Making Better Choices:
Self-regulative Tools for Flexible Learner Success

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Abstract: This paper describes two online readiness tools designed to help prospective students make better choices. These tools were developed to address the problem of effective flexible learner transitions into higher and continuing education. They target adult learners engaged in part-time or online/distance education during the initial stages of the study-lifecycle. Enhancing retention and completion rates of this group of life-long learners is a growing concern. After undertaking an audit of the range of institutional tools and supports available from traditional online/distance education providers, a Design-based research methodology was adopted to select, design and develop a total of eight online student readiness tools. The "Am I Ready for Study" and "Do I have Enough Time" tools outlined in this paper were based on a set of guiding principles, which seek to promote self-regulation as a core foundation for student success in the transition to higher education.

Introduction

The paper responds to the problem of effective transitions during the initial stages of the study lifecycle with a specific focus on flexible learners. In this context a broad definition is adopted of *flexible learners,* which includes adult learners engaged in part-time and/or online/distance education (Brunton, et. al., 2015). Enhancing retention and completion rates of this group of flexible learners has become a significant problem throughout the world, especially with the growth of new models of online learning (Simpson, 2009). 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 paper is on supporting flexible learners through key transitions in the early

stages of the study lifecycle—that is, thinking about study and making choices. A basic premise 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 higher education 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 the decisions prospective students make when considering part-time and/or online/distance study for the first time.

Project Background

The work described in this paper is part of the Student Success Toolbox project [www.studentsuccess.ie] funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education [http://www.teachingandlearning.ie]. The project involves four partner institutions: Dublin City University, Maynooth University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, and Institute of Technology Sligo. There are 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 workshops.

Methodology

Design-based research was adopted as the methodological approach utilized by the project team. The methodology provided an overarching framework that helped guide the design, development and evaluation of the digital readiness tools. Importantly, Design-based research aims to make a grounded connection between educational research and real-world contexts. It is an iterative process that does not just evaluate an innovative product or intervention, but systematically attempts to refine the innovation while also producing design principles that can guide similar research and development endeavors (Wang & Hannafin, 2005). In this respect the methodology is well suited to the development of digital solutions that can be adapted and customised by other institutions consistent with their original intent. Reeves (2006) emphasizes the iterative qualities of this methodology in his definition of Design-based research:

> "... complex problems in real contexts in collaboration with practitioners; integrating known and hypothetical design principles with technological advances to render plausible solutions to these complex problems; and conducting rigorous and reflective inquiry to test and refine innovative learning environments as well as to define new design principles."

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.

Design Principles

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 (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. This following section describes the first two tools we developed in accordance with these principles in order to help inform and scaffold the decisions of prospective flexible learners.

Am I Ready for Study?

In this first tool prospective flexible learners are presented with the opportunity to reflect and self-assess if they are ready to commit to part-time online/distance study. The tool involves a brief quiz, as shown in Figure 1, which is comprised of six sections addressing the following topics: (i) Previous Study, (ii) Work and Family, (iii) Study Intentions, (iv) Study Skills, (v) Computer Skills and (vi) Work Habits. Each section explores a particular issue relevant to the success of flexible learners, as identified from the literature review.

