

The old hands: experts in online and distance learning

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The University of B is a medium-sized, teaching-focused university which offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses. It is particularly strong in the delivery of vocational courses. It is one of the biggest national and international providers of online and distance learning (ODL). The University currently has about 2000 ODL students each year, which is about 10% of the University's overall teaching activity. The University has in place a strategy to increase these numbers to about 4000 students within the next 10 years, in areas where they have particular strengths, as they are seeing that traditional student numbers have been declining in recent years.

The University has built up its portfolio of ODL over the last 15 years. It started by developing several masters-level courses in areas where it has particular strengths in both research and teaching. Over time, it has put in place partnerships with other universities and colleges in a variety of overseas locations, and while the course content is all created by the University, the partners provide facilities and support to distance learners locally. It also franchises a limited number of courses to be delivered by other colleges and universities, some locally and others overseas.

The ODL portfolio now contains a number of programs at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and also some professional development courses that are offered jointly with partners. It also offers some of its programs in a more granular way, where students can study a particular module rather than a whole course. This is particularly relevant to some of the vocational programs, such as health care. The University also develops and runs bespoke ODL and blended learning courses for some of its corporate partners. These may vary in length from short courses, lasting anything from several days to several weeks, or spread over a number of blocks of time over a year, to a full degree course that runs over several years, part-time.

The MOOC story so far

The University has decided to invest in the creation of two MOOCs. The first MOOC will build upon the University's strong research and teaching profile in environmental studies. The subject area—flooding and climate change—has been selected in particular because of the recent public and media interest in these two subjects. Given the somewhat controversial nature of its focus, it is hoped that this topic will capture the public's imagination and encourage higher levels of engagement than the University might typically expect. The intention is for the MOOC to raise the research profile of the University in this particular area of research strength, and through this to increase its international visibility. The University plans to track, as far as it is able to (as not all data are easily available or can be mapped simply to MOOC students), whether this

has an impact on either applications for traditional undergraduate, part-time, and short courses, including summer schools in environmental studies, and for postgraduate courses.

The second MOOC is intended as a “taster” course that will, it is hoped, improve recruitment to the online undergraduate degree in computer science. This MOOC will have two aspects to it: firstly, to equip nontraditional students with the study skills that they will need in order to undertake a degree online; and secondly, to equip the students with some of the basic, foundational knowledge that they will need in order to make a more informed choice about whether to apply for the degree program. The first set of skills and knowledge that can be acquired through the MOOC will be transferable to anyone who is seeking experience of higher education, and the intake to the MOOC will be open to all and not restricted to those who may choose to progress onto the online degree course. The MOOC will, however, provide an opportunity for the University to study recruitment rates for the online course closely and to monitor the conversion rate from the access pathway MOOC onto the online course—or to other interactions with the University, including a range of other courses that might be relevant to the subject matter of the MOOC.

Imperatives for investing in MOOCs

Particularly given its understanding of the online learning market, the University is very clear about why it is choosing to invest in MOOCs and the level of investment. The University has three main drivers for offering MOOCs. They are: to increase recruitment to the University’s existing distance learning programs; to raise the profile of the University and increase brand awareness internationally; to attempt to achieve a position at the forefront of innovations in learning and teaching; and to be ahead of the competition in understanding how best to use online learning technologies to reach this goal.

Resourcing

The University has made a relatively small financial investment in the creation of MOOCs, as it has limited resources available for what it sees as speculative investments, so has chosen to only create two MOOCs at present. University management is divided on its perspective on MOOCs. Some see them as a serious threat to the University’s existing portfolio of ODL courses, and believe that it should invest heavily in MOOCs in order to see off the competition. Others see MOOCs as having marginal educational value when compared to “proper” ODL, so do not perceive a major threat to come from those who provide them, and prioritize investment in new, income-generating ODL courses over investment in MOOCs. So the current strategy of limited investment and “waiting and seeing” is something of a compromise between these contradictory viewpoints.

Quality assurance

The University has in place an academic quality process for validating individual modules and short courses which was put in place some time ago because of the need to be able to quality assure its full range of programs. This quality assurance process will be used for the MOOCs also, as the University wants to treat the MOOCs with the same processes as for all its other programs. This is helping to achieve consistency of quality across its offerings.

Student experience

The student experience for ODL is well-constructed and highly tailored to the needs of open and distance learners. Through its years of experience of ODL, the University has learned that ODL learners have particular needs which have to be met in specific ways. So the University runs a dedicated support center that provides 24/7 help for all ODL students. It acts as a single point of contact for all queries, whether they are academic, administrative, or technical. The University has learned that this supportive environment is an important tool in helping students to cope with the challenges of studying alone, often in a time-pressured environment where they have many other responsibilities, and may also have financial concerns. Ultimately, the support center helps to prevent dropout and contributes significantly to student retention and student satisfaction with the program and the University.

