

Innovative impact

MOOCs continue to rapidly evolve. The MOOC movement now has many different faces and is far more complex and nuanced than simply being a platform where traditional elite universities offer free online courses to help promote their international brands. Indeed, with the emergence of the third wave or generation of MOOC, and more specifically new global alliances and flexible credit earning pathways contributing to micro-credentials and even full degree programmes, many governments, policy-makers and institutional leaders would benefit from deeper appreciation and understanding of the evolution of the MOOC. Recent developments illustrate how the MOOC is starting to influence thinking about the nature of traditional campus-based education and through new alliances opening up opportunities for more flexible credit earning models of continuing professional development and life-long learning. It follows that we can expect the MOOC movement will continue to evolve. The choice is whether to standby and watch on the sidelines or embrace opportunities to innovate and help shape how we harness new and emerging models of online learning to create better futures for all.

Why Invest in MOOCs?

Strategic Institutional Drivers

Introduction

This brief paper asks the question why do higher education institutions continue to invest in MOOCs and what are the perceived strategic benefits? The inverse of this question also invites readers to reflect on, and infer why, the MOOC movement has not been a strategic priority for many European governments, universities and higher education providers. In attempting to answer this overarching question the MOOC is shown to be a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, which is something not fully appreciated in the research literature, policy language and related popular debates. After establishing that MOOCs can have many difference faces, which vary pedagogically in both style and substance, the remainder of the paper then reflects on three waves or generations of the MOOC movement since its inception. A range of different MOOC drivers and potential opportunities is then outlined and the paper concludes that the “third wave” of the MOOC movement requires a more strategic response from governments, policy-makers and institutional leaders.

Not a single entity

An anchoring premise of this paper is that both critics and proponents of the MOOC movement are often guilty of treating “the MOOC” as a single entity. Put another way too often the xMOOC by popular definition is seen as having the same common traits, features and characteristics -- irrespective of quite different contexts, design models and delivery platforms. The basic argument is the conception of the MOOC as a single entity is overly simplistic. After all, it would be naïve to claim, for example, that all face-to-face teaching has the same design qualities, benefits and outcomes. There are many different ways of designing and delivering face-to-face instruction and even the traditional lecture has many variations. It follows that not all face-to-face teaching is good and therefore the delivery mode by itself should not be uncritically treated as the “Gold Standard” of high quality teaching.

In a similar vein, “online learning” as an alternative delivery mode, which includes the MOOC as an important subset, has many different faces. Thus the MOOC needs to be understood as a multi-faceted phenomenon. Therefore, we should be wary of narrow binary debates and sweeping generalisations about either the upside or downside of MOOCs as they are both unhelpful and problematic. The key point or main takeaway message is the research literature tells us quite conclusively that delivery mode alone is not the major factor when it comes to determining the quality and effectiveness of instruction ([Siemens, Gasevic & Dawson, 2015](#)).

Best practices

Institutions committed to innovating with and harnessing the potential of MOOCs are increasingly:

- Looking at ways of integrating MOOCs into the learning experiences of campus-based students.
- Experimenting with MOOCs to push the boundaries and design features of more common virtual learning environments (VLEs).
- Seeing MOOCs as a means of increasing the level of choice and variety of course offerings for all students.
- Taking advantage of MOOCs to help promote readiness and the academic capital of prospective students.
- Integrating MOOCs as part of a strategy to internationalise the curriculum.
- Exploring ways of offering scholarships for MOOC completion to international students living in developing countries.
- Using data collected through MOOCs to build institutional capacity and capability in the area of learning analytics
- Adopting MOOCs as part of a wider dissemination plan for major research projects.
- Using MOOCs as a resource and opportunity to promote effective online learners as an important outcome in itself.
- Exploring the advantages of closer collaboration with other institutions offering MOOCs on the same platform, including conjoint degree programmes.

