

# Flexible Toolbox Project



Student Success Toolbox for Flexible Learners: Supporting Transitions from Thinking About Study to the First Few Weeks

**Website:** <http://www.studentsuccess.ie>

**Runtime:** February 2015 – January 2016

**Supported / Co-funded by:** National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning / Fund for Building Digital Capacity - €254K

**Partners:** Leader partner: National Institute for Digital Learning, Dublin City University. Supporting partners: Dundalk Institute of Technology, Maynooth University, Silgo Institute of Technology, Ireland

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## Short description of the initiative:

This Synergy Paper reports on an externally funded research and development project currently in progress in the Republic of Ireland. 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 study a broad definition is adopted of flexible learners, which includes adult, part-time and online/distance students. 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. Set against this backdrop and with support from the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education [<http://teachingandlearning.ie>], the project involves an initiative to address this problem by four partner institutions.

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 the foundations for student success start early in the study lifecycle and 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 online/distance study for the first time.

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 a minimum 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 will be informed by the literature review and institutional analysis completed in Phase Two.
- Phase Four involves piloting and evaluating the digital tools across the partner institutions. Based on feedback gathered 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.

**Main target groups of the project:** Flexible learners in the early stages of the study lifecycle

**Significant public results:** Eight digital tools will be produced as OERs that the Higher Education sector can use to enhance the readiness and success of flexible learners; a Digital Guide for Supporting Flexible Learners will be published to support these tools; a series of workshops will be offered to assist other institutions to adapt and implement the digital readiness and preparation tools; a comprehensive report will be published with a literature review on supports and interventions that can be developed to enhance the success of flexible learners.