

## ***My Maynooth on Moodle* - Introducing a year-long digital student transition programme.**

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### ABSTRACT

This *On the Horizon* piece outlines the development and early implementation of the *My Maynooth on Moodle* programme: a year-long, digital orientation initiative designed to support first-year undergraduate students' transitions into university. Developed in response to the university's Student Success Strategy, the programme combines asynchronous, modular content with student-led video resources to foster engagement, belonging, and confidence. This paper reflects on the co-creation process, early deployment, and lessons learned, offering recommendations for institutions seeking to enhance their orientation and transition support through digital means.

**Keywords:** virtual learning environment, student transition, co-creation, online learning, orientation

### Background and context

Beginning higher education represents a pivotal transition in a student's academic and personal development. For many, this period involves not only the assumption of new personal and academic responsibilities but also a fundamental shift in identity and belonging (Schuster, 2019; Stokoe et al., 2024). This time has been likened to a culture shock, where students may find themselves navigating unfamiliar norms, languages, values, and expectations (Mann, 2001; Milem & Berger, 1997).

Research shows that the quality of students' early experiences has a lasting impact on engagement, persistence, and success (Kuh et al., 2006; Thomas, 2012). Effective orientation processes are therefore central to facilitating positive transitions. However, traditional orientation activities often risk overwhelming students through information overload and administrative procedures, rather than supporting gradual adjustment (Harvey et al., 2006). Harvey and colleagues argue that successful induction should be conceived as a process rather than a single event—one that unfolds over time, responding to students' evolving needs and expectations as they progress through the first year.

In this context, the development of online orientation programmes represents a significant opportunity to extend and enhance transitional support. Online platforms can scaffold a gradual and inclusive induction process, allowing students to engage with academic, social, and community aspects of university life in accessible and flexible ways. Such approaches align with contemporary understandings of transition as an ongoing, relational, and developmental process; and one that requires early engagement, sustained connection, and partnership between students and staff (Briggs et al., 2012).

At Maynooth University, the Student Success Strategy recommended developing a comprehensive transition programme in partnership with students and stakeholders (Maynooth University, 2022). Strategy consultation highlighted the need to recognise that our students' personal development goals and the

academic, skills development, and welfare supports they require will vary throughout their individual learning journeys, and our orientation and transition opportunities need to be flexible and approachable to cater for this. The *My Maynooth on Moodle* programme responds directly to these recommendations, aiming to complement in-person orientation with a digital, flexible, and student-centred approach.

As Irish national policy bodies such as the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning and the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) have explicitly promoted partnership and process-based transition models, these frameworks shaped the design of *My Maynooth on Moodle* and its commitment to co creation, reflection, and ongoing support. *My Maynooth on Moodle* drew on the learnings from Ireland's Higher Education sector's response to the pandemic to build on good practice and provide more flexible modes of access to, and participation within, our orientation activities (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2021).

## Development

*My Maynooth on Moodle* was conceived as a modular, student-led digital orientation experience that evolved with undergraduate students throughout their transition to university. Its design was guided by four core objectives developed through consultation with staff and students:

- Deliver asynchronous, self-paced and modular content on Moodle, MU's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).
- Provide holistic support for academic, personal, and professional development.
- Partner with students to co-create relatable and engaging resources.
- Release content regularly to align with students' evolving needs throughout the year.

Initial development involved collaboration with IT Services, Registry, Timetabling, the Centre for Teaching & Learning, and multiple academic and support units including Student Services, Student Skills & Success, Library, EDI, Access, Fees & Grants, Programme Advisory, Oifig na Gaeilge, and the Students' Union. Students were key stakeholders and co-designers across the programme in roles as advisors, developers and creators. Oversight was provided by the Student Success Officer and an Online Orientation Taskforce of staff and students, reporting to the Orientation Leadership Group to ensure alignment with institutional priorities.

Student co-designers were recruited through multiple channels: open calls via the Students' Union, student ambassador networks, the Access Office, and the MU Micro-Internship Programme. Students participated as paid content creators, peer advisors, and content creators, with students compensated either through provision of vouchers or payment as occasional staff, depending on the nature of their involvement.

Launched in September 2023, *My Maynooth on Moodle* was initially a short programme that assisted first-year undergraduate students in the first six weeks of their transition to university. Early feedback from surveys and focus groups indicated that students wanted guidance extending beyond the first weeks and suggested content timed to their student journey. In response, the programme evolved into a year-long journey with monthly content releases. In its latest release, two modules are available to students when they first register with the university with content including:

- Welcome and introduction to campus, values, and expectations.

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- Navigating timetables, lectures, labs, and assignments.
- Introducing key services, learning supports, and extra-curricular activities.
- Interactive reflections, quizzes, and peer experience videos.

