

Internal Perspectives of MOOCs in Universities

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Abstract. Since 2012, the vision of MOOCs in universities has been evolving rapidly. Universities that have decided to place a serious bet for including this kind of courses in their portfolio have involved a diverse set of staff roles within the institution. In most cases, with the exception of fully dedicated staff members hired for the sole purpose of MOOC development, MOOC related tasks are assigned to staff that already performs other roles in the institution. This is the case, among others, for lecturers, learning designers, multimedia producers, and PhD students who have dedicated part of their professional time to this new form of online education delivery. This study aims to capture the reflection of such professionals in two European universities, around their involvement in MOOC production and implementation. A series of interviews, both individual and in group, have been conducted to determine how MOOCs have influenced their practice, and what their vision is with regards of the role of MOOCs within their institutions. A preliminary analysis of the results suggests that those engaged in the production of MOOCs see these courses as beneficial to the institution, and more support and incentives to this end would be desirable.

Keywords: Higher Education Institutions; Educators' Perspectives; Institutional Strategies

1 Introduction

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have been part of the educational catalogue of many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) long enough for these being able to assess their challenges and opportunities with factual experience, rather than from speculation.

There has been discussion on why Universities should offer MOOCs, both in Europe [6], and in the US [7]. There have also been comparative studies suggesting that European HEIs are keener than American ones on embracing MOOCs, and European HEIs motivations are more in the lines of educational innovation rather than financial [8]. Educational innovation and experimentation was also identified as the main motivating factor reported in Higher Education magazines [9].

Many of these discussions about the direction MOOCs are taking are based on the impressions of learning technologies commentators, and on surveys often addressed at professors and decision makers who are not always involved in the production of these

courses, such as the yearly surveys carried out in the US [1] and the survey carried out in Europe [8]. However, there is less literature published that delves into the perspectives of those who are actually involved in the creation of MOOCs such as academics who create the content, learning designers who make it pedagogically sound, and teaching assistants who help delivering the materials. This project aims to reproduce these voices, and to share the perspectives of such a stakeholders group. In order to diagnose the current situation of how MOOCs the influence of MOOCs is perceived within HEIs, a set of research questions have been formulated:

- What opportunities do staff involved in MOOCs development identify for their institutions?
- What challenges are faced when developing these MOOC?
- What is the role of MOOCs in the digital transformation of such institutions?
- What are the needs and demands of staff involved in MOOC development

2 Methodology

2.1 The institutions

Two European universities have started this research study. The first one (i1) is a British university, which became a FutureLearn partner 2013. This institution currently (as for January 2017) offers 16 MOOCs, and has 5 more in the pipeline. The second institution (i2) is a Spanish university, which joined as a new member of the edX Consortium in 2014. So far, this institution has offered several runs of eight MOOCs, and has 4 more in the pipeline. More than 90.000 learners have enrolled in their courses. Two more universities have agreed to participate in a further stage of the project.

2.2 Methods

A qualitative methodology is used for this study. The first batch of data has been collected in i2 through semi-structured interviews. The chosen analysis method was Template Analysis [10], a variation of Thematic Analysis by which a set of themes identified by the researchers is used as a template to analyse a dataset. Template analysis was the chosen method because it sits between two more traditional methods: thematic analysis, which provides flexibility but requires a big deal of interpretation; and content analysis, which provides a solid structure to the analysis but allows little room for interpretation and addition of emerging themes. The template in this case was created from the list of responses in stage 1, and was applied to the transcripts of the interviews in stage 2. The following sections contain a more detailed description of the data collection stages of this project.

Phase 1: the World Cafe.

A half-day event was prepared in i1, where all members of staff involved in MOOCs production and implementation were invited, and total of 34 attended. These were 11 educators, 5 learning designers, 10 mentors, 2 media producers, 1 librarian, 2 legal services members, 1 partnering MOOC platform representative, and 2 administrators.

The data collection instrument was the so-called World Cafe [10]. This is a method aimed at collecting comprehensive views of large sets of participants in an organisation,

usually used to extract insights of all members of staff on matters concerning an organisational change, process, approach, or new technology. The inclusion of MOOCs as a new educational technology is therefore a suitable object of study with an instrument such as the World Cafe approach.

The participants were asked a set of questions related to the research questions. These were the following:

The output of the participants was transcribed in one document, which was used to compile a list of themes that conformed the template for the analysis of the interviews in i2. These themes were divided into three categories: challenges, opportunities, and requests.