There are many other important factors to consider in the design of effective instruction, such as teachers' beliefs, underlying pedagogical assumptions, learning intentions, type of subject discipline, learners' pre-conceptions and background experiences, and the wider instructional culture, to name a few. What this point illustrates is the importance of ensuring that the MOOC as a multi-faceted educational experience is not disconnected from wider pedagogical considerations about the potential of new and emerging 21st Century models of digital learning. In this respect the MOOC is part of a wider and ever-changing digital learning ecology, which is not restricted to particular delivery modes.

Three MOOC waves

Mindful of the danger of sweeping generalisations this section outlines three main waves in the development of xMOOCs since they first became a distinctive feature of the higher education online learning landscape. The metaphor of waves is adopted to indicate fluid boundaries between each period of development and how as a force they continue to wash together and ebb and flow in shaping the evolution of the MOOC movement.

Wave 1 - MOOCs for marketing

Early adopters from mostly traditional elite universities primarily valued the xMOOC as a powerful global marketing tool ([Allen & Seaman, 2014](#)). Although a nest of other drivers are typically associated with the origins of the MOOC movement, including the language of access, flexibility and opening up higher education to all, this claim is evidenced in the findings of the annual [Allen and Seaman \(2014\)](#) survey of online learning in the United States. The authors report the two most cited reasons for introducing MOOCs were marketing-related: (i) to "increase the visibility of the institution" and (ii) to "drive student recruitment".

[Hollands and Tirthali \(2014\)](#) report a similar trend from interviews with more than 80 educational leaders across a range of predominantly US-based institutions, with 41% identifying "building and maintaining their brand" as the key reason for offerings MOOCs. Many sceptics at the time viewed the MOOC as simply a clever marketing ploy by some of the world's top universities to reinforce the value of traditional face-to-face teaching where students get a *real* education. That said, with the benefit of hindsight this interpretation may be overly theorised, as the "fear of missing out" (FOMO) appears to have also played an important role in early university initiatives.

Wave 2 - MOOCs for life-long learning

It is generally accepted that Europe was much slower than the United States to embrace the potential of MOOCs, although the level of interest grew quickly over this second wave, with the launch of the [OpenUpEd](#) portal and several [European funded projects](#) (e.g., EMMA, HOME, MOONLITE & SCORE2020), along with the increasing profile and development of the UK-based [FutureLearn](#) platform.

Importantly, during this period major initiatives were developed in Italy, France and Spain that rarely attract the attention they deserve in the brief history of MOOCs published in English speaking publications. For example, the [FUN MOOC platform](#) in France has developed almost 500 courses and registered more than one million learners. It also needs to be noted that down under in Australia the [Open2Study platform](#) managed by [Open Universities Australia](#) (OUA) attracted a small foothold in the emerging MOOC market with over 50 courses and a million learners. Other regional developments occurred typically using the EdX platform in countries like China, India, Indonesia, Mexico and Russia along with an Arabic platform serving the Middle East.

A notable difference emerged in the drivers between early MOOC initiatives in Europe and the United States, with the primary objective of "Increasing student recruitment" not featuring highly in the equivalent institutional survey ([Jansen & Schuwer, 2015](#)). Notably, the goals of "Generating income", "Learning about scaling" and "Exploring cost reductions" were perceived to be the least important objectives to institutions in all three European surveys (2014, 2015, 2016). In contrast the goal of "Increasing flexible learning opportunities" continues to feature prominently and was the most important institutional objective in the 2017 iteration of the annual European survey ([Jansen & Konings, 2017](#)).

Although speculative there is reason to believe that during this period the rapid growth of MOOCs in continental Europe was influenced by the long tradition of viewing higher education as a "public good" and the value placed on promoting access to life-long learning. That said, it would be naïve not to acknowledge economic factors, such as the influence of high youth unemployment in some European countries and perceived skill gaps in key industries as macro-level drivers for the development of MOOCs. There is also reason to believe based on an analysis of the Open Education practices, beliefs and strategies in five European countries (France, Germany, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom) that over this period supporting regional and national policies were important enablers in supporting the growth of MOOCs ([Imamorato, Mitic & Morais, 2016](#)).

