

# Key issues that emerged from the case studies



This chapter draws out the main conclusions from the six case studies and provides a picture of the most significant decisions that universities are making about Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and the approaches that they are taking to planning and implementing them.

## Imperatives for engagement in MOOCs

There are a range of different reasons as to why institutions are engaging in MOOCs. As we see from the case studies, some universities have very specific agendas that they wish to pursue, for example, the **entrepreneurial** institutions, which are investing heavily in developing MOOCs as part of an explicit strategic agenda: to establish themselves as key innovators in learning technology and also to enhance their international brand.

For others, particularly those with a strategic commitment to **online and distance learning**, MOOCs are potentially a major threat and these organizations are investing actively in a strategy that builds upon their existing expertise. They are selectively investing in MOOCs that help showcase their strengths and highlight their existing portfolio, and treading a careful line between using MOOCs to market themselves without undercutting their current business models and income streams. These institutions are potentially in a high-risk game: MOOCs have the potential to seriously disrupt their business over relatively short timescales, in a way that they do not for more traditional institutions.

For other institutions, in particular the **cautious experimenters**, the engagement with an MOOC platform may be based upon a desire to maintain their position in a competitive market, so although they do wish to invest in innovation in learning, their approach owes more to “keeping up with the competition” than trying to lead the way. For these institutions, working with MOOC platforms seems to provide a lower risk way to engage with MOOCs, without having to invest heavily in infrastructure, systems, or processes.

There is another strong motivating factor: to examine actively some of the promises that have been made about the benefits of MOOCs to universities. These institutions are also interested in testing out whether MOOCs may lead to higher application rates for some courses, may develop international markets, and may also encourage local academic staff to try out learning technologies with local students.

In some cases, this range of possible benefits are all being explored through just one or two small-scale MOOC experiments. For these institutions, it may be challenging to understand in any depth whether their MOOCs have brought these benefits or not, given the number of different factors at play, the limited timescales, and the small

number of experiments carried out. They will no doubt be watching their colleagues and competitors closely before they make decisions about whether to continue to run MOOCs, to increase or cease investment.

This speaks to the more general agenda about innovation in higher education. As we have noted earlier, faced by challenge and opportunity, the higher education system is in need of reform and investment decisions need to be made carefully and well. However, a consistently conservative approach to investing in change (“do nothing and hope for the best”) does not make strategic sense. For some, the problem stems from lack of clear strategy for the future upon which to base decisions—whether they are about investing in MOOCs, another significant new venture, or making other disruptive decisions, such as refocusing or ceasing research efforts, new partnerships, or growth. In the MOOC area, as for many others, the key point is for the institution to understand what it plans to achieve through the investment, to commit to putting in place adequate resources, systems, and processes plus senior management sponsorship, in order to really test out the possibilities, and to be clear about how they evaluate the success of the venture. Without this, they risk missing out on an opportunity to make the right strategic decision about their future strategy for online learning.

## **Governance and decision making**

The most striking aspect of MOOC development has been the speed at which universities and colleges have committed reputation and resources to them. When we consider the governance and decision making that has gone on behind the scenes in order to make this possible, the reason behind this becomes clear. In all the case studies that we describe, the mandate to “do MOOCs” has come from the senior management of the institution, many cases, specifically by the Vice Chancellor (or equivalent). In other cases, the drive has come from the senior management team, championed by one or two members of the team who are working at a very senior level within the organization.

There are helpful and unhelpful aspects to this level of senior sponsorship to the MOOC project. It is mostly positive, as it means that decisions are made much faster than usual and potential barriers that may usually crop up, either through formal decision-making routes or a lack of impetus for investment in change, are easily removed or circumvented. The less positive side is that it can at times lead to a situation where the MOOC project has not been properly embedded into institutional processes and procedures, such as quality assurance, and these processes need to be retrofitted after the fact, rather than before. There can also be a lot of pressure on stretched resources to “get the MOOC out there” which can be challenging for staff if they have been entering into new partnerships and dealing with sensitive issues such as copyright and academic ownership for digital resources.

Overall, though, senior sponsorship is positive for the MOOC project and also for related institutional strategies. In many cases, it has raised the profile of online learning much more broadly, and will lead to more comprehensive and longer term debates about institutional strategy in this area.

This includes developing the institutional approach to online learning (including the local strategy for blended learning) with the engagement and support of senior decision-makers, an approach that will lead to more focused use of resources, more support for change, and, ultimately, a better student experience.

## Quality assurance

There are three approaches to quality assurance (QA) described in the case studies. The first is to use the QA processes that are already in place in the university. This has the advantage of giving similar importance to QA for MOOCs as for traditional courses, and should be quick and easy to put in place. The disadvantage may be that the current QA processes are based upon a slow life cycle for the development of new courses, and this can restrict the speed at which MOOCs can be made available.

The second approach is to circumvent the usual QA processes and put in place lightweight processes, where the sponsorship group for the MOOC project makes decisions about when the MOOC is ready to “go live.” This model works well in terms of speed and is probably acceptable for developing just one or two MOOCs, where the institution is under pressure to complete and launch the MOOC, but has risks attached to it as the QA may be fragmented and there is a risk that all the key aspects of the MOOC may not be scrutinized as carefully as they need to be. It can, however, be difficult to move from this model to either the first or third approach, particularly if the institution has not yet decided to commit strategically to MOOCs.

The third approach is to develop new, thorough QA processes specifically for the MOOC project or program. Some of these processes may be based upon existing QA arrangements, particularly where these already exist for online programs, but they will have been adapted so that they work particularly well for the MOOC model. The **institutional innovators** case study provides a good example of this approach. It is the most in-depth and thorough model, and is also the most expensive and complex to implement, and may feel like overkill for a university that has not yet decided whether to commit to MOOCs in the medium or long term.

## Partnerships and MOOC models

Partnerships are emerging as a key factor for a growing number of MOOCs. These may be partnerships with other institutions, with charities and other not-for-profit organizations, or with commercial organizations. Universities are actively seeking ways to work with their existing partners to develop MOOCs together, for example, working with another academic institution through a global consortium. They are also working with professional associations to develop MOOCs jointly, and putting in place creative approaches to course design and accreditation that build upon the respective expertise of each partner.

This is in addition to the key partnerships that underpin membership of the MOOC platforms, where universities and the MOOC platforms are working together under the terms of specific legal and financial arrangements. These partnerships are also part of the MOOC experiment and part of the overall learning experience, and will no doubt lead to a range of different approaches being explored in the future.

## **Costs and business models**

The costs of developing and business models for sustaining MOOCs are the key factors in the decision to invest in development and require more detailed analysis, and are each discussed in detail in Chapters 13 and 14.

We will also use the experience of the case studies, and accepted good practice for the management of projects and programs, to set out, in the next chapter, a summary of the main steps involved in MOOC development.