

The cautious experimenters

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In this example, University senior management identified several imperatives for investing in MOOCs. Initially, there was interest in joining a new and exciting venture that would put the University alongside some of the elite institutions globally that were engaged in MOOC. One of the early motivations for getting involved in MOOCs was to not be 'left behind' other, more innovative peers. As more investigation was carried out and senior management reflected further, other agendas emerged to have become equally important, with the other main driver being to establish their position as an educational innovator through large-scale and well-informed experiments with learning technologies, and to bring that experience to bear upon their traditional undergraduate provision.

As the University has begun to select and develop its MOOCs, and has been involved in many detailed discussions with other MOOC partner organizations, their thinking has matured further and other imperatives and benefits to the MOOC experience have been identified. In particular, their interest in exploring with the development of MOOCs in a particular area might support undergraduate recruitment, both by increasing the profile of specific courses, and also allowing potential students to gain a far deeper understanding of the subject matter and learning experience that they would experience, should they come to study on a traditional course.

The imperative to recruit to MOOCs is not as crude as looking at absolute numbers as the University is already oversubscribed. However, it perceives that with its global audience, MOOC provision may enable it to increase the diversity of its intake and potentially to attract students from geographic areas where it is currently underrepresented.

In addition, the University sees a strong potential benefit for MOOCs to enable it to involve a greater diversity of people in the University and that this may help it to further succeed in its public engagement and widening participation mission, to which it makes a clear and ongoing commitment. It is aware, however, that less advantaged and minority populations are not always well represented in the typical MOOC learner population, so it is taking a realistic but optimistic approach. It sees that this opportunity to experiment with global scale online learning will enable it to find out more about how to fulfill this specific mission, to the benefit of both local populations and those further afield.

There is a more subtle potential benefit about learner intake; it is possible that taking an MOOC will better prepare the student for the course that she or he will apply. There are two potential benefits to this: firstly, the student may demonstrate their commitment to and interest in the subject area by showing that they have completed a relevant MOOC and secondly, the student may then be better prepared when

they take up their University place. This latter benefit may help to address some of the challenges of underprepared students that are fairly common at many universities. The University is using the MOOC experiments as an opportunity to test out these two things.

There is also an interest in exploring whether MOOCs might be useful for raising the profile of particular strong areas of research and teaching and attracting higher levels of postgraduate applications—and also attracting a higher quality of application. It is recognized though that this is probably a niche market with a relatively small number of potential students, even when considering a global population, so financial returns are likely to be limited.

Finally, the University is clear that MOOCs may provide one way in which to market the University to potential students and those who guide their decision making when selecting which university to apply to—including teachers, parents, and grandparents. They are sanguine, however, about how successful this marketing will be, and as part of their evaluation and analysis of their MOOC investment, they will explore the extent to which MOOCs have brought this kind of return on investment, or whether there are other innovative approaches to marketing the University that might create more value.

Overall, the MOOC project is a “nice to have” venture and although important at this particular time, and deserving of a high level of strategic focus and input from senior management plus commitment of resources, it is not at this point perceived as essential to the organization’s future strategy.

MOOC activities to date

When the University joined the FutureLearn partnership, it committed to developing three MOOCs spread across a range of subject areas. The spread of subject areas was a deliberate decision as the team wished to get experience of developing MOOCs for a range of disciplines—science, business, and humanities—in order to better understand the affordances and challenges that each may present. There was also a political imperative behind this, as it is important to the University that this is seen as a University-wide activity and not marginal, or restricted to a specific area. That said, the choice of specific topics for MOOCs was made according to a combination of strategy and opportunity—so one or more of the MOOCs was selected because where there were already experienced online teachers who were enthusiastic to lead a MOOC course, and they believed that it would enable the University to get a course up-and-running quickly and relatively simply. It has not always been as simple as they had hoped, due to the quality of the video materials that had already been created, and some copyright issues, but overall they believe that this approach was the most practical and has worked well for the initial phase. However, future choices about MOOCs will be based on more strategic imperatives that tie into specific aspects of the University’s overall priorities and strategy, as discussed below.

