



(Re)developing an online pre-entry course to support student transition into higher education

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ABSTRACT

Students entering higher education must possess the skills to navigate the digital landscape. In 2019 the Bloomsbury Learning Exchange (BLE) created an online 'Digital Skills Awareness' Course (DSAC), designed to improve incoming students' awareness of the digital skills required for them to succeed in their studies. The DSAC was disseminated – via mailing lists, conferences, and word of mouth – to colleagues working at universities across the United Kingdom (UK). Interested individuals could download and integrate the DSAC into their own institutional Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). To date, 58 colleagues have signed up to download a copy of the course for their students. However, it is unknown how many versions of the course have been successfully implemented. Students' perceptions of the DSAC implemented at one institution (University of Glasgow) have been positive. However, we do not have any understanding of staff members' experiences of adapting and integrating the course for their students. This 'On The Horizon' article reflects on the development of the DSAC, the outcomes to date, and describes next steps to evaluate staff experiences of adopting the course in their context.

Keywords: digital skills, transition, student induction, online learning, open educational resources

Background

Entry into higher education is a pivotal transition for students (Cheng et al., 2023). A key element of a successful transition into higher education is the development of the skills and knowledge to be able to competently navigate the digital landscape (Jisc, 2022a). Upon enrolment, today's students must be able to utilise institutional Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and use digital tools to, for example, access course materials, interact with peers or submit coursework. There is an expectation that students will be fluent in digital literacies on entry to university, but research shows this to be variable (Smith et al., 2020). Thus, it is important that all students entering higher education receive relevant training and access to digital skills support to get the most out of their learning.

Advances in digital technology in higher education were initially driven by technological advances, and were most recently expedited by the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 (Nordmann et al., 2020). The global overnight 'pivot' to online remote learning necessitated the use of digital tools that many staff and students were unfamiliar with. Now, in a 'post-pandemic era', many of the adaptations made during the pandemic have remained, such as remote working, hybrid meetings and blended learning. Blended delivery of teaching and learning – a mix of on campus face-to-face and online – is increasingly the norm in higher

education, with research publications on this topic doubling during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bozkurt, 2022). In 2021-22, 42% of students surveyed by Jisc said that their taught classes were delivered using a blended model (Jisc, 2022a).

Studies have found that undergraduate students predominantly use digital software for fundamental tasks whilst at university such as organising their time, (re)watching recorded lectures and gathering information (Henderson et al., 2017; Jisc, 2022a). Similarly, doctoral students report using digital technologies to manage, store and analyse data, as well as maintain their professional profile (Gouseti, 2017). It is therefore clear that whilst most students are not using digital technologies to 'transform' their university experience, the ability to navigate digital systems and use digital tools is essential for our students to succeed in higher education, and on into their professional careers.

If we are to support good-quality blended learning, staff must also be digitally literate. International research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic identified 'lack of expertise' among university staff as the biggest barrier to online teaching (Laufer et al., 2021). And while access to digital devices is high, fewer than half (44%) of teaching staff surveyed by Jisc in 2021-21 received digital skills support relevant to their role (Jisc, 2022b). Open Educational Resources (OERs), generally licensed under Creative Commons (<https://creativecommons.org/>), offer an alternative to in-house development of digital resources for teaching and learning. Understanding where and how OERs are being adopted or re-purposed in higher education, particular with regards to staff needs for implementation, is crucial to discern the utility of such resources.

This 'On The Horizon' piece outlines one initiative to help students develop their digital literacies on entry to university, reflects on the outcomes of the initiative, and sets out next steps to conduct a national survey of staff who adopted a similar initiative across the United Kingdom (UK).

The Digital Skills Awareness Course

The Bloomsbury Learning Exchange (BLE; <https://www.ble.ac.uk/>) is a partnership of six higher education institutions in London. The BLE brings together expertise to share good practice and enable collaboration in digital education and technology-enhanced learning projects. Two of the authors of this 'On The Horizon' piece, Nancy Weitz and Sarah Sherman, work at the BLE and were the initial developers of the online course described herein.

A

Student Digital Skills Survey

In advance of creating a new pre-enrolment course on Digital Skills for students, we would like to get your view on the skills of first year students when they arrive at your institution.

* Required

1. What digital skills do you expect your students to have when they arrive at your institution? *

Your answer

2. Which digital skills do they routinely lack when they start? *

Your answer

Name *

Your answer

Email

Please include your email address if you are willing to be contacted about your answers.

