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MOOCs for Social Inclusion & Employability

The MOONLITE Hague Declaration

Establishing MOOCs as a tool for societal change

Editor

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This declaration is one of the final results of the MOONLITE project (ref. 2016-1-ES01-KA203-025731) that has focused on a range of topics relating to the ways in which MOOCs can support refugees (and other vulnerable groups), migrants and students in their access to higher education and employment. This support can take the shape of different complementary learning pathways and scenarios that have been explored and analysed by the project partners in their respective HEIs (Higher Education Institutions).

MOOCs are defined here as online courses with at least four characteristics:
- they are designed for an unlimited number of participants;
- they can be accessed at no cost to the students;
- they require no entry qualifications;
- all elements of the course are provided fully online.

The presentation of this document corresponds with the last project multiplier event held in The Hague. This declaration moves beyond this specific area of focus of the project, on supporting refugees, migrants and students to consider broader questions related to the role of MOOCs for social inclusion and societal change. MOOCs have a real potential for social change and contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals intended to be achieved by 2030.

While it cannot be denied that MOOCs have had an impact on the educational panorama arguably since 2012, when the focus was largely on open access to education, it is still a challenge for universities, public authorities and civil society organisations to use them as a tool for societal change in general.

As a result of the work undertaken in this project, and different and varied interchanges of ideas, debates, and collaborations with other academics and experts in the field of open education and social inclusion, it has been possible to identify seven key challenges. The seven challenges presented here are:
- improving access to MOOCs and open education;
- keeping MOOCs open and free;
- the need for support in inclusive MOOCs;
- designing and developing MOOCs for social inclusion;
- the recognition of prior learning and MOOC certification;
- the need for open education policies at national and international level
- new funding and business models.

The responsibility to address these challenges does not lie only with higher education institutions and MOOC platform providers but also with intermediate support organisations in civil society (NGOs, foundations, support groups, charities, etc.), and national and international governing bodies.

The underlying objective is to place the displaced people at the core of this reflexion and provide them the opportunity to decide and choose *what* and *how* they should learn.

1. Improving access to MOOCs and open education

Most of the people who could benefit from open online education do not know that such opportunities exist, and even when they do, are unable to find information about how to participate.

Information and awareness raising activities are needed to promote MOOCs and other open education channels for refugees and migrants in order to increase their participation in higher education.

To this end higher education institutions and MOOC platform providers should collaborate with public authorities and civil society organisations to reach out to refugees (and other vulnerable groups) where-ever they are, in asylum centres, in cities and rural areas, and whenever they arrive (not necessarily at the beginning of a semester). Personalised guidance can lead refugees to distinct learning paths, taking into account their life conditions and prior knowledge and qualifications, such as:

- MOOCs on European culture;
- preparatory language and foundation courses;
- MOOC micro-credential programmes facilitating the transition into work;
- online degree level courses and short learning programs in order to involve them gradually in degree studies;
- online courses for graduate refugee students, enabling them to complete an accredited degree in European higher education.

All activities can be based on existing resources from higher education institutions, in particular flexible distance learning provisions, including open educational resources. Comprehensive course packages should be offered to refugees including services. This goes beyond current policies of offering scholarships.

Better coordination is needed between stakeholders (intermediate organizations, higher education institutions, government, etc.) to facilitate a culture where MOOCs and other open educational programmes for social inclusion are more accessible. If the potential of MOOCs as tools for social inclusion in a broad sense, reaching people who have not been fortunate enough to go through standard educational channels, is to be maximized, then the conditions presented here should be met.

Furthermore, course providers and aggregators should provide useful and appropriate course descriptions and enable people to search across multiple platforms. Course information and descriptions should clearly identify their primary target groups and how the course is relevant to them. MOOC publicity should also identify the intermediate groups, associations, foundations or charities who offer support to the main target groups (e.g. refugees). Once support groups understand what MOOCs are, and how they can use them to support the given collectives, then they can facilitate the adoption of the courses.

2. Keeping MOOCs open and free

Even when a suitable MOOC is found, few providers have courses that are always open to new participants. A course might be offered once every few months, or even less frequently, and this factor can exclude many potential participants. Therefore, MOOCs should be kept open for access, even when they are not running. Even if there is little interaction for learners in such "read-only" mode courses, access to the material means that third parties can use the course as the basis of a face-to-face courses with local support. Furthermore, it is essential that these courses are available without fees, not only in terms of access but also certification. Inclusive education cannot have costs for the students undertaking it, especially vulnerable groups like refugees.

Furthermore, as much course material as possible should be published with an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), providing third parties with the ability to adapt and repurpose material for local use.

