

The institutional innovators

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The University of C is taking a multipronged and holistic approach to the development of its MOOCs, and they form a key part of its overall investment in blended learning (BL) and online and distance learning (ODL).

It has taken a thoughtful approach to deciding where to invest in MOOCs, and its strategy has been to be both entrepreneurial, and take advantage of opportunities that have arisen through partnerships and new ventures, and also to plan MOOCs that align with its existing institutional strategies.

There are three parts to the multipronged approach. Firstly, the University has joined a regional consortium of institutions led by their national open and distance learning university. Through this partnership it is running three MOOCs in areas of particular research strength and where the University has been easily able to identify up-and-coming “academic stars.” It has freed up these academic staff from their normal teaching commitments for one year in order for them to focus upon the development of the MOOCs and for them to provide an active role in supporting the MOOC students when the MOOCs are running. These MOOCs will run twice in the current academic year and last eight weeks.

Secondly, the University has selected one area of strong research and teaching expertise where it believes that it has an outstanding and specialist course to offer, but which at present recruits only low numbers of students, very few of whom are from overseas. The course is run at postgraduate level and focuses upon palliative care for cancer sufferers.

The MOOC content has been created by the University’s specialist Cancer Research Institute, which has world-leading research programs into cancer treatment and care and which runs a range of face-to-face postgraduate courses aimed at both healthcare professionals and other specialists. This institute is providing support to students on the MOOC.

Students who complete the MOOC are eligible to transfer to the Cancer Research Institute’s accredited postgraduate diploma in palliative care for cancer.

Discoverability of this MOOC is affected by not going through one of the major international platforms, and the University has had to work hard to promote the MOOC. It has used many of its existing partnerships, with specialist cancer bodies, to do this and the strategy has paid off.

The palliative care MOOC has run twice so far and will run again shortly. Each time that the MOOC has run, it recruited over 10,000 students and, notably, it has seen extremely good retention and completion rates; in fact it is outstanding when compared with norms for any of the MOOCs that are being offered from the range of different international universities. The University is also seeing good transfer rates

from the MOOC into its postgraduate course. This is an interesting and useful experience for the University, which will inform its future approach to MOOCs, to its selection of new courses to create across its portfolio, and also inform its thinking about the “size and shape” of courses that it might offer—perhaps increasing its emphasis on short courses that encourage access to higher levels of study and also the value of being selective about the areas in which to try to develop a more extensive “market” for some of its quality programs that are not well known beyond a limited and mostly local community.

The third MOOC initiative where the University is investing is that after spending time on reflection and consultation, it has made the strategic decision to become a partner of the international, not-for-profit Open Education university (OERu). OERu has been in existence for several years and emerged from the Open Educational Resources movement, but has adapted and transformed in order to maximize the current interest in open, online, and free courses that the MOOC phenomenon has stimulated.

OERu includes as members a range of partners from across the world, with particular strengths in many of the world’s leading universities with an interest in open and distance learning, and also not-for-profit foundations that have a philosophical commitment to open education. It has been an interesting decision for the University to join the OERu, as its profile is different from that of many of the current OERu partners. However, it has had a long-term strategic interest in, and commitment to, open education and considers that this meets with part of its mission as a public institution. For this reason, it has joined the partnership and is creating two MOOCs that are being run through the OERu platform.

One of the interesting characteristics of OERu is that it is not simply hosting open courses but is also offering credit for them. Those of the University’s MOOCs that are run through OERu will be credit-bearing, so this partnership also provides an opportunity for the University to learn about the issues related to awarding credit for MOOCs and also whether these open courses attract a different audience than some of its other activities.

