



Student Success Toolbox Project

Guide for Supporting Flexible Learner Transition

James Brunton

National Institute for Digital Learning, Dublin City University

October 2016



NATIONAL FORUM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION



AN ROINN
OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA
DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION AND SKILLS



The Student Success Toolbox project is supported by the National Forum for Teaching and Learning Building Digital Capacity fund. It is a collaborative project involving Dublin City University (lead partner), Sligo Institute of Technology, Maynooth University and Dundalk Institute of Technology.

Authors can be contacted at:

T: +353 1 700 5329

Email: james.brunton@dcu.ie

Web: www.studentsuccess.ie

This work is published under the Creative Commons 4.0 Attribution Licence (CC-BY).



The Student Success Toolbox Project

The Student Success Toolbox 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 project a broad definition is adopted of flexible learners, which includes adult learners engaged in part-time and online/distance learning.

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 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.

Eight digital readiness and preparation tools were developed as Open Educational Resources (OERs) with a



[Creative Commons \(CC-BY\) licence.](#)

The eight tools can be viewed on the [project website](#), and can be obtained from the project's [Github webpage](#).

Am I Ready for Study?	Do I Have Enough Time?
Who Can I Ask?	My Computer Skills
My First Assignment	Head Start Online: First Steps to Flexible Study
Study Tips for Me	Online Orientation

Detailed descriptions of the tools can be found in the 'The Toolbox' section below. The tools have been developed in a generic form whereby any programme team, support unit or institution can adapt a tool or tools for their specific context and needs. This means that the majority of the tools need to be customised before they are ready to be used, for example there are blank areas for institution-specific resources to be inserted. The technical details relating to how tools can be customised can be found on the project's [Github webpage](#).

What is Student Success Toolbox?

The Student Success Toolbox is a suite of Html5 Widgets b applications are built as Single Page Applications and are d

You can check them out at <http://studentsuccess.ie/the-tool>

For more information on angular please refer to... <https://an>
<https://docs.angularjs.org/api/ng/directive/ngRepeat> etc...

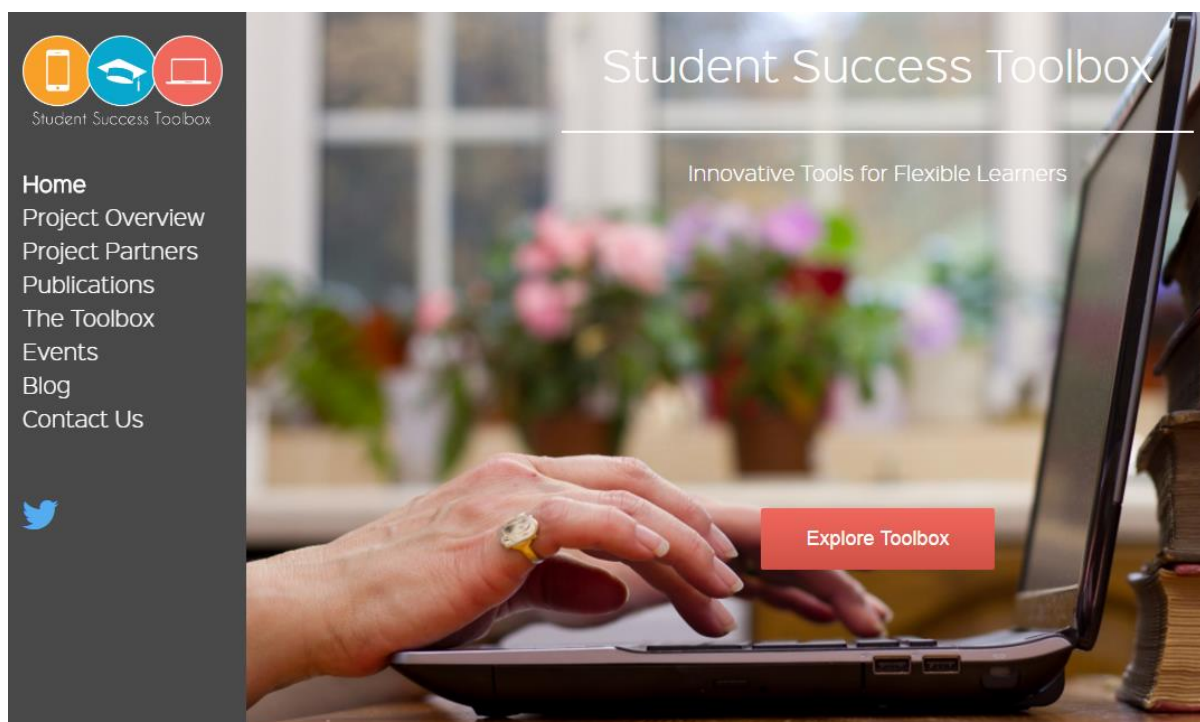
Prerequisites

IDE with html 5 support is advised, I'd suggest Netbeans [8

- [Node / npm](#) is used as the package management / build

Individual tools may be useful to a programme team or institution but the project team would suggest that the tools may most usefully be utilised in

combination as part of a strategic flexible learner socialisation plan. The tools should not be utilised in isolation but should be part of a programme team or institution's overall approach to recruitment, socialisation and teaching of flexible learners. The effectiveness of the tools will be diminished if they are set against inaccurate marketing materials or poorly planned first year teaching methods that do not support flexible learner transition into Higher Education. There is a separate Transition Plan Audit tool available from the [project website](#) that can be used to assess your programme or institutions approach to flexible learner transition.



