Chapter 7

Re–Purposing MOOCs and OER for Academic Credit in the UK Using a Flexible Work Based Learning Program at an English University

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of open educational resources (OER) and massive open online courses (MOOCs) has resulted for the first time in high quality higher education learning materials being freely available to anyone in the world who has access to the internet. While the emphasis in the literature is principally upon such matters as technology and cost pressures, rather less attention has been paid to ways in which pedagogical practices can be adapted to address these changes. This chapter reports on a UK university where innovative pedagogical practices have developed over a twenty-year period, which enables such adaptation. The development of a flexible work based learning framework enables the exploitation of these developments for the benefit of learners, tutors, and the university. The case study also highlights the importance of quality assurance and cost as key to competitive advantage in an increasingly globalised context.

INTRODUCTION

The most striking developments in UK higher education in recent years are its increased cost to students so that the majority now bear the full cost of tuition and the opening up of Degree Awarding Powers to private institutions, including those who are profit making (Fillippakou, Salter, & Tapper, 2012). Although UK higher education policy is more marketised than in many other nations, there is little doubt that social models of higher education prevalent in western Europe and elsewhere are increasingly subject to
liberalising tendencies such that many foresee major disruptive change for the whole of higher education (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Barber, Donnelly, & Rizvi, 2013; Christensen & Eyring 2011; Deloitte Canada, 2011; Ernst & Young Australia, 2012; Harpur, 2010; Kennie & Price, 2012a; Kennie & Price 2012b; Schejbal, 2012; Universities UK, 2008). Some of these changes include:

- Increasing demand for higher education coupled with a decreasing ability of states to fund public provision.
- An explosion in the availability of freely available online resources and the accompanying de-professionalisation of learning.
- The rapid growth of blended learning whereby online delivery is combined with other delivery methods.
- The separation of different parts of the higher education value chain (‘unbundling’) so that it can no longer be assumed that delivery and assessment are part of a single process within one institution.
- Increasing differentiation of institutional mission separating elite, globally focussed research intensive universities from others.
- Increasing diversity of providers, especially from the private for profit sector.
- A squeeze on non-elite teaching led publicly funded institutions from the above.

What is noticeable in the literature is the relative absence of discussion of what might be considered appropriate pedagogies for higher education in the twenty first century, coupled with an assumption that universities are somehow both monolithic and non-adaptive. This chapter demonstrates that some public universities are considerably more diverse and dynamic than is sometimes supposed, and have the potential to adapt to significant external change. Where there is a sufficiently flexible approach to learning and delivery allied to an entrepreneurial culture, public universities can exploit external changes for the benefit of learners, as well as the institution.

INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

The case study university is a medium sized publicly funded institution of approximately 15,000 students. Provision is dominated by full time, undergraduate on-campus delivery across a broad spectrum of subject disciplines. It does not enjoy an international reputation for the excellence of its research, and does not figure in any of the global league tables of best universities. In short, it is like the majority of universities in the UK: well regarded, but not outstanding. It is also, by global standards, expensive. Following the introduction of a new national regime in 2012, fees for a full time bachelor degree over three years are currently £27000 (US$47, 419/ €32,000) for domestic students (i.e. from the European Union), and even higher for international students (US$51,021/ €37,728)¹. While it might be too early to say what the long-term consequences of high fees are, it is difficult to imagine that it will not have a long-term effect on the pattern of demand (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2013). In short, the university is not an elite institution, but precisely the kind of public university seen by many as vulnerable to disruptive change, as a result of competition from lower cost, private institutions and freely available online learning (Huisman, de Boer, & Pimentel Bótas, 2012).