot, and the digital readiness tools contained with it, that these tools can improve prospective flexible learners' preparation for higher education study through the provision of active developmental supports, early in the study life cycle [10–12]. While it is acknowledged that the pilot of the MOOC involved relatively low participant numbers the feedback received indicates that this type of pre-induction socialization course can help prospective flexible learners to form realistic expectations about higher education study [13, 15, 18]. The MOOC makes prospective learners more aware of: the need to reflect on their life in order to plan around their personal circumstances [13–15]; the importance of managing their time [19, 20]; the need to have good sources of support during

their studies [13, 21]; and what skills they will need, e.g. study and computers skills, in order to stay on top of their studies in their first year [19]. The results from the Head Start Online pilot will inform future, full iterations of the MOOC, the data from which will help to fill an evident gap in the literature relating to the use of digital tools to facilitate flexible learner transition into Higher education.

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