Your answer

Institution *

Birkbeck

LSHTM

RVC

SOAS

UCL

University of London

Other:

B

My Digital Skills Survey

We're creating a course on Digital Skills for new students before they start University. Your own experience and advice would be very helpful.

* Required

1. What digital skills did you have when you arrived at University? *

By 'digital skills', we mean all sorts of things that you might do with a desktop computer, tablet or mobile.

Your answer

2. What digital skills did you need for University that you didn't have? *

Please also include the skills that you thought you had but weren't really sufficient.

Your answer

3. How did you acquire these additional or improved skills? *

Your answer

4. What advice about digital skills would you give to new students before they start University? *

Your answer

Email

Please include your email address if you are willing to be contacted about your answers.

Your answer

Which is your institution? *

Birkbeck

Figure 1 A) The 'Student Digital Skills Survey' was disseminated to staff in the Bloomsbury Learning Exchange (BLE) in 2018 to assess their views of students' digital skills upon entering higher education. B) 'My Digital Skills Survey' asked students to reflect on their own digital skills and to share advice. The results of both surveys were used to inform the development of the Digital Skills Awareness Course (DSAC).

We wanted to equip students with the key capabilities required to support them in learning and successfully achieving their qualifications. In achieving this aim, the BLE set out to create a generic Digital Skills Awareness Course (DSAC) suitable for undergraduate, postgraduate and distance learners that could be imported into an institution's own virtual learning environment where it is localised.

In 2018, the BLE established a working group of members working in learning technology and other student support services and roles (e.g. library), who were instrumental in narrowing down the specific areas and topics that should be addressed in the course. We next undertook rounds of consultation with staff and students from the six partner institutions to establish proof of concept (Figure 1, above). From here, Nancy Weitz, primarily, designed and wrote a generic course which promoted the *awareness* of the key digital skills needed for students to succeed in their studies. Subsequently, in 2019, the DSAC was rolled out under creative commons licensing as an open educational resource (OER) course for use across UK higher education institutions (Creative Commons, n.d.).

Course rollout and adoption

The DSAC was initially advertised at the UCISA (Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association) 'Spotlight on Digital Capabilities' conference, and subsequently disseminated to BLE partner institutions by press release, and more widely via email mailing lists such as the Association for Learning Technology (ALT; <https://www.alt.ac.uk/>). Further dissemination took place by word of mouth and advertising on the BLE webpage.

Colleagues interested in finding out more could access a demo version of the DSAC to experience it for themselves. To download a copy of the course, colleagues were asked to sign a license agreement stipulating that course adoptees adhere to the Creative Commons License BY-NC-SA 4.0 (Creative Commons, n.d.) (Figure 2). Course adopters next received a back-up version (copy) of the DSAC to upload and integrate into their own institutional virtual learning environment, alongside support documents such as a ‘course map’ Word document.

To date, 58 license agreements have been signed, with corresponding course copies sent out in each case. This means that there have been 58 *intentions* to adopt the course, however at this stage we are unable to state how many individuals or institutions are using it. All individuals who signed the license agreement were added to a community of practice mailing list, as a means to share course updates and contact all adopters of the course.

