



THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF EUROPEAN MOOC RESPONSE: MAKING DIVERSITY A STRENGTH!

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Introduction

The MOOC hype in the media might be over, but investment and uptake of MOOCs are increasing significantly worldwide. By the end of 2015, approximately 4,200 courses were offered by 500+ universities to 35 million students. This has increased by 2016 to 6,850 courses by over 700 universities to 58 million students (Class Central, 2016). However, these figures exclude many European MOOC offerings as Class Central mainly lists MOOC offerings of the big (commercial) MOOC platforms. Many European universities have built an own platform or use a regional platform with a limited visibility. Most universities are not accepted by the big MOOC platforms in the US by lacking the reputation (in ranking) and finances to become a partner. As such, European efforts in MOOCs are less visible. Also the efforts of OpenEducationEuropa (European MOOCs Scoreboard, 2015) were incomplete and stopped in 2016.

Consequently, also research data about MOOC participants, needs in society, etc. are strongly biased towards US dominance and lack evidence what really is going on in Europe. As many European MOOC efforts are local, there is a lack of coherent research at a European level. Only recently some efforts at European scale were conducted. These results indicate a distinct European uptake of MOOCs related to different needs. This paper elaborates on the European context of the MOOC uptake based on various European MOOC research and discusses various strategies to increase awareness, visibility and collaboration.

Characteristic of European context

Are those MOOCs or ...?

In the European context MOOCs are defined as “online courses designed for large numbers of participants, that can be accessed by anyone anywhere as long as they have an internet connection, are open to everyone without entry qualifications, and offer a full/complete course experience online for free” (adapted from Mulder & Jansen, 2015). This definition was developed by many European MOOC initiatives and in addition different criteria (OpenupEd, 2015).

As such, a MOOC differs from a “regular” online course in at least four aspects (e.g., Patru & Balaji, 2016):

- It is designed for, in theory, an unlimited number of participants and as such is related to the scalability of the education service provider.
- It is accessible at no charge.
- It requires no entry qualifications.
- All elements of the course provision are provided fully online.

Hence essentially MOOCs offer a complete course experience to learners for free. By this definition, a MOOC offers a certificate for free as well, such as a badge or a certificate of completion. In addition, fee-based certification services are increasingly offered by either institutions or third parties. These services relate to more verified certificates (including authentication services and portfolio services for participants) and formal certificates (i.e., ones recognised as part of a regular bachelor's or master's programme). Over the last years, the big MOOC platform providers are tweaking their monetization model and shifting to pricing models where MOOC participants are offered less for free or are tempted to take additional services for a fee (e.g., Shah, 2017)

Consequently, some online courses offered are strictly no MOOC anymore. In this context it should be noted that over 70% of European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) do not support the idea that MOOCs should be paid for except for getting a formal credit as part of an accredited curriculum. I.e., there is strong support for the complete course for free to the participants (Jansen & Schuwer, 2015; Jansen & Goes-Daniels, 2016).

European financial models MOOCs

According to Kalman (2014), it is hardly surprising that new business models based on “free” are powerful and often disruptive. The freemium approach can be an effective business model, whereby a product or service is free to a large extent, but some users pay for additional services. The freemium business model is based on offering a satisfactory but limited basic product (e.g., limited in storage capacity, number of users, features) and charging customers for versions in which some or all of the limitations are removed. While often a large percentage of the users are satisfied with the free product, the income from the limited number of paying users is sufficient to cover the fixed costs as well as the minimal variable costs created by all of the users.

SCORE2020 (2017a) provided an overview of added values of MOOCs and related possible revenues at a MOOC level, for a HEI and for providers offering MOOC services. Many MOOC providers are following the freemium approach such that revenues to balance their costs are mainly provided by MOOC participants in offering additional to be paid for services next to the free online course. However, most European providers advocate that the full course, including a credit should be for free and as such MOOC provision must be financed by public means or private parties. The SCORE2020 conducted a survey amongst participants of various events held throughout Europe. The vast majority of their survey participants believed that MOOC support should mainly be financed by public means (Figure 1), whereas 27% thought it should be financed by paid for services of the MOOC participants (SCORE2020, 2017b)

