The University of York and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)

Background

In October 2015, University Executive Board (The Board) approved a proposal from the Department of External Relations to engage in the development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and to join the FutureLearn Consortium to enable the University to use the FutureLearn platform to deliver these courses.

In the first instance UEB approved an initial pilot programme to deliver four MOOCs over the next 18 months. A MOOC Steering Group, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning, Professor John Robinson, has been established to provide academic leadership of the pilot. The Steering Group is now seeking proposals of interest from the York academic community to devise and deliver MOOCs during the 2015/16 and 2016/17 academic years.

Pilot objectives

The Board has established four key objectives for engaging with MOOC development at York, and these will inform the selection of the first tranche of MOOCs:
- To enhance the University's reputation for innovation in teaching and the provision of a rich student experience
- To showcase the strength of York's programmes, with the potential to engage new and diverse audiences
- To support the University's objectives in demonstrating research impact and to enhance student recruitment
- To develop partnerships with other institutions, and identify potential commercial and scalable distance learning opportunities.

How can you engage?

The pilot project is being directed by a MOOC Steering Group, comprising the Chair Professor John Robinson (PVC for Learning, Teaching and Students); Iain Barr (Learning Enhancement Manager, Lifelong Learning); Joan Concannon (Director of External Relations); Alison Kerwin (Director of Strategic Marketing and Digital Communications); Jane Lund (Online Teaching and Learning Manager and Tutor in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work); Professor Mark Ormrod (Dean of the Faculty for the Arts and Humanities); and Dr Richard Walker (E-Learning Development Team Manager).

Staff are invited to an open meeting and workshop with a team from FutureLearn on **Wednesday 20 April 2016** from 1pm to 4pm (venue to be confirmed). The meeting will begin with a short briefing session explaining in more detail why the University has joined the FutureLearn Consortium, and enable staff to ask any questions they may have about MOOC development in the pilot phase. The FutureLearn team will also explain their approach to learner engagement, how to use the platform to teach at scale, and the practicalities of developing and facilitating a MOOC.

Please complete the Doodle or email iain.barr@york.ac.uk to register interest.

Staff are invited to put forward suggestions for MOOC development using the MOOC Proposal Form; all members of staff involved in delivering or supporting learning and teaching are eligible to apply. Applications must be endorsed by the Head of Department or Chair of Board of Studies/Departmental Teaching Committee, or equivalent. The deadline for receipt of proposals is **Wednesday 4 May 2016** and should be emailed to iain.barr@york.ac.uk.

A decision will be made by the MOOC Steering Group within two weeks of the deadline for receipt of proposals. Applicants will be informed of the outcome via email.

Rationale for engaging with MOOCs
The recent Distance Learning report from Sero HE advised within its ten-point action plan that York should become a member of FutureLearn (or an alternative MOOC provider). This recommendation reflected the University Strategy:

> *'We will grow our distance learning provision… grow student numbers on our existing distance learning programmes… and encourage departments to establish new distance learning programmes… give it a strong identity and provide a forum for sharing of good practice.'*

Whilst we are aware that MOOCs and distance learning are not the same, there is an amount of synergy between them and the development of MOOCS will, it is hoped, complement the development of longer, credit-bearing distance learning programmes.

When MOOCs first came to the fore in 2012, the scope of their potential impact was dramatic, with some speculating that they represented the end of the existing higher education model as we know it. Such extreme opinions have become largely moderated and the initial hype surrounding MOOCs subsided, and the general consensus is that MOOCs could play a valuable role in supporting the delivery of higher education, contributing to the public engagement agenda and providing a vehicle to engage with potential future students.

What is a MOOC?
Within the FutureLearn portfolio, there is no standard model of a MOOC, with courses lasting between two and eight weeks. Anyone considering developing a MOOC is strongly advised to sign up for some of the free courses on offer at futurelearn.com to explore different approaches currently undertaken at other institutions. The primary characteristics of MOOCs are:
● They are online courses, with no formal entry requirement
● There tends to be no limit on learner numbers
● MOOCs are free of charge (though some MOOCs offer additional resources/examinations for a supplementary fee)
● Usually students do not earn credits
● The majority of MOOC participants already have a degree (upwards of 70 per cent in some cases).