Flexible Learner Transition - Key Points

Characteristics of Flexible Learners

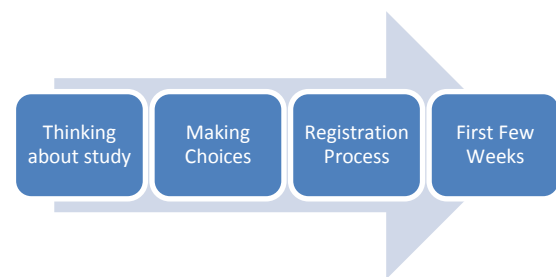
Tools being developed for flexible learners should be tailored to their (typical) characteristics:

- Time poor due to other time consuming responsibilities
- A need to negotiate with others for the time and space to study
- Anxious about going/returning to education
- Not accustomed to the norms of higher education institutions

Typical flexible learner personas should be created and used to reflect on flexible learner needs both generally and within the specific context of the institution and/or programme.

Study life-cycle

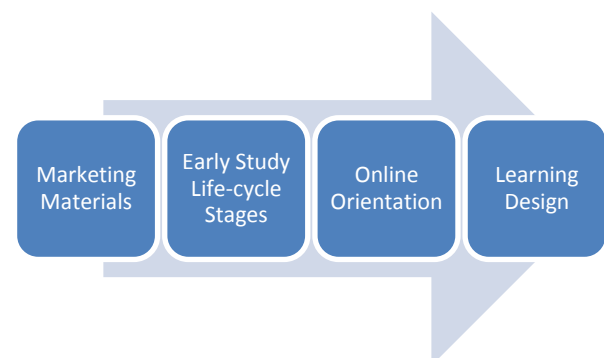
Effective interventions would ideally be targeted at at-risk learners, or those with characteristics that will potentially put them in the at-risk category before they reach the possibility of failure during the first few weeks.



This can be accomplished by targeting prospective or new flexible learners during the early stages of the study life-cycle: thinking about study; making choices; the registration process; orientation/induction; and the first few weeks.

A Strategic Approach

A strategic flexible learner transition plan should be used to direct a programme team or institution's overall approach to



recruitment, socialisation and teaching of flexible learners. The effectiveness of interventions with prospective and/or new flexible learners will be diminished if they clash with inaccurate marketing materials or poor learning design (especially in the

first year) that do not support flexible learner transition into Higher Education.

Student Success

The main areas of focus that should be tackled, relating to issues that flexible learners have in the early stages of the study life-cycle are:

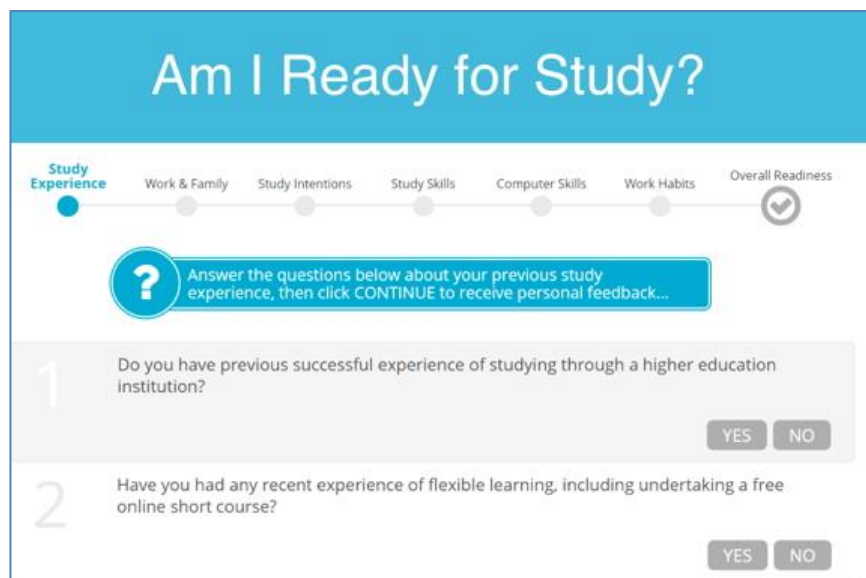
1. Balance of messages 'from the institution' and 'in the world of the learner'
2. Provide reassuring messages
3. Explicitly set realistic expectations
4. Provide positive role models
5. Provide socialisation opportunities
6. Orientation to physical & virtual campus
7. Introduce Study Skills