MOOC platforms

The University is unusual in the MOOC arena because it has decided to run some of its MOOCs, including the Palliative Care MOOC, from its own platform. The University has invested significant resources in the specification and development of the platform, not just in specifying and setting up the technical platform but also in developing the range of policies and strategies that are needed to launch a new, international venture in a way that is robust, secure, and legal. This includes the development of appropriate privacy statements, a branding strategy, terms of use for the platform, pedagogic guidelines to ensure consistency of approach and high-quality course creation, and technical and design guidelines for use by learning technologists who are supporting the MOOCs and MOOC content development. The MOOC platform is being developed jointly with a third-party supplier and the University team has worked closely with the supplier to get the platform design right and to pin down

contracts and respective areas of responsibility, so that there is a minimum likelihood of performance issues when the MOOC is being used.

There are a number of reasons why the University has decided to take this approach. Most importantly, the team wishes to retain control over pedagogy and not be restricted in the way that they are able to offer MOOCs. Part of their motivation for MOOC development is to be able to experiment, and they believe that they will be much better able to do this in an environment where they have control over all aspects of the MOOC platform and associated processes. Coupled with this, the University wishes to bring the learning from the MOOC development back into the University throughout the MOOC lifecycle, and this will be easier to do if the MOOC is based upon the same platform that is being used for traditional courses, rather than a new and separate platform.

By participating in two other MOOC ventures, there is also the opportunity to learn about other MOOC platforms and to compare the pros and cons of each. This is a clear benefit, but comes with the cost of understanding each of the different platforms and being able to support the MOOC creators through the specific development and delivery processes. So it has added complexity and cost to the project.

Governance and decision making

The proposal to invest in the MOOCs was made with the support of members of the senior team and very quickly gained strategic support through the institution. This was largely because the MOOCs fit with strategies that are already either in place or under development at the present time and because the Chief Executive and other members of the senior team are kept well-briefed about innovations in the student experience, planned partnerships, and new strategies. The other factor that smoothed the way was that the senior sponsor was able to quickly locate funds that could be used to self-fund the initiative in the first instance. So a combination of political awareness, being prepared for new investments, experience of similar ventures, and good ongoing communication with colleagues, meant that achieving buy-in was an easy and pain-free task.

Not all necessary processes were in place, and the team that is leading the MOOC development has worked closely with the senior sponsor to create a new set of processes for the development of the MOOCs. This includes a two-stage process with an initial application and, on approval, the creation of a full business case for the MOOC to be developed and run. This is seen as crucial to the ongoing sustainability and viability of the MOOCs as a core part of the institution's teaching portfolio.

Resourcing

Even in an institution with a strong and long-term commitment to innovation in learning and teaching, there are still challenges when it comes to identifying funding for the development of new online learning courses. One of the main challenges that has

emerged through the MOOC development process is due to the complexity of the resourcing arrangements. Unlike traditional courses, which are generally initiated, created, and run by a single School, the MOOCs involve teams of experts drawn from across the institution—and beyond. So it can be challenging to work out which department should resource which part of the MOOC development. This has proven to be a challenge and something of an impediment to development as it has slowed down the process of planning and creating the MOOC. Also, the MOOCs are being created much more quickly than traditional courses and using a nonstandard (and undocumented) workflow, so there is a lack of shared experience and agreement upon “who does what.”

However, the experience of going through the development process now means that the University has put in place a set of procedures and guidelines that can be used for all MOOC development in the future. This has included some sensitive negotiation between central support departments and services and the academic Schools. Not all parties have been completely happy with the decisions that have been made but most importantly, and a good indicator of future success, is that all key parties have agreed to the plan for the way ahead.

That said, sustainable funding for MOOCs is still a big challenge to their ongoing viability and, until clear business models are created and well understood by all stakeholders, MOOCs will not be accepted as a core part of the institution’s portfolio of activities. The evaluation of the current MOOC activities will be crucial in helping senior management to better understand costs and business models and hence to determine their future strategy.

Quality assurance

A comprehensive quality assurance (QA) process has been developed and put in place for the MOOCs. This includes four steps: the proposal of new MOOCs; QA monitoring as the MOOC is developed; testing and sign-off; evaluation and reporting.