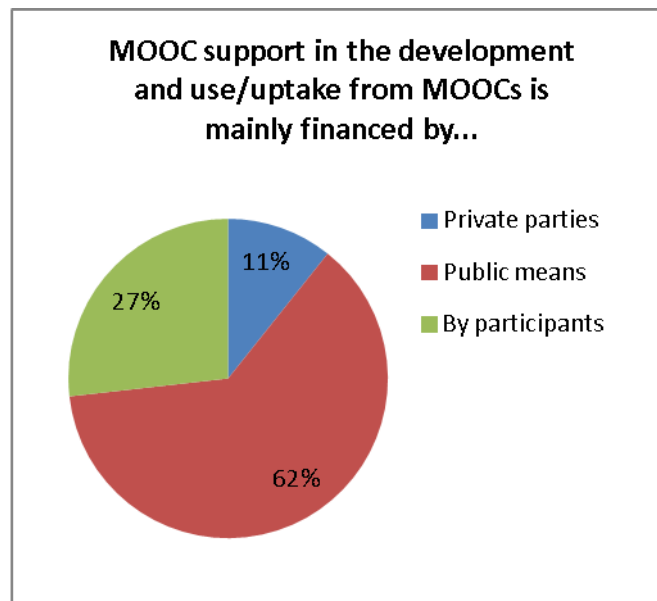


Figure 1. Response of question on “MOOC support in the development and use/uptake from MOOCs is mainly financed by...” as part of survey conducted by SCORE2020 (2017b)

This observation requires a more fundamental discussion between European stakeholders on how they should use and finance MOOCs.

MOOC development and delivery models in Europe

Currently, the following four modes for MOOC production and delivery are observed (e.g., Patru & Balaji, 2016):

1. National or centralised scenario (e.g., France Université Numérique, FUN);
2. Industrial scenario, facilitated by private companies (e.g., FutureLearn);
3. Collaborative–decentralised scenario, promoting diversity by embracing the strength of local–regional implementation (e.g., OpenupEd);
4. (Cross-)institutional MOOC development and delivery.

In the first two scenarios, a central MOOC platform is available for the development and delivery of MOOCs. Additional design and implementation services are offered to the academic staff of educational institutions next to marketing based on collective brand. In the collaborative–decentralised scenario, institutions of regional hub partners have their own MOOC platform, and those partners share different scalable services in the development of MOOCs and in their uptake by society.

In Europe the most common scenario is the last one where HEIs are developing their own MOOC platform mainly based on open source software like OpenedX and Moodle (e.g., UNED, Fachhochschule Lübeck), using a cloud solution like Canvas (e.g., University of Derby) or starting a regional collaboration (EduOpen in Italy, CADUV in Czech Republic). The main reason for this is that most European universities are not accepted by the big MOOC platforms in the US by lacking the reputation (in ranking) and finances to become a partner. Consequently, many HEIs in Europe that want to be involved in MOOCs cannot

connect to big MOOC players and are potentially left behind or need to invest in platform, tools and services themselves.

Mature uptake of MOOCs in Europe

MOOCs are becoming mainstream in Europe. Already four independent European studies show a strong MOOC involvement of HEIs (Jansen & Goes-Daniels, 2016). In Figure 2 the results of these European studies are compared to similar studies in the US by Allen and Seaman (2014; 2015; 2016).