Governance and decision making

The decision to invest in MOOCs was made personally by the Vice Chancellor, after discussion with external parties and consultation with some of the senior team. The senior sponsorship for the project was then quickly picked up by one of the Pro-Vice Chancellors (PVCs), who has put in place a lightweight and fast-moving Project Board to oversee the initial phases of putting in place the partnership with the MOOC platform provider, selecting the courses, and now providing senior sponsorship to the team that is leading the MOOC development. The two PVCs have almost daily contact with the MOOC team and have a very close level of involvement in the project as it develops. This is due to the high-profile and high-risk nature of the project and is not typical for online learning and learning technology initiatives and ventures.

The Project Board is a small and focused but powerful team whose membership includes the PVCs for Education and for Enterprise, the Head of Marketing, the Head of Finance, the Head of the School of Education, and the Head of E-learning, as well as a dedicated Project Manager who has been seconded from the University's Quality Office to work exclusively on the MOOC project.

To some extent, the MOOC project has sat outside normal decision-making processes, particularly during the early phases where it would usually have gone through more standard approval processes of the Education Committee or Senior Management Team.

There have been legal issues encountered, which have at times slowed down the development of the MOOCs and which raise questions about the risk attitude of the University when approaching the MOOC project. The University's legal team has had an important role in ensuring that the MOOCs are following legal guidelines; this has been particularly critical because of the open nature of MOOCs—anyone can access the materials at any time—and also because of the media interest in MOOCs. Both marketing and legal teams have encouraged a careful and cautious approach and recommended that all MOOC materials are vetted carefully for any potential copyright infringements.

This approach was supported by the senior MOOC team in theory but has proven to be a significant hurdle to the smooth and fast development process, particularly where some of the MOOC materials include video that is not openly licensed, and which may for example include materials that include branded items in shot. The legal team has advised that these videos are not suitable for inclusion in the MOOC, so some video has had to be refilmed or not included and the course plan altered accordingly.

The outcome from the high level of legal scrutiny has been that the video production plan has not been delivered on time and the quality of the materials included in the MOOC has suffered, as the MOOC team had to chase up so many copyright issues. This issue will need to be addressed in the future by the University, which will need to decide whether they take a less risk-averse approach to copyright, as they do with other learning technology activities, or whether they invest more resources in developing new video materials where copyright is assured.

Resourcing (including funding)

There is a recognition amongst the senior management of the University that the creation and provision of MOOCs is not a free or cheap activity. They have been able to identify resources from existing internal budgets that were not fully allocated to pay for the creation and support of these first three MOOCs. This strategic use of internal resource in order to pump prime this first MOOC activity was discussed and approved by the senior management team of the institution as an appropriate use of resources. As such, the business plan for the initial MOOCs is clear.

Beyond this initial investment, any further MOOC proposals will need a clear and well-articulated business case to be made for their investment. Individuals and some departments are in some cases showing interest in developing MOOCs, but they will need to make it completely clear how they are able to resource the creation and support of the MOOC before they are able to commit to this. Either individual or department will need to explain if they have the resource available for MOOCs, and if so, why there is this flexibility within their workload allocation and budgeting. Any further MOOCs will also need to be self-sustaining in the future. So overall, the University is cautious about encouraging individuals or departments to attempt to engage with MOOCs without properly understanding the costs and benefits. A centralized approach will be taken to approval for further MOOC developments.

The University estimates that each of the MOOCs has cost about £40,000 to develop, but this does not include the cost of academic time used in the creation of the MOOC materials, nor to support the MOOC when it is running; these costs are being born by the respective academic departments during this pilot phase. The first pilot was the most expensive to develop as the development team was still putting in place appropriate processes and learning as they went along about the more efficient and effective ways to create the MOOC. The creation of high-quality video has been particularly costly, and legal costs (including the legal input required to check contracts and to ensure appropriate copyright for all the MOOC materials) have made up a substantial proportion of the budget. It is anticipated that some of these costs would reduce as the team gained more familiarity with the MOOC model and processes that are needed to support it.

Quality assurance

The MOOCs that are created are subject to the same course approval processes that are followed by traditional courses. This is considered to be essential in order to be able to ensure that quality standards are as high for any course that is offered by the University and to offer equity of quality to all learners, whether they are fee-paying or not.

The quality of the student experience during the MOOC experience is also being taken very seriously and the University has put in place strong teams of postgraduate facilitators for the first of their MOOCs in order to ensure that the students have a well-supported and smooth experience.