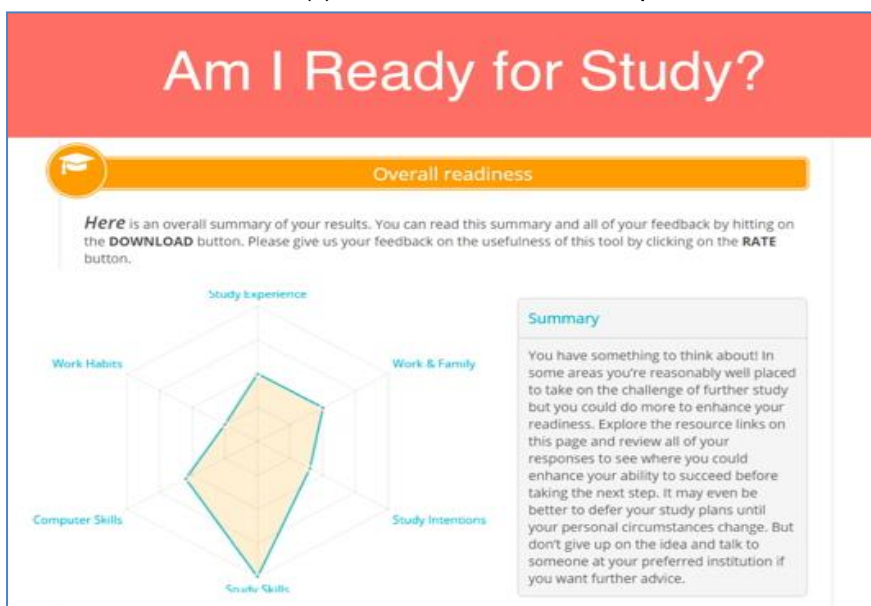
The Toolbox

Am I Ready for Study?

In the [Am I Ready for Study? 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 that 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.



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. 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.

The *Am I Ready for Study?* tool is designed for use at an early point of the study life-cycle, when an individual is considering the prospect of becoming a flexible learner. The feedback a user of the tool receives within the tool is framed on that basis, for example “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...”. However, the tool could be augmented such that it would fit in at later points in the study lifecycle. To accomplish this change the feedback that users receive would have to be altered to reflect the stage of the study life-cycle in which you wish to use the tool, for example “you probably need to talk with your close family and friends. It’s really important that they understand the decision you have made about undertaking further study...”.

Do I Have Enough Time?

The [Do I Have Enough Time? 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 enables people to self-assess whether balancing study with their existing life, work and family commitments is realistically achievable.

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.

Detailed feedback...



You clearly lead a busy life and you're short on free time. You might need to rethink your plans or reduce some of your existing commitments. Discuss ways of freeing up time with your family. Keep in mind you'll have busy periods around assignments, tests and exams. Some weeks will be busier than others. While most courses are designed to require a minimum number of hours to complete, the actual time you need will vary. If you manage to find some more free time, then we strongly encourage you talk with the staff and check the course requirements for the particular programme of study before going any further.

Student comments...



“ You have to be realistic and I only came back to study after giving up some of my other commitments ”

— Mary

The *Do I Have Enough Time?* tool is designed for use at an early point of the study life-cycle, when an individual is considering the prospect of becoming a flexible learner. The feedback a user of the tool receives within the tool is framed on that basis, for example “while most courses are designed to require a minimum number of hours to complete, the


actual time you need will vary. 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”. However, the tool could be augmented such that it would fit in at later points in the study lifecycle. To accomplish this change the feedback that users receive would have to be altered to reflect the stage of the study life-cycle in which you wish to use the tool, for example “While we recommend that you spend eight hours studying per week per module, the actual time you need will vary. Remember to include some flexibility in your study plan”.

Who Can I Ask?

The [Who Can I Ask?](#) tool 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. Through a series of information slides, users are made aware of how they can seek support from Friends, Family, Employers, Universities and Other Students. In these slides examples

On this home page you can click on each shape below to find out more about **Your Support Network**.

1. Select a Support Network



2. Alternatives

Perhaps you do not want to talk to anyone about your decision to study. It might help you to know that many people feel that way. Click [here](#) to find out more.

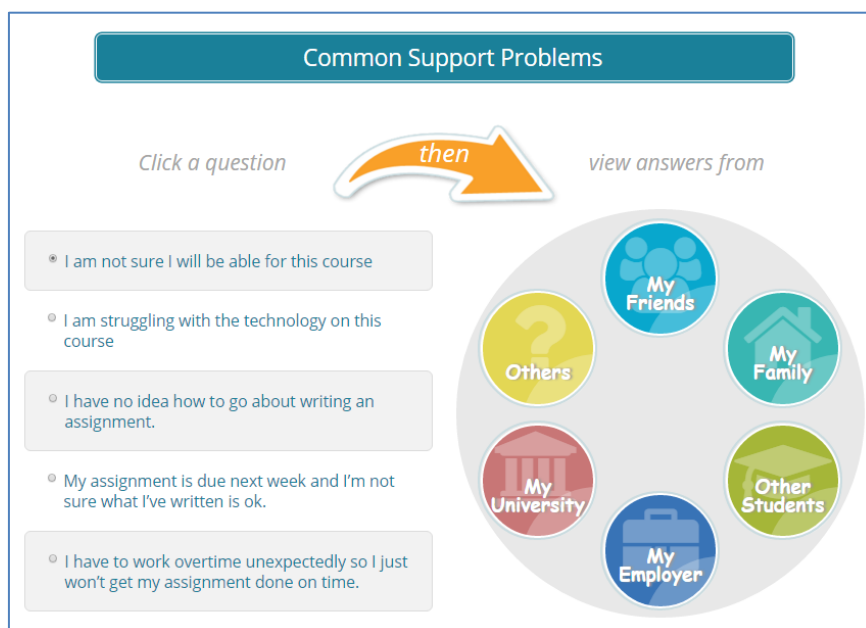
Alternatively, you might feel there is nobody you can talk to. If that sounds like your situation then click [here](#) to find out more.