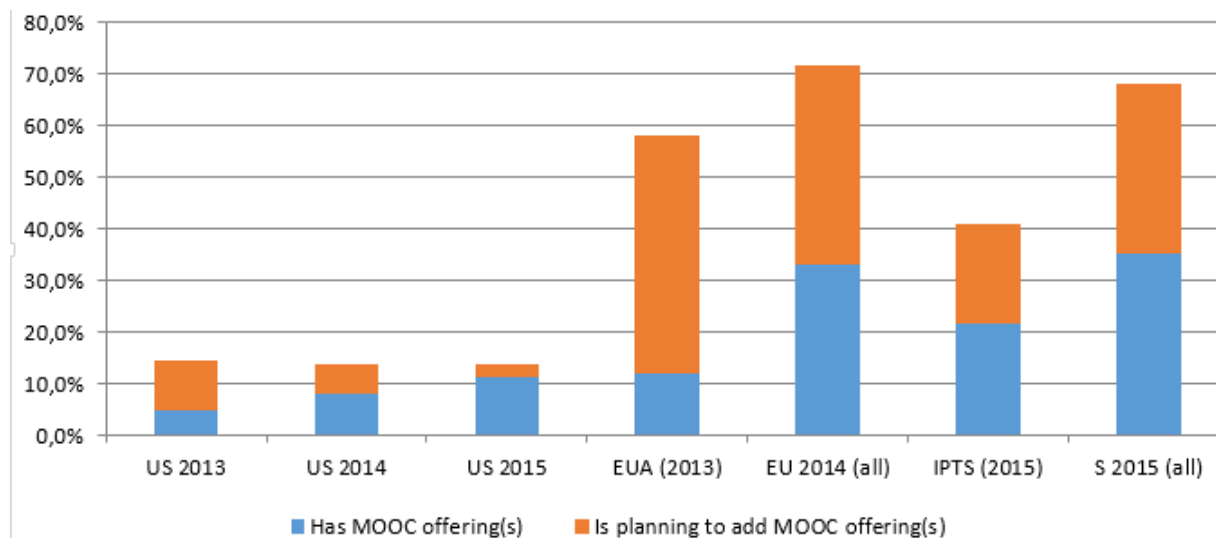


Figure 2. Institutional profile in their MOOC offering compared between that of US surveys (US 2013, US 2014 and US 2015) and the EU surveys (EUA 2013, EU 2014), Muñoz et al. (IPTS 2015) and HOME survey (S 2015).

The abbreviations US2013, US2014 and US2015 refer to the US studies published a year later (Allen & Seaman, 2014; 2015; 2016). EUA (2013) refers to the European survey in 2013 published by Gaebel, Kupriyanova, Morais, and Colucci (2014), EU 2014 (all) to results of Jansen and Schuwer (2015), IPTS (2015) to those published by Muñoz, Punie, Inamorato dos Santos, Mitic, and Morais (2016) and the results of S2015 survey are published in Jansen and Goes-Daniels (2016).

At least about 40% of HEIs in Europe are having MOOCs or planning to develop MOOCs soon against 12% in the US (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

Difference between European countries

Although some differences are observed between countries, it seems that a strong European involvement is widespread. Muñoz et al. (2016) limited their survey to five European countries. In their study the number of HEIs offering or planning to offer MOOCs ranges from 23% in Germany, 32% in Poland, 46% in the UK, 48% in Spain and over 62% in France. Hence, although more involved than US, HEIs in Germany and Poland are somewhat less involved.

The latest HOME survey end 2015 shows that HEIs in most countries have a MOOC or are planning to have a MOOC (Jansen & Goes-Daniels, 2016). Note that for a long period the main players in the European MOOC game derive from Western Europe (Dillenbourg, 2013),

with Eastern European HEIs only just joining in. These recent surveys show that the uptake in Eastern Europe is catching up. I.e., these surveys indicate an expected increased uptake of MOOCs in Poland, the Czech Republic and in Lithuania at levels equal to Western Europe.

However, the initiatives in central and eastern Europe are still in a vulnerable starting phase experiencing barriers like a) no regional platform available; b) lack of funding and b) not enough experience with Open Education in the region (hardly any regional support structure) (Rohlíková, Rohlík, Jansen, & Goes-Daniels, 2016). In general, strongest MOOC involvement of HEIs is seen in those regions with supportive policies and structures (e.g., Muñoz et al., 2016).

But low MOOC uptake by European companies

However, in Europe the low or about zero penetration of MOOCs in the corporate world is somewhat surprising. A recent study (BizMOOC, 2017) amongst 56 European companies concludes amongst others that there is a low level of familiarity with MOOCs and a very low percentage of the interviewed organisations are involved in MOOC related activity. In the BizMOOC study the organisations already applying eLearning state that MOOCs could become a core component of HRD, at least complement existing resources and materials, hence as part of a total solution. In that study interviewed companies perceive MOOCs as having the potential to transform current learning environments in companies and impact on various areas in a company or an organisation.

