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Pocket Watch – Maturing MOOCs?

Introduction

The inclusion of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) in the recently released consultation on 16-19 performance measures shows how rapidly the MOOC phenomenon is spreading across the education system. Distance, online and blended learning have all been around in various forms for some time but the MOOC model, which has been brewing in HE for some time and was formally launched for the UK HE sector this week through FutureLearn is, as an accompanying **Report** from the Dept put it, “*maturing.*” MOOCs remain the subject of intense debate, their impact has been variously described as ‘*revolutionary*’ and ‘*destructive,*’ positive and negative. Either way, as the Report puts it: “*MOOCs are heading to become a significant and possibly standard element of credentialed university education, exploiting new pedagogical models, discovering revenue and lowering costs.*” How far they’re adopted across professional training and mainstream education remains to be seen but they’re clearly making their presence felt. Two UKHEIs already have 165,000 and 308,000 registrations respectively

It may be maturing but what is it?

As the BIS Report notes, MOOCs rather defy definition partly because they’re a learning model rather than a product and partly because there are two distinct types: c and x, connective and instructional. Currently they tend to be 4-10 week courses, “*offered free, online and at scale,*” 2-4 hours a week, managed solely by the learner and ending with a submission of work of some sort, as yet not formally recognised although credit-recognition is under development

How are things looking in the UK?

Following on from developments in the USA, most of the activity here has been around the HE sector and has been driven by pioneers and bodies such as the OU. The emergence last year of FutureLearn added further impetus in that it brought together a number of key partners such as the British Library and leading universities and helped create the online learning platform that was formally launched with Ministerial support this week. At present, 23 universities including Monash University in Australia and three ‘supplier’ organisations, the British Library, Museum and Council are all involved and some 20 courses have been lined up including in the next few weeks: ‘The Secret Power of Brands’ from the UEA; ‘England in the Time of Richard 111’ from Leicester University and ‘The Shocking Shallowness of Human Psychology’ from Warwick. The FutureLearn **website** offers an eclectic mix of choices. As for FE, it’s probably fair to say, MOOCs are at an evolutionary stage. Many can see its potential and it was one of the themes at the recent FELTAG (FE Learning Technology Action Group) Conference but as the Report notes: “*the sector’s structural diversity is a barrier to a highly scaled operation like MOOC*”

What now?

MOOCs are likely to continue to divide opinion with enthusiasts stressing benefits such as accessibility, innovation, empowerment, efficiency and global opportunities and with critics pointing to development costs, equality of access, limited human interaction, lack of accreditation, unproven learning quality and disruptive tendencies. Either way they are unlikely to go away



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