3. When Finished

When you are finished exploring your support network click on **NEXT** to see some Common Support Problems

NEXT

of student support/non-support scenarios can be accessed by clicking on quotes presented throughout the tool. Furthermore, in the first part of the tool advice is offered for those who feel they would have a lack of support in their life and for those who feel they would not want to tell anyone in their life about their studies.



The *Who Can I Ask?* tool then offers students a set of common support problems: I am not sure I will be able for this course; I am struggling with the technology on this course; I have no idea how to go about writing an assignment; My assignment is due next week and I'm not sure what I've written is ok; I have to work overtime unexpectedly so I just

won't get my assignment done on time, and how various types of support networks might be able to help a learner experiencing that problem.

Within the Student Success Toolbox project the *Who Can I Ask?* tool is designed for use at an early point of the study life-cycle, when an individual is considering the prospect of becoming a flexible learner. However, the information presented to users of this tool is not explicitly tied to this study life-cycle stage. Therefore this tool can also be used with new flexible learners who are waiting to begin their studies, or as part of an 'on-entry' orientation.

My Computer Skills: Am I Computer Ready to Learn?

In the [My Computer Skills tool](#), through the guidance of a student narrator, prospective flexible learners are informed of the necessary computer skills needed in higher education. The student narrator's guidance is personalised based on their current computer skills, which a user indicates by choosing one of three scenarios. They are also informed of the technology they

Select the student you identify most with by clicking on their story below.

“ I rarely use a computer and I am not sure if I have the computer skills that I will need for college. What do I need to know? ”

“ I know how to use a computer but not sure how I would use it for learning. ”

“ I use computers everyday for work and I am confident that I have the necessary computer skills for learning, however I would like some information on college computer supports. ”

will need, and the computer services offered by colleges. Four student stories can also be accessed within the tool, relating to flexible learners' first interactions with email services, online reading materials, Microsoft Word, and Microsoft Powerpoint.

Tick which applies to you:

Yes *I can do this* ? *I may need help* No *I cannot do this*

Word Processing & File Management

I can create a new document/open an existing document Yes ? No

I can carry out basic document formatting, font size & style Yes ? No

I can use the cut, copy and paste functions Yes ? No

I can use commands such as undo, redo, backspace, delete Yes ? No

A computer skills quiz is also offered within this tool, allowing users to self-assess their current level of computer skills. The quiz opens with three questions. If a user answers no to any of these fundamental questions they move straight to a set of online services that can assist learners in improving their computer skills are

also. If a user answers yes to the first three quiz questions then they are presented with further questions relating to word processing, file management, and using the internet. A space has been created at the end of the tool where a set of resources specific to a particular institution can be inserted.

The *My Computer Skills* tool is best used at an early stage of the study life-cycle, either when an individual is considering the prospect of becoming a flexible learner or when they have made a decision to become a flexible learner and are waiting to begin their first year of studies. However, the information presented to users of this tool is not explicitly tied to these study life-cycle stages and so could be used at later stages, for example as part of an 'on-entry' orientation. This tool requires some customisation before it can be used. Audio can be created for the four student stories in the tool, or the audio option can be removed. The resources section at the end of the tool needs to be populated with relevant links for your institution.

My First Assignment

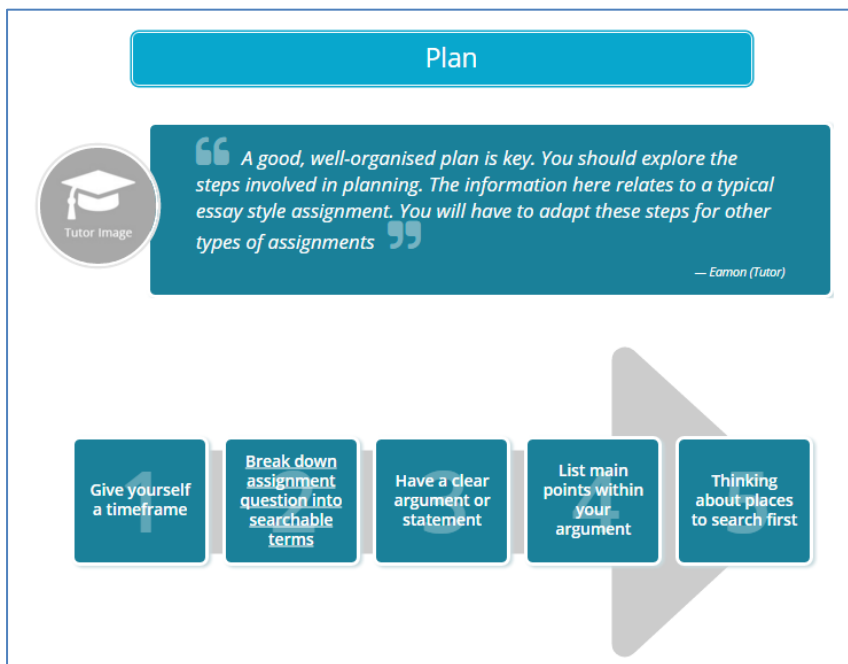
In the [My First Assignment tool](#), through the guidance of a student narrator, prospective flexible learners navigate through a narrative relating to what it is like to plan out and develop a first assignment in higher education. Four different navigation pathways are available through this tool pending

on the user's indicated previous experience with developing higher education study skills.

