MOOCs: Introducing Flexibility in Academia

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Abstract. The number of high level MOOCs produced by top universities can contribute to an increasing flexibility in academia but we seem somewhat hesitant in offering them to our students. When Wageningen university decided to integrate its own MOOCs in the electives for the campus students, we discovered that most obstacles were caused by academic beliefs and systems, anchored in our face to face education. Our policy to treat the MOOCs as a normal course with the parameters of the study guide and by organizing an on campus examination, most problems were solved. For the next step, the exchange of MOOCs between HEI's, we predict that our administrative and quality assurance systems will be the limiting factor to exploit the scalability of the MOOCs.

Keywords: MOOCs, campus education, policy, credits, elective

1   Introduction

Wageningen University&Research is investing heavily in online and open education. Our main goal for these investments is twofold: reaching out to new target groups and realizing more flexibility for our cam-pus/degree students. In our strategic plan we described that we want the university to develop into an educational ecosystem where:

- we will use online components and courses both on- and off-campus and for various target groups,
- we will facilitate learners to transfer between the various ways we offer education: open courses and MOOCs, professional courses, online distance (degree) education and on campus degree programmes.

Coming from a traditional campus university we are rapidly transforming into a more differentiated provider: end 2017 we will have 20 MOOCs of an academic level on edX, stand alone and bundled in two Xseries and one MicroMaster, 3 online MSc programmes and several online professional courses. However, increasing the flexibility for learners in academia meets many obstacles: in systems, in mind-sets, in funding etc.

One of the ways to increase the flexibility in our education is making it possible to get credits for MOOCs. The university puts a lot of effort in the production of our MOOCs, all our MOOCs should be on an academic level, they are designed by our world famous experts - why not offering them to our own students? And there were more and more students following our MOOCs and asking if and how they could integrate them into their programme as electives and get credits for them. We decided to start a project "MOOCs4Credit" with a twofold aim: making it possible for our own students to follow our own Wageningen UR MOOCs and get credits for it, and thinking further, exploring the possibilities to exchange MOOCs with national and international partners. In this paper we describe how we dealt with the challenge of introducing credits for our own MOOCs.

Note: we are not speaking about using the MOOCs in a blended course, we talk about using MOOCs as such: running in certain periods or self-paced, with moderation but with no extra effort from teachers nor special assignments for campus students.

2   Problem Description and Challenges

The introduction of MOOCs4 Credits confronted us with several challenges: some of them have to do with quality aspects, some with administrative issues. Many obstacles however seem to be related to our belief system "how things are done and how they should be in academia". Often we built these beliefs in our rules and regulations.
The issues we met will probably sound familiar for other HEI's as well:

Quality aspects
- Examinations: MOOCs on the big platforms do not include a fraud-proof exam. A fraud-proof as-sessment is a condition for awarding credits.
- The value of the MOOC: suspicions/hesitations that MOOCs would lower the academic quality since they are meant for a broader public. Therefore their level would not fit our degree programmes.
- Contact hours: to which extent do rules and regulations allow to organize a course with no contact hours on-campus.
- Students expectations: doubts if students will accept online self-study courses. They probably prefer tutoring and face to face contact with lecturers and peers.

Administrative aspects
- Student registration: students register for a MOOC on a platform outside the university, but in order to be able to give credits we need to keep track of them in our system.
- Academic schedules: we have an academic schedule divided into periods, all our courses need to run in one of these periods. Consequently, our system does not accept courses that are not fixed in a period.
- The size of a MOOC: all Wageningen courses are 6 credits or a multiple of 3 credits; MOOCs are often smaller. So following a MOOC and getting credits will not always

add up neatly to the 120 or 180 credits of our degree programs. Other HEI's seem to have similar systems.

- Internal funding: our funding system does not apply to a course which is very expensive to make, and then scalable (easy to deliver to almost infinite number of students). We for instance fund our courses related to the teaching methods and number of students who take the course.

3   Applied Policies and Results

3.1   MOOCs as a 'Normal' Course in the Study Handbook

All students in Wageningen have a portion in their individual study programme which can be filled by courses of their own choice (electives). The Examining Board has to agree on the chosen package. All our own possible courses for degree students are listed in our study handbook/course guide. In the study handbook all courses are described with characteristics like amount of credits, content, learning outcomes, teaching methods/activities, examination form and date, level, presumed knowledge, period of the academic year, etc. In order to make the MOOCs an integral part of our study handbook we had to describe them along these parameters. These parameters are also needed to guarantee the quality of the course. By fitting the MOOCs into these parameters we actually could tackle all perceived or real quality problems, as well as the administrative issues.

Our choice to treat MOOCs as much as possible as normal courses and incorporate them in the course-guide, resulted in the following:

- Examinations: In order to provide a fraud-proof exam we decided we could organize locally proc-tored exams on campus for our students twice a year. That way there would be a trusted form of assessment. The examination date shows in the study guide.
- Academic level and value of the MOOC: First: in principle we produce only MOOCs on an academic level. The responsibility of our lecturers for the level and quality of the course is no different whether it is an on campus-course or a MOOC. Our trust in their judgement should therefore be the same. Second, it is up to the Examining Board to approve in each individual case the choice of the MOOC as an elective. Two parameters are important: is it a course broadening your expertise (then an introductory course can still be an option even for MSc-student) or is it deepening in the area of expertise of the programme (then a corresponding level is important). Third, we evaluate all courses with students' evaluations, including the MOOCs, to check the quality and level.
- Size: At Wageningen we have a regulation in our education framework that courses in the degree programmes are 6 or a multiple of 3 credits, because it facilitates the scheduling of courses (every period holds 6 or 12 credits). But for courses that do not need scheduling, like individual assignments or capita selecta, there is no such rule. So it proved no problem to deviate for MOOCs from the standard of 6 credits.

