

UCU policy position on MOOCs

UCU Policy and Campaigns Team

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INTRODUCTION

The sections below outline the basis of a UCU position on MOOCs (with key elements in bold). These build on the union's policy in areas such as online learning, widening access and for-profit education and are informed by a recent consultation with members at the 21 UK universities involved in the FutureLearn project.

ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

UCU supports the original goals of MOOCs: to offer free, high quality education to anyone and everyone with internet access. In principle, MOOCs represent the further democratisation of knowledge (albeit limited to those with proper internet access) and can be a good way for people to engage with higher learning with minimal barriers to entry.

At the same time, there is legitimate scepticism about the capacity of MOOCs to widen access to higher education. Although research into the 'MOOC demographic' is in its infancy, there is evidence to suggest that the majority of MOOC learners already have a higher level qualification. **UCU, therefore, calls for more research and evidence on the impact of MOOCs on 'first step' in to HE learners and learning returners.**

While MOOCs may make access to education easier for individuals with certain disabilities, their format may also render the courses inaccessible to individuals who have a vision or hearing impairment. **It is, therefore, important that MOOC websites are designed to work with assistive technology and include captions or transcriptions.**

In terms of widening access, we are also concerned that a preoccupation with celebrity academics offering MOOCs at 'elite' universities can conceal the fact that good lecturers and courses, particularly the online variety, can be found in non-research intensive institutions.

In the United States some policy-makers have sought to promote MOOCs as a 'low-cost' alternative for learners from poorer backgrounds. For example, in 2013 the California Senate proposed legislation:

- to require colleges to accept a number of MOOC courses for academic credit
- to create a new system of HE (the New University of California), which would not offer courses but provide credit based on examinations.

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Fortunately, these proposals were abandoned as a result of vocal opposition from universities, staff and students.

In the UK MOOCs have not been promoted in this way but we should be alert to the dangers of politicians or vice-chancellors developing them as 'cheap' alternatives to either high cost distance learning or traditional higher education.

COMMERCIALISATION AND CASUALISATION

The commercialised nature of MOOCs remains one of the UCU's major concerns.

In the United States, for example, idealistic goals around MOOCs soon morphed into 'elite' university partnerships with venture capitalists and for-profit education companies.¹ So far this has not been a major issue with the UK's FutureLearn, where the only financial investment appears to have come from the Open University. FutureLearn has been set up as a separate for-profit company, although at the moment there appears to no intention of forming a partnership with venture capitalists.

At the same time, we need to keep a close eye on the corporate structure of FutureLearn, particularly as they are looking at how learners are able to buy statements of accomplishment.

The development of tiered approaches (eg charging for a statement or certificate that was previously part of the free MOOC experience for users) ties in with wider concerns about *'MOOCs as a potential agent for the "unbundling" of learning and teaching functions to make them more ripe for commercialisation and casualization'*.²

This is a major concern of the UCU branch at the Open University:

'There is concern about the direction in which the OU is moving with potential for production of MOOCs to be outsourced and the use of casually employed staff or consultants but headed up by academic superstars from the OU, Russell Group and other leading institutions who are partners in the subsidiary. This could mean the phasing out of most "ordinary" academic jobs which are currently based on the production and delivery of OU teaching material'.

UCU policy is to oppose the development of MOOCs as a means to further privatise and commodify higher education and as a tool to undermine existing jobs and conditions of service.

QUALITY AND STANDARDS

Quality concerns should be a central element in the UCU's approach to MOOCs. With current MOOCs there are difficult issues relating to identity fraud, plagiarism, peer learning and a proper assessment of learning outcomes. There are ways to minimise some of these problems (eg the use of independent testing centres) but these add significantly to costs and also provide new markets for companies such as Pearson.

¹For a good analysis of the corporate interests involved in US online education, see Campaign for the Future of Higher Education, The "promises" of online higher education: profits, <http://futureofhighered.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Promises-of-Online-Higher-Ed-Access2.pdf>

²Response from a UCU member at the University of Leicester.

For UCU, the issue should be to ensure that MOOCs are driven by educational considerations and that there is proper academic scrutiny at the senate and academic board of plans to create new courses.