Choose your level of experience on writing assignments below.
Read how other students with similar experience approached that first assignment.

COMPLETE BEGINNER WILLING BEGINNER SOME EXPERIENCE COMPLETELY CONFIDENT

? What are assignments?



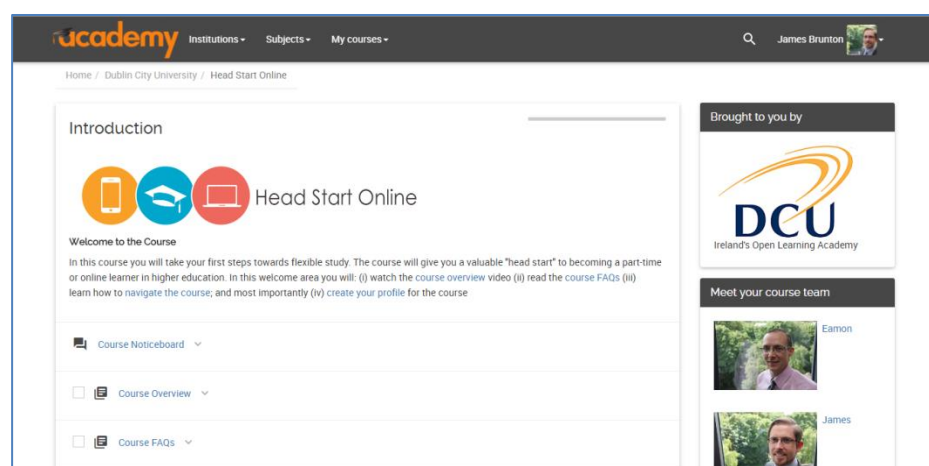
Advice on how to start an assignment is given, for example reading over the assignment instructions and course notes, and talking to others students/the tutor. Information relating to the development of an assignment plan, and how to find, evaluate and use information to create a good assignment is also given. Additionally a series of student orientated quotes are

readily accessible throughout the tool in order to give users a further sense of what it is like to tackle a first assignment in higher education. A space has been created at the end of the tool where a set of resources specific to a particular institution can be inserted.

The *My First Assignment* tool is best used at an early stage of the study life-cycle, either when an individual is considering the prospect of becoming a flexible learner or when they have made a decision to become a flexible learner and are waiting to begin their first year of studies. However, the information presented to users of this tool is not explicitly tied to these study life-cycle stages and so could be used at later stages, for example as part of an 'on-entry' orientation. This tool requires some customisation before it can be used, in that the resources section at the end of the tool needs to be populated with relevant links for your institution.

Head Start Online: First Steps to Flexible Study

This [Head Start Online tool](#) is a five week MOOC that provides prospective flexible learners with advice on how to prepare for studying at higher education level as a flexible learner. 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?

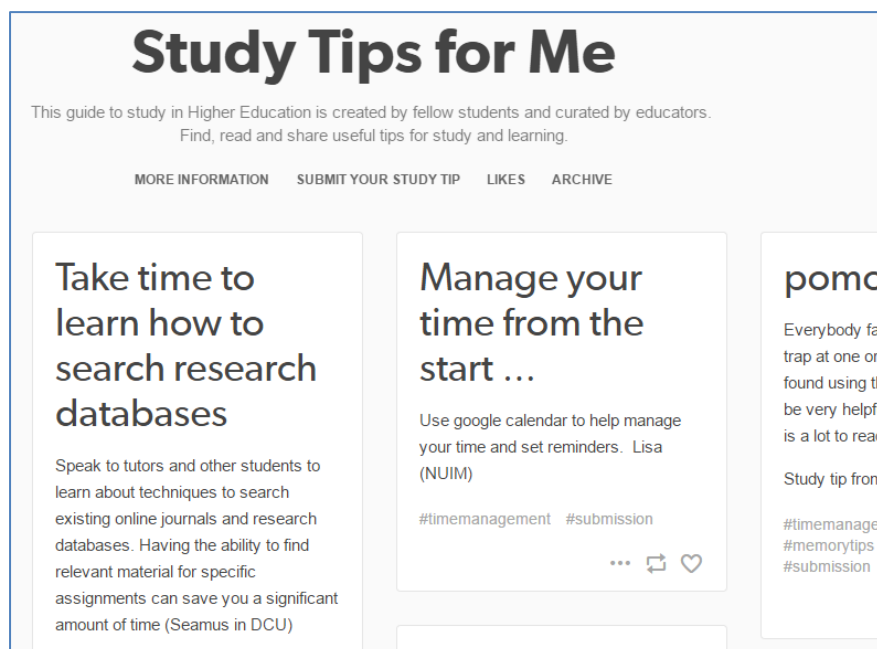


This tool incorporates a number of the other tools within its structure. This allows the MOOC to aid prospective learners in: assessing their readiness for higher education; calculating how much time they have available in their lives to study; examining what supports they have to help them overcome common problems; learning about computer; and about the study skills required to study successfully.