Firstly, the MOOC team has created and put in place new, transparent processes for the proposal of new MOOCs. These processes follow two stages: an initial application process, which, if successful, is followed by the submission of a full business case. Given the early stage of maturity for MOOC business models, the business case may not contain balanced return-on-investment estimates but it includes a detailed analysis of target audience; an explanation of how the MOOC supports existing University strategies for learning and teaching, innovation, recruitment, or public engagement; description of the team that will create and support the MOOC; and detailed estimated costs for MOOC creation and delivery. This proposal is reviewed by the team that has been established for the purpose. It includes the senior sponsor (the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education), Head of Quality, Head of Marketing, Head of e-Learning, and two Heads of Academic Schools.

Secondly, there is a process in place to monitor the quality of the MOOC as it is being developed. This includes processes for planning the content of the MOOC, according to agreed principles for learning design, and for monitoring guidelines for MOOC production, such as the length and quality of film clips. The process includes the external, third-party supplier of the learning management system as well as all the key members of the MOOC team.

Thirdly, there is a multistakeholder testing and sign-off process, which tests academic quality, instructional design, technical factors, and overall quality and accuracy. This step involves students, academic staff, pedagogy experts, and e-learning and marketing experts. The MOOC must satisfy agreed quality requirements before it is allowed to “go live.”

Fourthly, and importantly, QA does not finish when the MOOC is launched—the MOOC is evaluated and reviewed throughout its delivery period through a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures. Data are collected from a number of formal and informal sources, including solicited feedback from students, through monitoring discussion forums and social interaction spaces, through the outcomes of the formal assessments that take place throughout the MOOC. These data are then pulled together and analyzed by the expert in-house e-learning team in order to produce a report that comments upon the experience of delivery of this instance of the MOOC and also draws out more general recommendations based upon this MOOC and others. This report is sent up to the senior MOOC steering committee and used to inform regular progress reports to the University’s senior team.

This four-stage QA process may seem heavyweight but the experience to date has been that it has been a crucial part of the MOOC project, not only to ensure adequate quality in an external-facing, high-profile activity, but also to reassure colleagues that appropriate care is being taken in the creation and delivery of the MOOCs. The process also has created the “by-product” of emphasizing to all involved that the MOOC is a serious undertaking and one that requires proper commitment of resources in order to be done well. So the costs involved are deemed to be outweighed by the benefits.

Future strategy

The future strategy for MOOCs, and indeed for open and distance learning and BL, is subject to an ongoing process of planning, implementation, and review. The current published strategies for these areas will be updated when the current MOOC activity has been evaluated, within the context of other ODL work.

As described above, the current crop of MOOC developments are subject to thorough and rigorous evaluation and reporting, and this learning will be reviewed by the senior institutional team in order to determine their next steps of investment in MOOCs. The multipronged approach enables them to test out, and learn from a range of different MOOC designs, partnerships, platforms, and business models. This will enable them to make informed decisions about the future.

Key points

- This type of university has taken a holistic and long-term approach to innovation. Its leadership has put in place a strategy to support innovation through the whole organization.
- There is long-term commitment to improvement and adaptation at all levels of the organization, using a range of top-down and bottom-up interventions.
- This approach is not specific to MOOCs, but because the university is always reviewing its strategy and making incremental changes, it is in a better position than many to take a strategic approach to new trends as they arise.
- MOOCs have been undertaken as a highly strategic activity and are one part of an overall strategy for innovation in learning and teaching. They also feed into strategies for developing the institutional brand profile locally, nationally, and internationally, and public engagement in areas of research excellence. They also support strategies for recruitment and engagement of students.
- Investment in quality processes and procedures has been recognized as important from the start and due attention was given to these early on rather than retro-fitted as an afterthought. This includes a long-standing commitment to continuous improvement of the student learning experience, a commitment to BL, and using a range of different approaches to student engagement, support, and teaching.