Figure 2: Example of Personalized Feedback

After answering each block of questions, personalized feedback is provided, and upon completion of the quiz the prospective learner is presented with an overall summary of their results and further personalized feedback. This feedback includes a visual representation of their responses, as illustrated in Figure 2. A key feature of the feedback is the deliberate use of two voices: (i) the institutional voice and (ii) advice from current or previous adult students with flexible learning experience. Importantly, each person is either informed they are ready for study based on their responses or encouraged to re-assess their situation and directed to a number of resource links to help them reflect on how they could enhance their readiness to succeed as a flexible learner. The feedback is quite clear when it appears the person would be at risk of failure but does not discourage people from pursuing study when their circumstances change. The tool also allows people to download a PDF version of their personalized feedback so they can use this when weighing up their decisions with family members, friends or even institutional learning and/or career advisors.
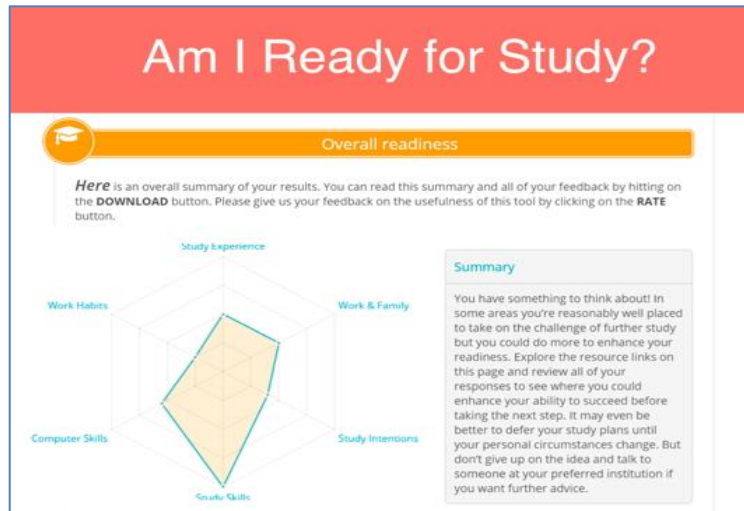
Figure 2: Example of Personalized Feedback

Do I Have Enough Time?

The second tool 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 calculator illustrated below in Figure 3 enables people to self-assess whether balancing study with their existing life, work and family commitments is realistically achievable.

Figure 3: Example of the Life Calendar

In completing the tool for a typical week each person is provided with tips on how to most accurately estimate how they currently spend their time under six sections: (i) Work, (ii) Family, (iii) Household, (iv) Hobbies, (v) Leisure and (vi) Sleep. On completion of the exercise people are given feedback on whether their personal circumstances are conducive to embarking on further study through a flexible mode of delivery. Again the feedback does not shy away from suggesting the person re-consider plans to study if they have very little spare time over and above work, family and other life commitments, as illustrated in Figure 4.
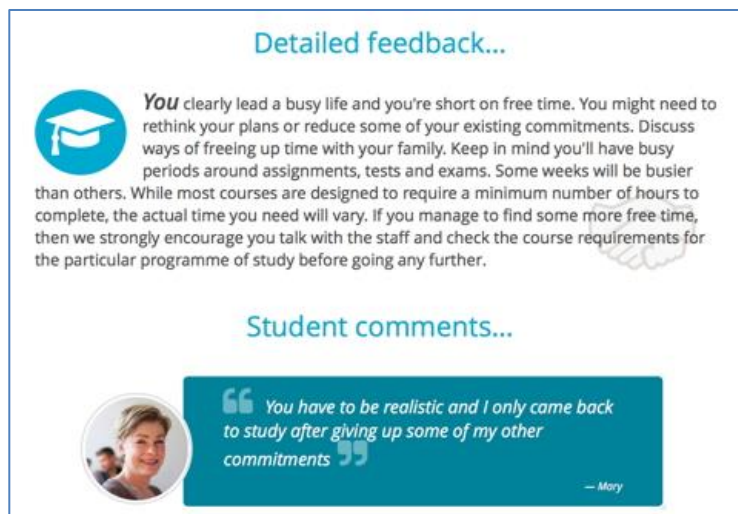
Figure 4: Feedback on Life Calendar Data

Conclusion

The Student Success Toolbox project is designed to address the problem of effective flexible learner transitions into higher and continuing education. Specifically it targets adults thinking about undertaking part-time and/or online/distance learning during the initial stages of the study-lifecycle. In total the project will produce a toolbox of eight digital readiness and preparation tools, although only the first two tools have been described in this paper. Notably, one of the other tools involves a free online course targeting prospective flexible learners, which incorporates several of the other tools so that participants will be able to interact with and receive even more personalized feedback from other people. The tools described in this paper will be openly available through the most accommodating Creative Commons Licence (CCL) for other institutions to take, augment, customize and use to enhance the success of flexible learners. Guidelines will also be provided alongside of the tools to help facilitate the effective implementation process. As we found a dearth of peer-reviewed evaluations of similar tools during the literature review and audit of other major online providers, the research team is committed to undertaking further research in this area. Our experience of developing these digital tools has reinforced the basic premise that foundations for student success are laid early in the study lifecycle.

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