Additional content (text, audio and video), activities and facilitated online discussion forums, unique to this tool are also used to help prepare prospective flexible learners. The Head Start Online MOOC is hosted on a Moodle-based MOOC platform, DCU Academy.

Study Tips for Me

This [Study Tips for Me tool](#) is designed to provide crowdsourced support for flexible learners



from other flexible learners. The site is based on a social media platform, Tumblr, and addresses topics such as developing a healthy study/life balance, how best to study, and how to prepare. Flexible learners are free to post any tips they wish to give other flexible learners. These tips are then reviewed by a moderator and approved for

publication on the *Study Tips for Me* page. This allows prospective or new flexible learners to get good, practical advice from those that have come before them. It also allows prospective or new flexible learners to socialise, asynchronously, with those existing flexible learners, to get a sense of those other flexible learners. Through encouraging interaction between

students in this manner it is thought it will benefit all students in overcoming challenges and developing suitable plans for study.

The *Study Tips for Me* tool developed by the Student Success Toolbox project is an exemplar of what is possible to accomplish using this type of social media platform to harness support from existing flexible learners for prospective or new. This exemplar has been designed such that the materials posted are generic and beneficial for any flexible learner and discipline or course specific content has not been included. However, the primary purpose of creating the *Study Tips for Me* tool was not to create the tool itself but to demonstrate how such a tool can be built. This type of social media based tool can be used in many different ways. As long as there are enough students to generate the desired content and a moderator to view and approve the content submitted then this approach can be used for broad uses, such as in the exemplar tool, or for specific discipline or course uses.

The *Study Tips for Me* tool can be used at any stage of the study life-cycle. Within the scope of this project the *Study Tips for Me* tool can be used when an individual is considering the prospect of becoming a flexible learner, when they have made a decision to become a flexible learner and are waiting to begin their first year of studies, and/or as part of an 'on-entry' orientation.

Submit your Study Tip

Write a message to a learner who is about embark on a course of study at third level for the first time. Share with them a tip that you would have liked to have when you started out or an experience that has helped form you as a learner.

So tell us what works for you and why. Some ideas to get you thinking are to:

Include a photo of your desk at home or in the library, your notebook, your computer or any place or thing that you associate with having learning successfully. Maybe share a link to a useful site that you have used to help you study. Maybe share an inspiring quote that has motivated you. You could even record a short video with your advice for learning.

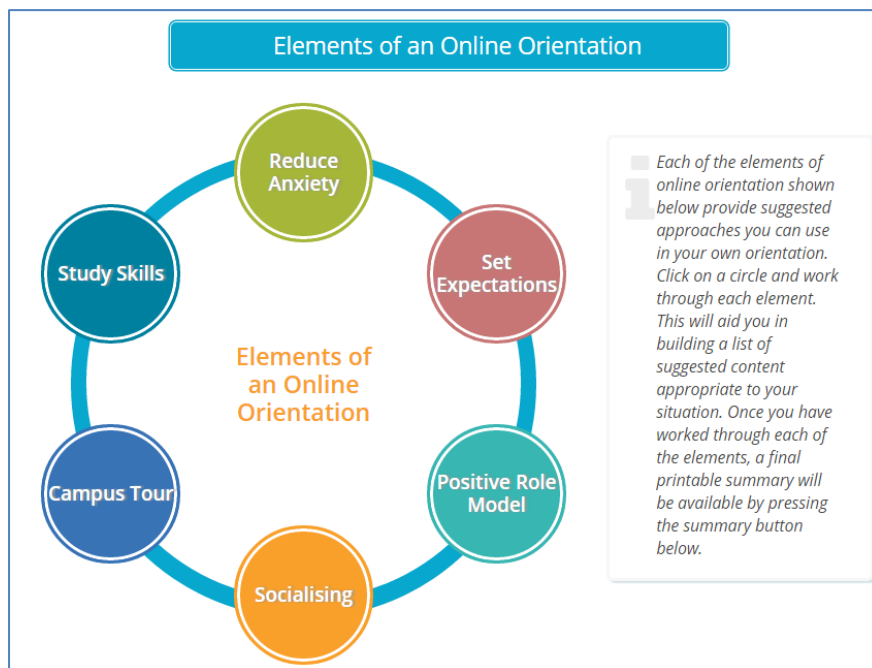
After you submit your tip, we will review it before publishing. Include your name and email address, so you can be credited and contacted if necessary.

Text		Name (required)	Email (required)
Title			Optional

The exemplar tool that has been produced by the Student Success Toolbox project cannot be used by others, as what we want to share with others is how to create such a tool. Before you create this type of tool you will first need a plan for who your tool will be aimed at and for what type of crowdsourced advice, tips etc. you wish to gather in your tool.

Online Orientation

As an online orientation, at the beginning of the academic year, would necessarily be unique to that programme or institution the [Online Orientation tool](#) takes a different form from some of the other tools produced by the Student Success Toolbox. The *Online Orientation* tool is created as a guide for those who wish to create an online orientation, whether they are academics or those within service units in an institution.