The University does not plan to offer this level of dedicated support to the students on the MOOC. The support model for the MOOC will need to evolve over time, as the University learns more about the MOOC students, their motivation, and challenges. For the first two MOOCs, the student support model is based upon two mechanisms: practical support (for log-in queries, etc.) that will be provided by members of the ODL support team, but will be restricted to up to one full-time post for both MOOCs; and academic support, which will be provided through the online forums by a team of postgraduate students, under the supervision of the academic lead for each MOOC.

Accreditation

The MOOCs may function as both a separate module and a short course. There is a question that is still being debated about how the model will work for accreditation—whether to keep the MOOC completely open and charge for accreditation, or whether to get people to sign up from the start and pay at that point.

In the short term, the University will not offer credit for the two MOOCs, but will use them informally as an access route for further study, and use them as evidence of prior learning and commitment when reviewing applications for online and traditional programs.

In the longer term, there are options available that partly blur the distinction between the MOOC and the charged ODL courses. One of the interesting ways that the University is thinking about this is in terms of the entry point (admissions) as well as credit for the MOOC at the end of the course. There is potentially a route whereby the students pay for access to the MOOC and go through a limited level of assessment before they are able to join the course, rather than just thinking about accreditation at the end of the MOOC.

The University is debating whether it is useful to require proof of attainment as part of entry requirements, or whether to trust the applicant to make the choice about applying for a module. One of the challenging issues related to business models is that if proof of credentials is required, the costs of running the program immediately go up. So there are some complex and challenging issues to negotiate when considering how to make the MOOCs sustainable.

Partnerships

The University has a mix of many different partnerships in place. It offers dual awards with other educational institutions, mostly overseas, where part of the course is taught here and part in another country. It also has partnerships in place with about 20 corporate partners, ranging from large, multinational companies to small, local businesses. The corporate partnerships are mostly focused upon open and distance learning collaboration, delivered through a blended model where some of the course content and support are provided online and then the students come together for blocks of teaching and social interaction. The programs that are offered with corporate partners range from short, two-week focused courses on very specific topics, through to full degree programs that are developed specifically for that partner, working closely with them, and delivered through a combination of online tutorials, online content, two-day blocks of face-to-face teaching, and a summer school.

Relationships with some partners are developing, where they offer facilities and tutorial support; whilst the University provides the teaching, assessment, and accreditation. The University also runs franchised programs run entirely by partners, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The MOOCs will be used to complement and supplement these existing partnerships and models. The University is having discussions with some of its partners about possibly offering a MOOC format taster course that would be offered to their staff. They are also discussing whether they might develop a MOOC together that would help one of their larger partners with recruitment of new staff; this model is one that is being tested out by some of the large MOOC platforms, and the University believes that there is potential to replicate it on a smaller scale, particularly for specialist areas of knowledge and skills where their corporate partner has difficulties with recruitment. There is potential to tap into a much larger market of possible future employees, and to use the MOOC to gain some prior knowledge of the aptitudes of those people.

Future strategy

The outcomes from the two MOOCs are closely reviewed and evaluated in order to understand the student experience, the costs involved, and most importantly, the transition routes to further study that have been taken by the students.

The learning from this evaluation will feed into the University's five-year strategy for ODL, which is under development at present. This will include a student support model that will bring together the range of face-to-face, blended learning, and open and distance learning opportunities into a single, student-centered framework. It will include targets for student numbers in open and distance learning at all levels, including short courses, but the emphasis will be upon offering the most flexible and adaptable experience to students, based upon rigorous costing. It will include an appropriate credit framework and emphasize engagement with, and delivery through, partners in the UK and around the world.

Key points

- The experience of this type of institution in ODL has meant that they have developed knowledge and experience of how to create online courses, what structures and expertise to put in place, how to support online students (who have distinct needs), etc.
- They have developed some understanding of the ODL market and how to operate within it, and their use of MOOCs will further help them to develop this understanding.
- They will have addressed issues such as quality assurance already; they will probably have well-established workflows for creating and testing online learning content which can be adapted for the MOOCs, and scalable systems in place, as well as experience of creating multidisciplinary teams for course development.
- MOOCs still present a challenge to this kind of institution. The business models for MOOCs are not clear and though they do not wish to risk ignoring MOOCs completely and potentially lose some of their credibility as an ODL provider, they can be challenging to the well-understood ODL market. How many MOOCs should they invest in, given the lack of financial return on investment (ROI)? What about accreditation if they offer it: will they risk competing with their own ODL courses? How will MOOCs affect their established brand as an ODL institution?
- So although they are in a strong position from many perspectives, these institutions are also in quite a precarious position as they have a lot to lose. They need to learn through experimentation and with a clear understanding of the value that they hope to create from some investment in MOOCs. Their main ROI may come from engaging learners who may then transfer to charged ODL courses in the future.