Learners register for a course which begins on a given date, and materials are then made available each week, with learners working for between two to six hours a week in their own time: watching short videos, reading recommended materials, taking quizzes, participating in discussions and undertaking short exercises for peer review. Learners who complete a course may be awarded a statement of completion, and some MOOCs are now exploring the option to award credit via a closed examination at an approved centre at the conclusion of the learning.

Who are the learners?
People sign up for MOOCs from a range of social and educational backgrounds, and from a variety of countries. The content of the MOOC can have a significant impact on who engages in a particular course with regard to age and gender. Learners offer a wide variety of reasons for registering:
● Testing the water to determine if a subject is right before enrolling in formal education
● Simply for the pleasure of learning
● Refreshing and enhancing existing knowledge
● Teachers looking for tips for their own teaching
● Exploring what online learning and MOOCs are like
● Lifelong learners
● Gaining a certificate and enhancing career prospects
● No other provision available locally.

You can find out more at about.futurelearn.com/blog/measuring-our-first-eight-courses.

Teachers
From an academic perspective, MOOCs represent a different way of teaching and learning, and institutionally there are lessons that may be applied to distance learning and how we demonstrate impact. MOOC leaders elsewhere have cited several reasons for choosing to engage, including:
● Potential to connect with a huge audience of enthusiastic learners
● Potential to connect with other subject specialists
● Demonstrating commitment to widening access and widening participation
● Potential for testing new pedagogic approaches
● Opportunities to showcase subject areas not taught at A level to enhance understanding of a degree programme
● Opportunities to develop partnerships to deliver innovative teaching.

Why FutureLearn?
Since 2012, FutureLearn has become a key player in the world of online learning, and grown significantly from an initial 12-partner HEI to now include 85 partners from the UK, Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. It recently reported having more than three million registered learners, with an average of 12,000 students on each course it hosts. With Manchester and Durham joining the consortium in late 2015, the majority of Russell Group institutions are now offering FutureLearn MOOCs.

By using the FutureLearn platform, York will be able to engage with MOOC development without the need to invest in additional infrastructure. Moreover, the exact role that MOOCs will play in the evolution of higher education is still to be determined at this nascent stage. Through partnership with FutureLearn, York can engage with the MOOC dialogue while minimising institutional risk.

Other considerations

Learner numbers
As indicated above, the 'Massive' element of MOOCs is no exaggeration, with FutureLearn seeing an average of 12,000 learners on each course offered. One of the criticisms of MOOCs, however, has been that although large numbers of learners sign up, the majority may not complete. However, this assessment of MOOCs is tied to a view of how traditional higher education courses operate; the learners' motivation for engaging may well not be aligned to the same measures of success that we currently hold. MOOC learners tend to pick and choose what they want to learn, and therefore 'completion' for them may not relate to undertaking the entire course. Instead, they have used the opportunity to learn what they wanted to learn and then opted to leave.

Moreover, even taking account of the high dropouts rates often reported by some case studies, such are the high starting numbers that most MOOCs are still left with a significant number of students at the conclusion.

Workload
Given the range of learning and teaching activities that the academic community undertakes, the issue of time commitment is important. Research by the Chronicle of Higher Education found that it typically took 100 hours of academic time to design a MOOC, and then eight to ten hours per week to deliver and support it while the course was running. This figure is provided as an indicator only – for a shorter MOOC (and there is increasing evidence to suggest that three-week courses are becoming more popular), less work may well be involved, and the use of a PGWT team to support facilitation could share the delivery workload. Within the pilot phase, we are also keen to explore the possibility of team-taught MOOCs. Academics should also take into account design and quality

assurance cycles when considering workload; this will be explored in more detail at the Open Event in April, and the role of FutureLearn and the steering group within those processes.

Resources

Centrally, there is support available for the development of MOOCs, primarily with regard to the cost of producing high quality video, infographics and other media. Potential MOOC developers should ideally have experience of setting clear learning objectives, and designing online teaching activities to realise those same objectives; FutureLearn will, however, be outlining their specific approach to designing MOOCs as effective tools for teaching and learning in April.

Any support required should be indicated on the MOOC proposal form.

Any enquiries should be directed to iain.barr@york.ac.uk in the first instance.

References

Honeywell (2013) *A First Briefing on MOOCs [online]. Available at* http://www.flnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/A_First_Briefing_on_MOOCs.pdf