The *Online Orientation* tool describes the elements that should be present in an effective online orientation and then gives examples of different approaches to including that element in an online orientation. The *Online Orientation* tool then facilitates you in building up a plan for how they would create an online orientation for their programme or institution. To build up such a plan you need to know what tools,

skills, resources and/or supports you have available to produce an online orientation, or be willing to reflect on these issues before moving forward with building your online orientation. For example, does you have the capability (skills, equipment, supports etc.) to record and produce video content for your orientation? If not you may still be able to develop an online orientation based on text, audio files and online activities. Another important factor is to assess what current orientation materials and activities are available to new flexible learners and how the new online orientation can utilise, or align with, these materials and/or activities.

Reduce Anxiety ('Entry Shock') Video 2

In This Section: Video 1 Video 2 Text 1 Text 2 Activity 1 Activity 2 Summary

From Graduate & Current Online Tutor/Writer perspective

Dr Anne Markey
Former Distance Education Student
Current Online Programme Tutor and Writer

Models of Implementation

Use of Individual Tools

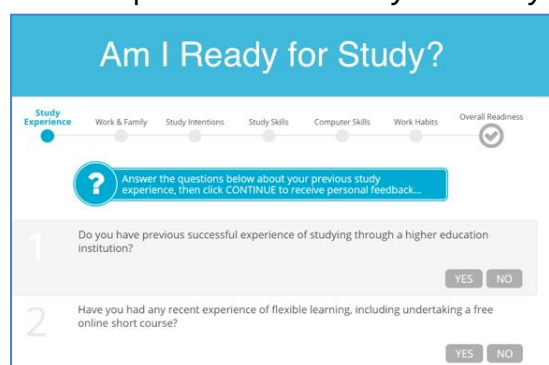
Individual tools may be useful to a programme team or institution to target the particular issue that needs to be addressed, whether that is time management or awareness of the need for computer skills. For example the *Do I Have Enough Time?* Tool could be used



by a programme team to highlight issues of time management to new flexible learners.

Tools in Combination

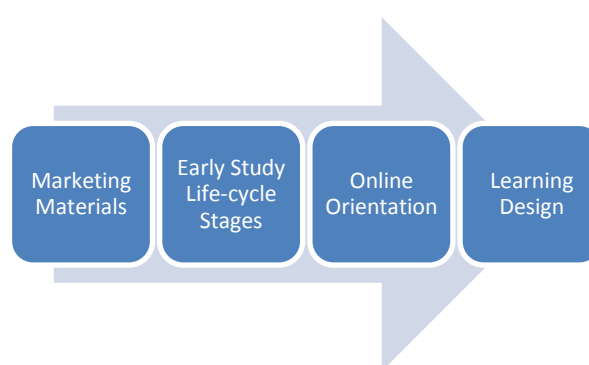
The Student Success Toolbox project team would suggest that the tools may more usefully be utilised in combination. For example the *Am I Ready for Study?*



Self-readiness quiz touches on a number of important areas of concern for new flexible learners, and aids them in reflecting on how these issues do/may

impact on their plans to study. Other tools can be used to then follow up on these areas of concern in more depth, facilitate further reflection and reinforce key messages and advice, for example: *Do I Have Enough Time?* for time management; *Who Can I Ask?* for support networks; *My Computer Skills* for computer skills; or *My First Assignment* for Study Skills.

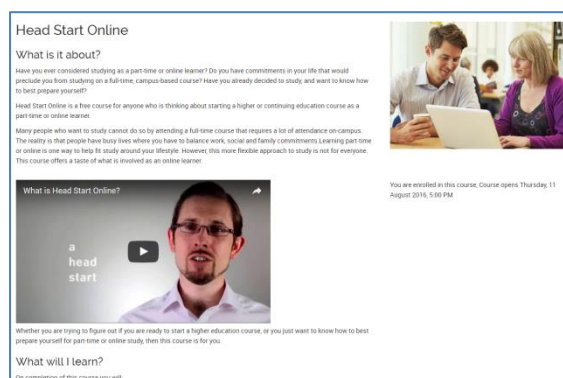
The Tools can most usefully be utilised not only in combination but as part of a strategic flexible learner transition plan, as part of a programme team or institution's overall approach to recruitment, socialisation and teaching of flexible learners. The effectiveness of the tools will be diminished if the messages they contain clash with inaccurate marketing materials or poor learning design (especially in the first year) that do not support flexible learner transition into Higher Education.



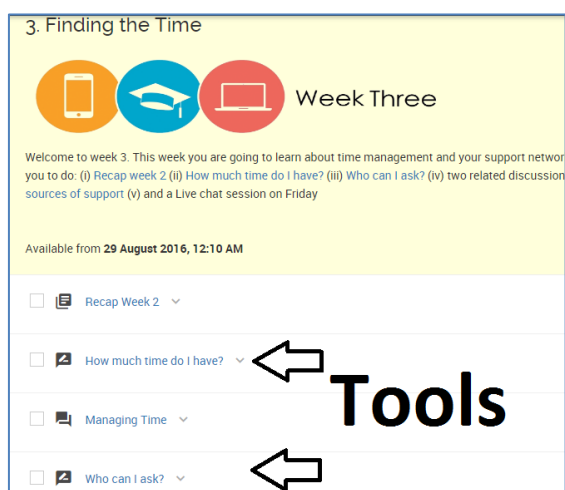
There is a Transition Plan Audit tool available from the [project website](#) that can be used to assess your programme or institution's overall approach to flexible learner transition.

