

# The old guard

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The University of F is a prestigious institution with a long history and pedigree. It is ranked as one of the top four institutions in its home country and one of the top universities in the world, appearing in the top 25 universities in the Times Higher Education World Reputation Rankings. It has a very strong reputation for research and receives 70% of its income from research funding, but also has a high reputation for the quality of its teaching, and it is one of the most heavily subscribed institutions in the country with an average of five applications for every place.

The University prides itself upon its low staff to student ratios and small-group teaching approaches; it generally scores highly in national surveys of student experience, although there is some difference in ratings between subject disciplines. Its recent focus has been to strengthen its reputation for excellent education still further, and to ensure consistency of quality across all courses.

Historically, the University has taken a measured approach to engaging with learning technology. It has been an early adopter of some systems, mostly driven by innovative teachers who have experimented with new approaches because they want to support their learners better. Particular disciplines, such as medicine, have developed their own online learning systems because they fit the teaching approaches for that subject area. This type of innovation has mostly been “bottom up” and although supported and encouraged through central support, and awarded through University teaching quality recognition schemes, it has never been mandated.

About 10 years ago, the University put in place a Virtual Learning Environment or Learning Management System, and it mandates as part of its learning and teaching strategy that a level of course information should be provided for all undergraduate courses. However, this is often fairly limited and interaction with the online systems is in some cases managed by administrative departments rather than faculty, so that many faculty have a limited interaction with online learning systems, and potentially little or no understanding of the pedagogy of online learning.

Overall, the picture of blended learning for traditional undergraduate students is that there are pockets of innovative and ground-breaking practice, but the general level of adoption is low and unsophisticated, with little sharing of practice among colleagues and across disciplines. There is central support available to teaching staff, in terms of video production, multimedia, lecture capture, and online assessment systems, but this is made available on an optional basis and there is no consistent approach in place to the use of these technologies. In surveys, students have commented on the lack of take up and use of learning technologies and the low level of awareness and understanding of them by some of their teachers. At the same time, though, students value the close contact that they have with academic staff, small-group sizes for teaching, and access to wide ranges of resources.

The University has experimented with some limited distance and online learning ventures over the past 20 years or so, focused at postgraduate level, working in partnership with other prestigious institutions and commercial organizations, but these have been pilot activities that have never really taken off or gained a prominent place in the University's strategy. The overall approach has been conservative and care has been taken not to threaten or undermine the international brand of the institution.

## **Open education**

In line with its mission to engage with the public through outreach activities, the University has engaged with the production and promotion of Open Educational Resources (OER) over the past 5–10 years. It successfully sought external funding to create some exemplar OER materials and these were well received, and acted as a focus of experimentation for specific groups of academic staff, working closely with learning technologists. The successful bids for external funding led to investment by the University in a local repository for OER, which has provided a focus for the ongoing creation of further open resources, supported by the learning technology department. There has been no compulsion for teaching staff to engage in this, or to deposit or share their materials as open resources or under a particular licensing framework. The repository has been promoted as part of various University schemes to recognize and celebrate innovation in teaching, but there has not been any specific incentive made available to encourage further creation of resources, or to reward those who make this a priority over some of their other commitments (research, publishing, and administration).

The University has also promoted its OER resources externally through national UK repositories such as Jorum, and commercial offerings such as iTunesU. There is an ongoing program of support to academic staff to create OER, but there is no current OER strategy in place. The Head of Learning Technology is a strong supporter of OER and is engaged with various national and international projects. Working with some of the more OER-aware academic leaders, he has drafted an OER strategy that has been reviewed and discussed by the Education Committee, but no decision has yet been made about the preferred approach to take. The advent of MOOCs has added complexity to the discussions.

## **MOOCs**

The University Senior Management team has observed the development of MOOCs with an interested but cautious eye. There has been quite a high level of interest generated by the national and international press that has reached the attention of some members of the Board of Governors, who have raised MOOCs as an agenda item at one of their meetings. The Vice Chancellor has also taken a personal interest in the issue; MOOCs are of particular interest to her because of the caliber of the US institutions

that have been taking the lead with MOOC development; these are peer organizations to the University so their significant investment in MOOCs is more relevant than for some other online ventures.

In parallel, the University has been approached by all main international MOOC players and by the UK MOOC platform, FutureLearn. It has had high-level meetings with some of the platforms and has pursued these discussions seriously but carefully, with a particular interest in understanding the contractual arrangements that would be put in place were the University to decide to partner with a particular platform, or platforms. The emphasis has been upon careful fact-finding in order to make an informed approach, but with an underlying sense that the University has no need to enter into this kind of venture unless it can see a very strong case to do so. As with any major strategic initiative with potential international visibility and impact, the governors and senior management consider that the risk to reputational loss through an ill-considered partnership far outweighs the disbenefit of being slow to engage, or not to engage at all. To date, the strategic decision has been not to engage with MOOCs, but to keep an open ear and mind, to pursue ongoing discussions with selected potential partners and dialogue with possible philanthropic investors.

Some private providers of online and distance learning have also managed to engage the University in dialogue about possible partnerships or mutually beneficial relationships. Engagement with private providers is also being considered but being treated with even greater caution than the University-led MOOC platforms. The benefits and terms of any engagement would need to be carefully appraised and accepted before any partnership might take shape, and this seems the least likely outcome of discussion.

The University is currently reviewing its position with regard to learning technology and plans to publish a new Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) strategy within the next 12 months. Both MOOCs and OER will feature in this strategy. The University is currently fact-finding and engaging in debate with senior engagement and local experts in order to determine its position. Part of the drafting of the strategy to date has included consultation with the academic body about their views on learning technology, and there has been a strong positive engagement in this exercise, not least because academic staff are also sensitive to the recent publicity about MOOCs in the media and are keen to propose suggestions for the development of both OER and MOOCs. The student body is also interested and enthusiastic about activities that enhance the global reach and brand of the University, and surveys have shown that they are supportive of the current range of open ventures. Their attitude toward MOOCs that would be open freely to anyone has not yet been tested.

There is also discussion in the University about offering online materials to a more limited and select group, either alumni or the current staff and student body, or perhaps both. The Harvard move to offer Small Private Online Courses has generated interest and attention, and will also be considered as part of the new TEL strategy.

The University will wish to carefully harness the enthusiasm of both teachers and students and to build upon it, while carefully managing its outward-facing provision and brand. Quality assurance will be of paramount importance, starting from the selection of appropriate courses and the team who would create the course, and running through the set of processes that would be put in place to ensure appropriate quality of

materials and support. Any decision to engage with MOOCs will be carefully handled and is likely to be very limited in the first instance, with perhaps one or two pilots. It is also likely that pilots would be hosted by a local platform rather than through partnership with an existing platform, due to the overriding desire to manage and protect the University brand.

## **Key points**

- Some of the most elite global institutions are very cautious about engaging with online learning and MOOCs in particular.
- Their desire to maintain their brand and reputation is stronger than the drive to embrace change or the risk of being perceived as laggardly and out of date.
- They are highly sensitive to the attitudes of their main competitors and are influenced by the decisions that their peers make.
- Although they are not interested in joining large consortia, they are interested in partnerships, as long as they are “the right kind.”
- These universities are very attractive to both private and public investors. We should expect to see some interesting partnerships emerge, as this new wave of investment in online education continues to develop.