Student experience

One of the main current strategic priorities for the University is to be recognized as providing a very high-quality student experience to its undergraduate students. It does not in any way intend for the MOOCs to dilute its focus upon excellent, full-time undergraduate provision that is mostly delivered face-to-face.

However, the University perceives that MOOCs provide an excellent opportunity to experiment with learning technologies and with very large numbers of learners. They believe that learning about delivering content to many thousands of learners will help substantially with their knowledge of the technology that is available, how it can work best to support the kind of pedagogy that interests them. They are hopeful that the work that they do to create the MOOCs will give them far greater insight into how particular technologies, such as video recording, lecture capture, and online assessment, can be used to support an excellent student experience. This learning will feed back into learning on-campus and enable the University to make practical, informed decisions about how to best use these technologies to achieve excellence for their traditional undergraduate population.

So the University sees that MOOCs will help them to make their use of learning technologies more focused and effective—but not necessarily more efficient. It is clear that the experimentation with MOOCs is about an effectiveness rather than an efficiency agenda. Moreover, it wants there to be a clear separation between the courses that are developed as MOOCs and their provision for fee-paying students. There should be no suggestion that MOOC learners are getting access to the same experience of the University as fee-paying, traditional undergraduates. They are clear that there is a great deal of additional value that is gained by traditional students, in particular the level of contact with teaching staff; feedback on their progress through personal responses to assessments; and access to the broader University experience of on-campus activities, clubs, societies, and academic support, including provision for placements with partner organizations, and career advice. The desire to retain a clear distinction between MOOC provision and traditional provision is a key factor in the stance that they are taking at present with regard to accreditation and will influence their choices in this area in the future.

Accreditation

The University will not award or offer any credit completion of the MOOCs. Students will, however, be able to purchase completion certificates through the FutureLearn scheme, but these will be FutureLearn rather than University awards.

This is an important strategic issue and has been discussed extensively in the University and also between the University and its peer FutureLearn partners. After discussion, it has been agreed that there will be no plans to award University credit for MOOCs in the short- or medium-term future. The main reason for this is that it would potentially blur the boundaries between the experience that a traditional, campus-based undergraduate receives and an MOOC learner.

The University will nevertheless be investigating offering credit for MOOCs when working in partnerships with other organizations; in these cases, credit would be offered by the partner organization rather than by the University. This is discussed further in the Partnerships section below.

Partnerships

Partnerships are an important part of the MOOC project for the University. This reflects the growing number of important and strategic partnerships that have been put in place in recent years. The University is taking an increasingly sophisticated and proactive approach to partnership with a range of different types of organizations.

Its main MOOC partnership at present is with FutureLearn. As noted above, it was one of the first universities to sign up to the FutureLearn initiative and has a close working relationship based on mutual trust and benefit. The relationship is not without some occasional challenges, as is to be expected with such a new and ambitious venture. Communication has at times not been entirely smooth, in particular during the intense decision-making phase, when many different individuals at the University needed to be involved in the detailed arrangements of the partnership agreement and also more recently when developing the MOOC course and ensuring that the FutureLearn guidelines are properly understood and adhered to. Overall, the University is happy with the way that the relationship with FutureLearn has developed and feels sufficiently involved in key decisions. It is acknowledged that this may change in the future as the University's priorities and strategic approach to MOOCs evolves and as FutureLearn develops its own business models and possibly invites a broader range of institutions to become partners in FutureLearn. There is an awareness that the FutureLearn business models will no doubt develop in the future, and it is possible that they may not align completely with how the University will want to sustain MOOCs, so there is an expectation of reviewing the relationship at some point in the future.

Since the University first committed to its MOOCs venture, it has explored the potential to work together on MOOC development and delivery with some of its existing partners. Discussions are still ongoing but the types of arrangements that are being considered include jointly developing an MOOC with a professional association that would accredit the MOOC as part of its Continuing Professional Development program; and a partnership with an NGO to create an MOOC for its outreach workers in sub-Saharan Africa.