A multi-layered engagement strategy supported active participation: pre arrival email nudges, announcements in Moodle, promotion through a dedicated monthly email, and ongoing reinforcement via orientation leaders and on-campus activities. Each month a new module is released with the aim of meeting students where they are on their orientation journey. These releases are aligned with student journey milestones to ensure relevance e.g., understanding assignments, preparing for labs, coping with emerging loneliness, and exam readiness.

The 'whole of institution' approach created challenges relating to timelines, content consistency, and accessibility standards. These were managed through shared templates, structured workflows, and a regular cross-unit content review. Additional challenges included ensuring content was engaging without overwhelming students; this was mitigated by moving to staged, monthly content releases based on student-identified priorities.

Three key features distinguish *My Maynooth on Moodle* from traditional orientation models:

1. *Continuous, modular support*: By extending orientation beyond the initial welcome period into a year-long journey, the programme addresses evolving student needs, such as loneliness and study-life balance.
2. *Student-led content creation*: The inclusion of student videos showcasing candid experiences fosters relatability and peer support, ensuring the content resonates deeply with learners.
3. *Pedagogical integration*: Learning activities and self-assessments embedded within the modules encourage reflection and active engagement.

Locally, the programme has already demonstrated tangible benefits:

- *Student impact*: Over 8,000 students have engaged with the programme so far, gaining confidence in their transition into and through university life. Feedback indicates that the relatable, modular design helped prepare students for university, reduce anxiety, and fostered belonging and connection.
- *Staff impact*: The collaborative model encouraged cross-departmental learning and engagement, fostering a culture of innovation and shared ownership in student success.

Looking forward, there is potential to expand this approach to post-first year and postgraduate students, providing continuous online transitions support across multiple stages of the student journey. This will require us to tackle some remaining key questions, including which components students find most impactful, how engagement varies across cohorts, and how usage relates to academic and wellbeing outcomes. A structured evaluation study, with appropriate ethical approval, is planned to investigate these areas.

### Lessons learned

Early evaluation and reflection highlight how digital tools can transform the transition experience.

### **Reimagining transitions digitally**

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Traditional in-person orientations are often limited by time, space, and resources, making it challenging to deliver personalised, comprehensive and holistic support to every student. By leveraging the VLE, the programme provides flexible, scalable, and modular access to orientation content. Students can revisit resources whenever needed, enabling a more inclusive and supportive experience.

### **Continuous and tailored support**

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Monthly module releases demonstrate a forward-thinking approach to student transitions. Rather than viewing orientation as a one-off event, the programme provides continuous support, addressing students' evolving needs throughout their first year. This approach also enables timely interventions, such as support for loneliness or workload management.

### **Embedding reflection and feedback**

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Learning activities and self-assessment tools are integrated into the modules, ensuring students actively engage with content rather than passively consuming information. These features also generate data on engagement patterns, supporting evidence-based adjustments and personalised improvements.

### **Amplifying student voice**

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Student-created videos and content highlight the power of peer storytelling to foster empathy and connection. By showcasing authentic experiences, the programme fosters empathy and reassurance, bridging the gap between digital delivery and the personal touch of in-person interaction.

### **Promoting access and equity**

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Digital delivery reduces barriers for students who may face challenges attending on-campus sessions, including those with disabilities, caregiving responsibilities, or long commutes. Ensuring flexible access supports equity, providing all students with the opportunity to engage meaningfully with orientation content.

### **Building Digital Fluency**

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The programme familiarises students with Moodle early in their academic journey, promoting digital confidence and literacy. By learning to navigate the VLE and interact with online resources, students are better prepared to engage with their courses and academic materials.

## **Recommendations**

Developing an online programme to partner with and strengthen on-campus orientation and transition activities recognises that students learn in different ways and through diverse means. Being able to combine digital videos, text content, activities and supplement this with in-person activities enables mixed modes of learning and participation.

The experience of developing and implementing *My Maynooth on Moodle* highlights several key considerations for practitioners:

- *Co-creation & partnership*: Engaging students in meaningful ways allows staff to recalibrate assumptions and respond to authentic experiences. Co-creation strengthens the relevance and impact of transition programmes.
- *Cross-institutional engagement*: Coordinating content across multiple departments requires careful planning and structured processes. Dedicated project teams and content review templates support timely and accurate contributions.
- *Peer validation*: Students particularly value peer-led content, which reassures them that challenges are common and normalises the transition experience.

Integrating digital and in-person orientation enables mixed-mode learning that accommodates diverse student needs. This approach fosters belonging, inclusion, and student success from the outset. The programme offers a sustainable model for other institutions seeking to combine co-creation, technology, and pedagogy in supporting student transitions.

## Biography

*Eddie Corr* is the Student Success Officer at Maynooth University (Ireland). He leads the *THRIVE Initiative* which is focused on enhancing student partnership, transitions, and belonging. His research interests include student transitions and student success, extra-curricular activity, belonging and loneliness, student engagement, and developing student partnership practice.

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