Example 1. Head Start Online: First Steps to Flexible Study

The *Head Start Online MOOC*, hosted on a Moodle-based MOOC platform (DCU

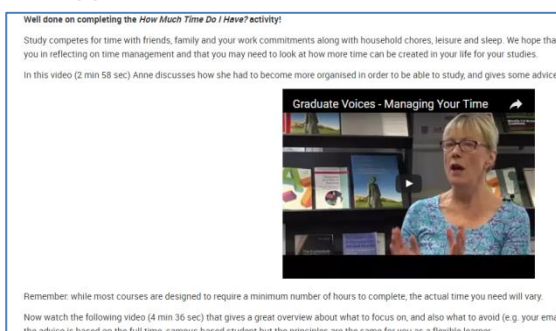


Academy), incorporates a number of the tools within its five week structure. This allows the MOOC to aid prospective learners in: assessing their readiness for higher education; calculating how much time they have available in their lives to study; examining what supports they have to help them overcome common problems; learning about computer; and about the study skills required to study

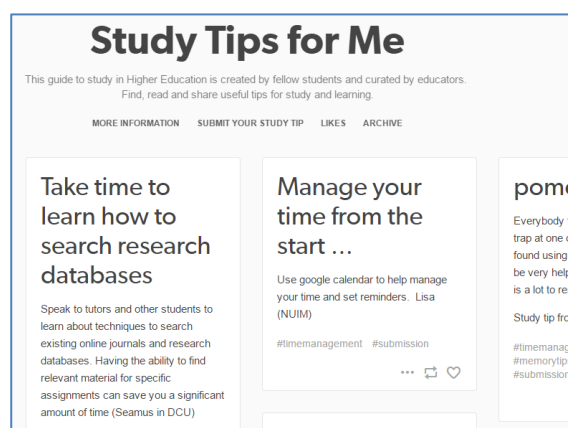


successfully. In developing this MOOC additional content (text, audio and video), activities and facilitated online discussion forums, unique to this tool are also used to help prepare prospective flexible learners. This allowed the MOOC to create a structure within which the key messages

imparted by the tools were expanded and reinforced by other content and activities. For example week three of the MOOC focused on time management and sources of support for flexible learners. At the heart

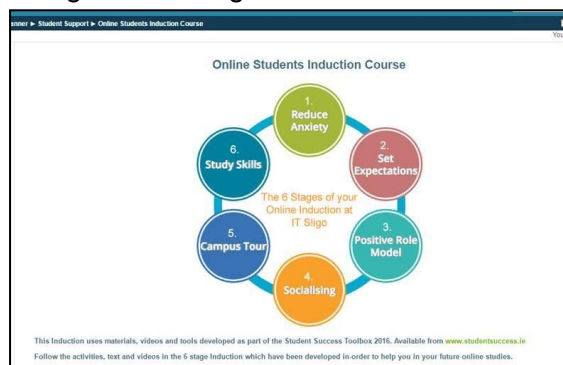


of week three were the *Do I Have Enough Time?* and *Who Can I Ask?* tools, but the key messages on time and support were echoed in video content that appeared after the tools were used, and in related discussion forums. *The Study Tips for Me* tool was also highlighted in Week 3 to show how other learners are a source of support.



Example 2: Online Learner Socialisation in IT Sligo

IT Sligo has implemented the tools in a number of different ways. The tools were presented at an online learners Induction, which was live streamed so students abroad, or who couldn't attend also learned about the tools. The tools were brought together in an



'Online learners induction' course in Moodle, which was designed using the *Online Orientation* tool in order to address key areas, for example reducing anxiety, setting expectations etc.

All new students are introduced to the tools during induction. Part of the induction involves breakout activities where student go to computer labs and familiarise themselves with Moodle, part which was to use the online induction course. This is a comprehensive flexible learner socialisation course based upon the 6 stages highlighted in the Online Orientation tool. The course uses a combination of the toolbox tools and videos created as part of a separate student orientation toolkit.

The toolbox tools on their own, rebranded for IT Sligo, are available on the [main website via 'Supports for New students'](#).

The screenshot shows the 'Student Success Toolbox' website. The header includes the title 'Student Success Toolbox' and a brief description of its purpose: 'The aim of the Student Success Toolbox is to support transitions from thinking about study to the first weeks of college particularly for flexible learners (undergraduate adult, part-time and online distance students)'. It also mentions that a suite of digital tools has been created to assist flexible learners by helping them assess their own readiness, provide feedback and lay the foundation for successful programme completion. The project is supported by the National Forum for Teaching and Learning Building Digital Capacity Fund, a collaborative project involving Dublin City University, Sligo Institute of Technology, Maynooth University and Dundalk Institute of Technology.

Below the text, there is a section titled 'The Toolbox' with four circular icons representing different tools:

- Tool 1: Am I Ready for Study?
- Tool 2: Do I Have Enough Time?
- Tool 3: Who Can I Ask?
- Tool 4: My Computer Skills

On the right side of the page, there is a vertical banner with the text 'PROGRESS YOUR CAREER' and 'Download your Guide to Online Learning at IT Sligo'.

Below the toolbox section, there is a testimonial from Rachel: 'My ability to succeed really depended on finding enough time for study in my busy life...'. At the bottom, there is a 'START' button and a footer with social media icons, a privacy policy link, and the IT Sligo logo.