The lecturer who is responsible for the course decides on the number of credits for the MOOC. The student can decide if the amount of credits fits into his/her program, and if he wants to let the amount of credits play a role in this decision.

- Contact Hours: it turned out that we did not have any regulations on contact hours except for the first year of the bachelor's programme. The course guide does not force us to list contact hours. So we decided we could simply go ahead without a remark on contact hours. The teaching method we used for the MOOCs was "independent study", which was already in place for other courses too.

- Registration of students: We decided that students can follow the MOOC on edX without any registration upfront in our system. Students have to look at edX when the MOOC runs and they must register themselves there (we provide a manual). We take care that every MOOC is sufficiently open to follow. Students will have to register for the examination in our registration system. That way we simply got around the problem of the academic period. Not the MOOC but the exam is listed in an academic period.

  This way of registering has two disadvantages: we do not know how many of our students try to follow a MOOC and we do not know until short before the examination how many students are interested in the exam. For the future, we set as one of the requirements of our administrative system so that courses that all sorts of time schedules and self-paced courses can be listed and students can enrol from there.

- Funding: we decided to fund only the design and the correction of the exam. That is also the only extra task we ask from lecturers who have designed and run a MOOC.

3.2 Student Expectations

Of course we wanted to see how students react to the option of a MOOC. In Spring 2016, we conducted a first pilot with MOOCs4Credits. Students could register their interest in a MOOC as an elective and receive credits after passing a scheduled, on-campus examination. In this case we asked them to register by the teacher as well, in order to see how many students enrolled, started the course, finished it and finally took the exam. Sixty-six students originally decided to enrol in this MOOC, twenty-nine of these students registered for the examination, though only eighteen students actually showed up. However, of these eighteen students, fifteen passed (83%). Afterwards, we used a survey (n=28) and held interviews (n=3) to find out how students experienced taking this course and how they feel about online courses in general.

The reasons why students chose to enrol in this SPOC varied from being highly interested in the topic (which isn't explored in this way on-campus) to just needing a few credits to round off their programme. Many students (86%) indicate they would be interested in taking another online course for credits – amongst them also students who did not finish this course.

Students say that they particularly liked the flexibility of the course, but at the same time they also reported it as the most difficult thing about being an online student. Some students couldn't handle the flexibility and dropped out of the course – mentioning that

having campus meetings would probably have helped them to finish. Others found the flexibility to be a relief - for them it was the only reason they could even take this course, for instance because they lived too far away to be able to get to campus whilst also juggling a job or because they only had two weeks available in which to study. Some students developed strategies to keep themselves on track while following the SPOC, like going to the library at set times to study. For others, the fact that they really needed the credit was enough to keep them motivated.

3.3   Conclusion

We found that we had barely any quality problem when we treated MOOCs as a normal course and added them to our course guide as an elective. We trust, as we do with on-campus courses, the lecturer to define level and size of the MOOC and we let the Examining Board approve the use of the MOOC as an elective. The only thing we added to the MOOC is an on-campus examination. By funding the examination, the lecturers did not object to this extra burden. The administrative system and the underlying beliefs are often the real problem. That will be different in every HEI.

The unscheduled and flexible way to take a MOOC as an elective might not be suitable for all students, but it suits the interests and motivation of many. They seem to need some skills to organize themselves. As long as it is the students' own choice to take the course we do not have to bother. However, when a course as such will be part of the obligatory programme, we need to find out what minimal support is needed for the students who do not have these self-organizing skills.

4   Recommendations

We would like to emphasize that this is not the only way to integrate MOOCs in campus education. One can also make blended courses based on MOOCs, make a special cohort of the students and provide them with extra assignments, teaching or materials, or organize the MOOC as a SPOC: an online course only for your students. This paper is only proving that MOOCs can be integrated without major difficulties and that some of the assumptions we make do not hold if we think them through.

A logical next step for us is making it possible to follow MOOCs and other online courses for credits from other HEI's. Currently we discuss with a group of European institutions the possibilities to establish a European Virtual Exchange programme.
For this programme and others that might follow, we expect some new challenges:

- The offer of MOOCs that can be used as an elective should be communicated to students of all institutes and the description of the MOOCs should have a similar format;
- Examination: the idea is that students can take the exam at their own university while following an online course from another university. This is possible with a limited number of partners and limited participating students. When these numbers multiply,

online proctored exams can be an easier solution. But there are still many hesitations about online proctored exams (apart from the costs). Note that Wageningen already uses online proctored exams in their degree programs

- The administration of this exchange is more complicated than that of our own MOOCs: how will students be registered, how will we issue the transcript of records. Maybe the current system of guest students will help us in solving these problems of the virtual guest student.
- Funding: at this very moment we can only agree in consortia to open our online courses, because there will be no money exchange. (Money exchange is not allowed in the Dutch system, we cannot charge students extra on top their regular tuition fee). So reciprocity is at the very core of the ex-change system and that may limit the possibilities.

The solutions we tend to choose (administrative solutions, examinations in the home institute, reciprocity, a small number of trusted partners) seem to deny one of the most evident characteristics of the MOOCs: their scalability.

References

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