Making diverse European response a strength

Important role of policy-makers and governments

Observed regional differences in the uptake of MOOCs in Europe are correlated to the existing of supportive policies by regional or national authorities. A successful uptake of MOOCs requires that policy and decision makers need to be in a better position to understand the *MOOC phenomenon*, capitalise on the advantages of these large-scale courses and use them as a strategic opportunity to help meet local needs and develop related capacities. In this context, we need specially to address awareness raising amongst policy makers and governments about the potential of this new mode of achieving educational policy objectives in coherence with a broader continuous education/CPD policy. Different (regional) strategies must be highlighted to leverage the full potential of MOOCs and open education for Europe.

Need for a European voice in a global market

Although MOOCs are becoming mainstream, the European efforts are hardly visible and known, even to European organisations themselves and are not incorporated in worldwide MOOC portals as Class Central (Shah, 2016). This is partly due to very localised and sometimes short-term innovations (e.g. EU-funded projects). I.e., EU MOOC activities are mainly being predominantly driven by individual institutions or small groups based on a limited number of platforms.

We need a strong joint partnership to provide a European voice for European and national policy makers to ensure a European coverage for the development and use of MOOCs as a free part of the respective higher education systems, leading students to continuous education/CPD and open education provisions. Such a partnership must support the organisation of MOOCs and continuous education in European universities as complementary areas to degree education and the creation of interfaces for cooperation with companies and social partners.

HEIs, to increase their capacities in developing MOOCs

Several studies in general demonstrate that the uptake of MOOCs in Europe is maturing at a much higher level compared to the US. This is mainly an achievement of the current (cross-)institutional, partially language-bound platforms. However, many European HEIs that want to develop MOOCs report that (regional) support structures are missing and/or existing structures are unknown to them. The regional differences in languages, cultures and pedagogical approaches hinder the development and uptake of MOOCs in large parts of Europe. Hence, effective collaborations and scalable services for emerging MOOC provisions have to be made available at a European level. As such there is a strong need for support and scale in Europe by sharing platform for MOOC and building MOOC community, developing supporting tool for MOOC, workshops, seminars about MOOC and toolkit for developing MOOC.

Not one European MOOC platform

One centralised European or an integrated MOOC platform is hardly an option given the various languages, different cultures, regional needs and autonomy, etc. Instead we must cherish the diversity of the European MOOC initiatives and see the segmented MOOC approach as a strength in addressing the needs in each own market. Europe needs a joint partnership to *exchange, connect and align different European MOOC provisions* such that platforms, tools and support services are strengthened by collaboration and are better available for universities, businesses and learners in Europe. Innovative technologies, pedagogies and business models, will raise the quality of European MOOCs and promote their use in companies. For example, by developing approaches to the co-creation of MOOCs for continuous education/CPD with companies or knowledge transfer centres.

Collaboration on scalable services

The latest MOOC surveys (SCORE2020, 2017c) amongst >100-HEIs demonstrates that many European higher education institutions are willing to collaborate on scalable services in MOOC provision, and that a regional collaboration is much more likely than outsourcing services to commercial parties. It is of interest of Europe and individual countries that HEIs European-wide are stimulated in their motivation to be involved in MOOCs and are assisted in their needs to scalable services by emerging and maturing, possibly language-bound regional platforms.

It is generally observed that European HEIS are very much willing to collaborate on services like co-creating MOOCs with other institutions, re-using elements from MOOCs, development of MOOC (materials) and in the design of MOOCs next to a quality assurance framework the use of MOOC platforms, learning analytics and recognition of each other's MOOCs. The joint development of a European MOOC platform is not seen as very likely as well as services on selling data and translation services. These results strongly indicate a strong need in Europe to strategically invest in a European partnership and capacity development in order to strengthen the quality of MOOCs for education and upscaling their use in HEIs and companies.

The economics of open and online education requires developing and delivering open products and services in partnership with others, regionally and globally. The world of open and online education does change the way we innovate our education system, programmes and courses. Investment in networked models (involving regional, national and corporate entities) is needed to promote open, flexible and online education for all. A Pan-European response is crucial if we want MOOCs to advance the many possibilities for a more flexible and modern higher education system, and to fully open up education to the many that need the skills and knowledge for 21st century jobs (see also Porto Declaration on European MOOCs, 2014).

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