Another issue is the very low completion rates on MOOC courses. Coursera, for example, estimates that only 10% of its learners complete their short courses.³ If the aim of MOOC providers is to offer an engaging and educationally valuable experience, then this should not be viewed as a major problem. **However, if there are plans to provide MOOC courses for academic credit, a re-evaluation of the current pedagogical model is required.**

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In the United States, academics have become increasingly concerned about the lack of consultation within their institution over MOOCs.⁴ Probably the most famous case is at San Jose State University where academics in philosophy resisted plans to foist Professor Michael Sandel's edX MOOC onto their curriculum.⁵

So far we are not aware of any similar high profile cases in the UK. However, there remain concerns about the transparency and financial sustainability of FutureLearn. In the words of one OU academic:

'It appears that much FutureLearn activity is shrouded in secrecy (as well it might be as it has the potential to make a huge difference to colleagues' work), is considered to be commercially sensitive but is based on a business model that is not apparent to us. We have no idea of how it is intended to generate income.'

For UCU, the issue should be to ensure that MOOCs are driven by educational considerations and that there is proper academic scrutiny at the senate and academic board of plans to create new courses. In addition, there needs to be proper financial scrutiny of MOOCs at the level of the university council/governing body.

WORKLOAD AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

UCU has concerns about the workload implications of the new MOOCs, including the heavy burdens that can be experienced by course leaders and tutors resulting from the increased volume of students. Interestingly, this was also the view expressed by the director of the Edinburgh University MOOC about their participation with Coursera.⁶

UCU has received evidence of both 'good' and 'bad' practice in relation to workload models. For example, at one university the experience has been positive: *'There has been recourse to buy out my time, in terms of teaching assistance, and no use of 'casual' labour for the MOOC itself'*.

However, in other institutions a more negative picture has emerged. For example, at one university academics have been invited to create content for a MOOC but with no automatic workload allowance for this (ie they would have to do it on top of

³<http://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/coursera-takes-a-nuanced-view-of-mooc-dropout-rates/43341>

⁴See <http://chronicle.com/article/In-Colleges-Rush-to-Try/134692/> and <http://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/harvard-professors-call-for-greater-oversight-of-moocs/43953>

⁵<http://chronicle.com/article/Why-Professors-at-San-Jose/138941/>

⁶http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/events/Documents/Making%20the%20most%20of%20MOOCs%20and%20other%20models_conference%20report.pdf

Given that the situation involving MOOCs is rapidly evolving, we would welcome continued feedback from UCU branches and members on what is happening at your institution.

everything else they were expected to do). Similar problems have been reported at other institutions:

'My university is officially strongly in favour of MOOCs. In my department, the head of department wants staff to volunteer to create MOOCs. However, there is no adequate provision for the time this would take.'

The impact on staff workloads is often tied up with the valuing and ownership of content creation. In the words of one UCU member:

'Academics should get appropriate reward for their intellectual property and creative endeavours and the time spent. At the moment time spent on developing teaching material and giving feedback is underestimated and undervalued by the employers. Many universities will not reap direct finance from MOOCs, but will use them as marketing. This should not be an excuse to value the work of their creators as zero.'

UCU believes that staff engaged in generating MOOC teaching materials must have their intellectual property rights protected.

In 2010 UCU published detailed guidance to branches on online education. The guidance covers the professional and trade union issues associated with online education, particularly in relation to workload, training, and professional control.⁷

If necessary, the UCU guidance on online education could be updated to include references to MOOCs.

In addition, UCU should make sure that development and teaching of MOOCs is included as part of the UCU workload campaign.⁸

CONCLUSION

UCU will continue to monitor the development of MOOCs at UK HEIs, including the new FutureLearn initiative. In addition, we will continue to work with our sister unions internationally to monitor the development of MOOCs at the global level, particularly where universities have developed partnerships with corporate providers.

Given that the situation involving MOOCs is rapidly evolving, we would welcome continued feedback from UCU branches and members on what is happening at your institution.

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⁷http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/s/h/ucu_edonline_guidance.pdf

⁸<http://workload.web.ucu.org.uk/>