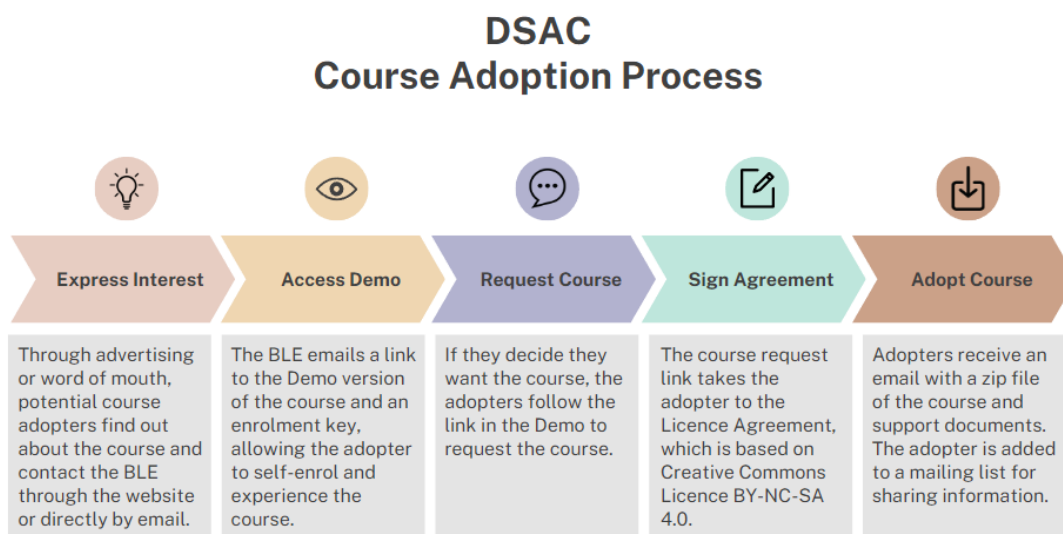


Figure 2 Potential course adopters learned about the Digital Skills Awareness Course (DSAC) through advertising or word of mouth. The next steps for individuals interested in adopting the course for students at their institution are illustrated in the flowchart.

Course impact: student perspectives

The DSAC was rolled out in 2019, and since then has been adopted by numerous institutions across the UK to support students’ transition into higher education. Kirsty McIntyre, an author of this piece, was an early adopter of the DSAC to support undergraduate medical students at the University of Glasgow, first implementing the course in September 2019. Kirsty evaluated students’ perceptions of the DSAC year on year using a voluntary online experience survey and, as a result of this feedback, has made iterative changes to create what is now a bespoke ‘Becoming A Medical Student’ course for their students. The implementation, challenges and lessons learned from implementing the DSAC in this context has been discussed fully elsewhere (McIntyre, 2020; McIntyre & O’Neill, 2022).

Students’ experiences of the adapted DSAC this academic year (2022-23), shared in response to open text questions exploring factors that affected their engagement with the course and what information (if any) they would like to see included in future, are illustrated in the comments below:

I think everything currently included in the course satisfied my questions, explaining online tools such as Moodle/ Microsoft apps/timetables etc was massively helpful

... thought the advice was really helpful on this course. Thank you. I feel much more prepared for classes and revision. The links to helpful apps and websites was great.

Thank you for creating the course, it was truly a fantastic and immersive start to medical school and answered so many questions I had prior, such as how to access the university wifi [...] was vastly appreciated!

Generally I found everything on the BAMS course to be extremely helpful and I will be referring back to it throughout my time at medical school I'm sure. As a graduate there were definitely parts to it that I may have known (such as email etiquette for example) but otherwise the course did give a great sense to how this differs from my first degree. It makes me feel much more prepared going into week 1 even though I thought I may have been prepared, this course showed me I was only a little bit.

It seemed like a good way to get used to the online systems in place in Glasgow

Next steps

Whilst there have been published evaluations of students' perspectives of the DSAC (McIntyre, 2020; McIntyre & O'Neill, 2022), we currently do not know how many of the 58 signed license agreements have led to course implementation, nor how many institutions and therefore students, these represent.

Our next steps are therefore to conduct a national survey to explore how and where the DSAC has been implemented. We aim to survey members of the DSAC mailing list to understand who has adopted the course, and for how many degree programmes and students.

Following this, we plan to conduct semi-structured interviews to explore colleagues' experiences of implementing the DSAC for their students. Interviews will investigate the support that staff received either at their institution or through the DSAC community of practice mailing list. Finally, interviews will explore how the DSAC has been adapted for specific student cohorts: a previous study comparing two cohorts of students at the University of Glasgow found that this is necessary to promote student engagement with the course (McIntyre & O'Neill, 2022).

We anticipate that these data will improve our understanding of how the DSAC has been implemented across the UK and inform future course development and support strategies.

Biographies

Kirsty McIntyre is a lecturer in the School of Medicine at the University of Glasgow. Her scientific background is in placental physiology and women's health. Currently, Kirsty's scholarly work focuses on student transition into higher education and patient involvement in medical research and practice. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3224-7043> Twitter: @_kirstymcintyre

Nancy Weitz is a digital education specialist, working (through her company Architela) with the Bloomsbury Learning Exchange to lead online course creation and other digital learning projects. In her thirty-year

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Sarah Sherman is the Director of the Bloomsbury Learning Exchange, which promotes digital learning strategies and practices for its institutional partners. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA), a Fellow of the Centre for Online and Distance Education and a former Trustee of the Association for Learning Technology. ble.ac.uk ; Twitter: @BLE1

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