- Challenges: there are challenges inherent to the production of learning materials in new formats such as MOOCs, such as reputational risk and uncertainties about future directions.
- There are also inherent opportunities that engaging in MOOCs can bring.
- Staff involved in MOOC production have needs and requests for a successful implementation of MOOCs in the institution.

Phase 2. The interviews

A set of eleven semi-structured interviews of around 15 minutes were conducted in i2. The participants in the interviews were staff directly involved in MOOC production and delivery: 4 professors, 4 lecturers, 2 PhD students working as teaching assistants, and an instructional designer. The academics were from varying disciplines, namely philosophy, computer science, chemistry, literature, and law. The questions were the same as those asked in the first stage in i1. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The transcripts of these interviews were then analysed against the template created in stage 1. The analysis was carried out by researchers from both i1 and i2.

3 Results and discussion

The respondents provided a wide variety of comments on their perspectives about the influence of MOOCs on the educational offerings of their institution.

3.1 Challenges

Adapting to new tools and processes: Many of i2 participants mentioned their own lack of experience in the use of tools and processes for producing online learning materials, as the participant below states (translated into English by the researchers):

“The challenge was facing a new tool. I had the materials and the teaching experience, but I had no idea how to structure these materials” (professor in Literature)

Meeting deadlines: Time management was a highly commented challenge in i1, and there were mentions also in i2. This is connected to the theme above regarding the adaptation to new tools and processes. MOOCs are projects with many actors involved, the coordination of which can be challenging [12], as the participant below states:

“We had to learn on the go. Most of our challenges were time related. You see the deadline coming and the project is still far from complete. And it is not only the MOOC office work, it is also the input from the academics, who have their own workload and priorities too” (Learning technologist)

3.2 Opportunities

Social mission, free education: The opportunities of MOOCs as free education providers have not been widely identified within the top strategic motivations of universities [6;9], although there has been discussion about their potential to provide a service to developing countries [14,15] with opposed sceptical views in that respect [16]. When asked about the opportunities offered by producing MOOCs, these theme was recurrent:

“MOOCs offer access to knowledge to all citizens in a highly affordable way thanks to new technologies and the flexibility in terms of timing, dedication, and availability. This is a fundamental right, and it is actually my main motivation for doing MOOCs” (Lecturer in Law)

3.3 Requests

Incentives: Given the time and effort involved in developing MOOCs, there were certain requests that educators would made if they had the opportunity:

“More institutional support is needed. I was several months working in this course. At least, the institution could recognized the time in this task as regular teaching hours” (Professor in literature)

Investment in resources: More investment in resources for technology enhanced learning was a recurring request from educators developing MOOCs. These demands were about both technological and human:

“Nowadays, the institution provides us with several tools for the generation of audio-visual material, however, there are new tools that can help us to make better resources” (Professor in Law)

4 Conclusion

This paper has reported the views of practitioners involved in MOOCs development and delivery towards the influence of this kind of courses in their institution. This preliminary analysis suggests that practitioners involved in MOOCs do so with a positive attitude. They believe in the benefits of open education. These are inclined to create externally facing materials, a window to the outside world through which they can showcase their work, and to provide free education to those who need it.

However, the involvement in these projects comes at a cost. Academics have to face the challenges of delivering in formats that are new to them, such as talking to a camera,

and writing materials under the scrutiny of large, diverse, and unknown audiences. This is one of the reasons why these courses require academics running the extra mile, devoting working time on top of their assigned duties and responsibilities. This is why a very common demand from these educators is institutional recognition of their efforts, mainly in the form of contact hours reduction. They also demand more internal communication and dissemination of these courses, beyond their externally facing intention. Unawareness of these courses within the institution's students is seen as detrimental to their sustainability. Another common demand is much more institutional investment in resources to support the creation of these courses, as it is believed that they are soon to become an excellence indicator.

This project will be completed by reviewing the template for the analysis, and increasing the sample of institutions in order to obtain views from a wider pool of participants.

Acknowledgments

Work partially funded by the Madrid Regional Government with grant No. S2013/ICE-2715, the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness project Flexor (TIN2014-52129-R). Special thanks are due to the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and the University of Southampton for their support in this cross-institutional collaboration, and to their staff for their participation in this study

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