There are also less direct ways in which the University is making the most of its existing corporate partnerships in the MOOC area. It has a close and well-established relationship with some of its partners, which have specialisms and, depending upon the type of organization, have developed their own community of consumers, members, and supporters. The University is exploring the success of working through these communities and networks to promote MOOCs that may be in subject areas that are relevant to them. This is a kind of "cross-selling" in one sense and provides an interesting model for getting more value from partnerships that are already in place, particularly where those partners have ready access to potential MOOC

students—who of course may then go on to engage with the University in a number of different ways. Depending on the level of take up that results from this new approach, it will inform strategic decisions about the creation of particular types of MOOCs in the future, for example by prioritizing MOOCs that draw upon research and teaching strengths that are likely to interest particularly accessible communities.

This university and others of similar reputation are already working to some extent with private providers of online education. Companies such as Kaplan and Laureate and, more recently, newcomers such as Academic Partnerships are working with a number of reputable institutions to deliver courses together in specific subject areas. There have been further approaches from several of the online education companies to the University to invite them to engage. This is not being taken up at present but is another avenue for further exploration that will be considered in the context of the University's overall approach to online education.

Finally, the University is also able to consider working with other MOOC platforms and not just FutureLearn; it may possibly look at developing relationships with other platforms in the future, and also one-off ventures working with existing or new partners, where mutual benefit can be identified clearly.

Future strategy

The University has invested in its MOOC project as an experimental initiative that will, it is hoped, provide it with several different types of hands-on experience and also a substantial amount of objective data, all of which will be used to inform its future strategy and tactics for online learning in general, as well as MOOCs more specifically. As described above, the University has foreseen several different sets of potential benefits to engaging with MOOCs and is using the creation and delivery of its first and second phase of MOOCs in order to explore and test out some of its assumptions. The University will be monitoring application rates for relevant courses; it will be monitoring conversion rates for MOOC students who have taken up fee-paying courses (where it is possible to do so), and it will look at its more usual market research data in order to try to identify an “MOOC effect” upon its reputation and recognition.

It is also carefully monitoring the resource requirement for both creating and running MOOCs, across a range of subject areas, to build up as accurate a picture as possible of the real costs of MOOCs. This will inform future decision making about whether to invest in the current MOOCs on an ongoing basis, as clearly the costs incurred in providing an MOOC are not only the costs of development of content, but there is a recurring cost in providing support to learners, in updating materials, and also any associated services that are run (such as specialist assessment tools).

So it is too early for the University to assert what its future MOOC strategy will be, but the main flavor to any future plan is that it will be very clear about which subject areas and levels of study (including Continuing Professional Development and informal learning) would best serve the University's overall strategy and help it to meet its targets for recruitment, marketing, and outreach; and secondly, it will look carefully

at the possible partners with whom the University may work in order to maximize the benefit of their investment in MOOCs. They will be open-minded about the types of partners that this would include. It may include other universities that would traditionally be considered as competitors, because in the MOOC arena, traditional rules do not always apply, and the benefits of collaboration may far outweigh the limits or costs.

The University will also keep closely informed about further developments and trends in the MOOC world over the coming period, in order to understand the ever-changing political MOOC landscape, and equip itself to make the best guess as to the MOOC winners and losers in the medium and long term.

The strategy for MOOCs will be firmly rooted in a broader strategy looking at online learning in an inclusive way, spanning blended learning for traditional students and all its distance learning ventures, open education, and charged for courses, as well as MOOCs.

The general expectation is that the University will commit to a long-term strategy to MOOCs and that there will be a range of different types of MOOCs developed, with a range of subject areas, level of study, partners, and business models. Whatever approach it decides to take, there is no doubt that it will be considered at the highest level of the institution and will form a core part of future strategy.

Key points

- Some high-quality and research-intensive institutions are experimenting with MOOCs in a cautious way.
- Their traditional approach to online learning has been to invest in excellence and high-quality support, but to allow change to come from the bottom up rather than supporting it from the top downwards.
- Their interest in MOOCs is driven largely by not wanting to be left behind new approaches that are being explored by their peer group. There is a political element of wanting to be seen to join “the right club” and be associated with other similar, high-quality organizations, in order to further extend and deepen their brand and identity.
- They are investing fairly substantially in MOOCs and are interested to see what value they can bring to the institution’s strategic objectives, but MOOCs are not seen as critical to their future performance, nor necessarily a major area of investment.
- For these institutions more than for any other group, MOOCs are seen as a way to promote the reputation and brand of the university.