Wave 3 - MOOCs for credit and CPD pathways

Over the past year the European MOOC movement has evolved with the rapid emergence of new credit earning pathways and business models that more explicitly target the continuing professional development (CPD) market. For example, in early 2017 [FutureLearn](#) introduced its first suite of online degrees through a strategic partnership with [Deakin University](#) and more recently Coventry University with the latter planning to develop 50 programmes over the next 5-years. A number of other universities around the World are known to be negotiating to join this special "degree partner" status within FutureLearn, which adopts a business model not dissimilar from the major airline alliances (e.g., [Oneworld](#) or [Star Alliance](#)).

In a similar vein, the [Virtual Exchange Alliance](#) was formally launched in early 2017 as a partnership between eight leading institutions around the World, including Delft University of Technology, Leiden University, Wageningen University in The Netherlands. The stated intention is to open up the curriculum to students from partner universities and use MOOCs to forge cross-boundary and cross-cultural awareness, knowledge and friendships around the globe without having to leave your own Country.

In October 2017 the [European MOOC Consortium](#) (EMC) was launched with a goal to "strengthen the continuing education sector by increasing the credibility and visibility of MOOCs, by developing a framework for the recognition of micro-credentials, and by working towards the adoption of that framework by stakeholders across Europe". This initiative is another sign of the growing convergence between major European MOOC initiatives and the willingness to collaborate rather than compete. A related collaborative development in the first half of 2018 was the launch of EADTU's [Mobility Matrix](#) designed to support joint Masters programmes and greater virtually mobility across European universities.

The above developments, coupled with emergence of "Nano degrees" and "Micro Masters" from major US platforms, is likely over the next few years to fundamentally change the current MOOC landscape. While free MOOCs have never been more popular, with almost 80 million learners registering for an online course in 2017 (Class Central, 2018), the combination of new building blocks, flexible pathways and international alliances leading to recognition of credit for university-level study is arguably the most significant new development.

Looking to the future

It is almost impossible to predict how this third wave will evolve but MOOCs are certainly not going away. Interestingly, in Germany there is even a proposal following a recent [feasibility study](#) to establish a national platform for online learning. This development highlights once again the role that central and regional governments can play in enabling innovative new models of online learning consistent with the aims of the recently launched [Digital Education Action Plan](#) for Europe. In Ireland my own university is taking some of the latest MOOC developments seriously. Indeed, we see MOOCs as an important driver and enabler for fostering a strong culture of innovation in teaching and learning. Notably, our plans include using MOOCs, even those offered from other institutions, as a core feature of the campus-based learning experience. Moreover, carefully selected MOOCs integrated within the student experience provide a vehicle to help internationalise the curriculum. We also see MOOCs as a valuable resource for promoting readiness, academic capital and successful transition to higher education. Increasingly we expect MOOCs will be aligned with our wider goals of research dissemination and provide a platform for the development of conjoint programmes and CDP pathways with other institutions. As Ireland's first "University of Sanctuary" we are also exploring ways of using MOOCs to extend our current scholarships for refugees and asylum seekers for online study. Lastly, we also see learning how to become an effective online learner through MOOCs as an important outcome in itself, and valuable preparation for living and earning in the 21st Century. Hence at Dublin City University the MOOC has many dimensions that go well beyond being seen as simply a platform for institutional branding.

Conclusion

The strategic question for other governments, policy-makers and institutional leaders is how should they respond to the third wave of the MOOC? In many respects this question requires more serious debate about why we should continue to invest in traditional models of education even though we know not all face-to-face teaching is effective—nor is it accessible to all. These issues aside the "new reality" is that the many and varied faces of the MOOC, as outlined above, are beginning to open up new credit earning pathways and fundamentally challenge traditional binary conceptions between on-campus and off-campus models of learning. The choice for governments, policy-makers and educational leaders is to either ignore these developments or play an active role in helping to shape new learning models and pathways that prepare life-long learners and citizens for better futures.

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