3. The need for support in inclusive MOOCs

The majority of MOOCs are aimed at learners with good study skills and digital literacy and are thus not particularly inclusive. Furthermore, many MOOCs are designed from a particular cultural perspective (i.e., European / North American) that will not be relevant to target groups such as refugees. In order to help such learners to benefit from open online education a considerable amount of support is required, preferably local and face-to-face. Course facilitators and mentors, preferably from within the learning community and support organisations, can provide regular meetings at community centres, libraries etc., scaffolding students to learn and participate. Such groups can offer teaching and technical support in the learners' own languages and help them interact with the online material in the MOOC. Such human support is essential to help the learners acquire the digital and study skills necessary for success in online education.

4. Building MOOCs for Social Inclusion

MOOCs have the potential to provide educational opportunities for a very wide multilingual and multicultural audience, if they are designed to be inclusive by default. Three phases can be identified in this process: design, development and deployment:
- **Design**: it is important to involve the target audience and relevant stakeholders in the MOOC design process. This process can apply design thinking and follow a bottom-up approach. The natural extension of this process is the co-creation of a MOOC where,

for example, refugees can be involved in the course design from the start. An inclusive rubric should be used for the design process that focuses on technology (that used by the students, especially mobile, taking into account connectivity problems), linguistics (extra support required for non-natives), pedagogy, culture & ethics (relations to online interaction and learning), and institutionalization.

- **Development**: the specifics will depend upon the MOOC platform being used and associated tools available. As parts of the course become available it is preferable to test them with members of the target learning community, firstly in a blended and face-to-face setting, and then fully online. This testing, and any previous design input, places the displaced people at the core of the MOOC's development.
- **Deployment**: when the course is being finalised and before it is opened for students, the facilitators can be provided with early access, given relevant documentation about the course and any provided with training. Each time the course is run the results obtained can be used to make improvements before it is run again.

5. **Recognition of prior learning and MOOC certification**

For disadvantaged students taking a MOOC, the issue of accreditation can be very important, since they may not have another way of obtaining any recognition of prior learning or certification. A problem with most MOOCs is that the final assessment of a course, leading to obtaining a completion certificate is not free. In the same way that MOOCs need to remain open and freely accessible to maximize social inclusion for vulnerable groups, then the certification must not have any associated costs. Once this type of recognition and certification is generally available then motivation in the learning community to take these courses and complete them will increase. In order for this to become a reality:

- HEIs need to provide MOOC certification that can accredit for future formal studies and for entering the employment market. Such certification can take the form of ECTS or micro-credential awards, as they become available, including a transcript with the learning objectives of the course, next to the study results of the individual learner.
- Cross-institutional collaboration is required between higher education institutions to recognise open education as an alternative pathway into higher education. This will be potentiated by common European strategies and policies and is presented in the next section.
- Higher education institutions need to help employers understand the value of MOOCs. Given the difficulties in controlling the quality of the student assessment process in these courses, then it is reasonable that employers will not treat such qualifications in the same way as they would those from formal education. MOOC certificates should indicate competences that students can demonstrate in job interviews or formal educational contexts.

- Help needs to be provided to students about how to exploit skills and certification obtained in MOOCs. They need to know what options they have to combine them, how to build a CV (e.g., Europass), and plan a career path.

6. Open education policies at national and international levels

As has been noted, when MOOCs already exist in a given HEI, there is quite often an understanding of how these courses can be used by the students toward other formal study programmes at the same institution., including micro-credential programmes for continuous education preparing for the labour market. It is important that open education policies are developed at supra-institutional (national and international) levels. This would facilitate and regulate the interaction between HEIs in this area and structure credits and awards that students can gain from MOOCs and other similar open educational initiatives. This needs to be undertaken in two complementary ways:

- Potentiate the generation of new policies and educational standards that make it easier to award micro-credentials and recognise non-formal prior learning obtained in other HEIs. Work has been undertaken in this area, toward the generation of new policies, with initiatives such as the *application of the ESG and ECTS Users' Guide* to the recognition of MOOCs; the ENIC-NARIC Network's guidelines for *credential evaluators*; *Europass*, the *European Qualification Framework*, and the *EU skills profile tool for third country nationals*. New micro-credential initiatives are also appearing, such as the European MOOC Consortium's Common Micro-Credential Framework, and research projects such as Open Education Passport (OEPass), Micro-Credentialing in European HE, the e-Valuate and DigiRec projects, which are exploring standardised ways to address the question of the interoperability of micro-credentials. Finally, some HEIs are already directly adopting learning agreements to make recognition of MOOC-based modules more standardised and transparent.
- Simplify existing policies for the recognition of prior learning so that it is less complicated and time-consuming. These procedures can make the admission process complicated and lead to uncertainty, therefore hindering admissions for disadvantaged students thereby leading to exclusion from higher education.

7. Funding and new business models

Since MOOCs first came into existence, and became part of HEIs' online educational portfolios, considerable thought has been given to the development of business models that enable institutions to manage the costs of developing and running these courses. In general, business models have evolved that justify MOOC development and delivery costs in terms of building the HEI brand and visibility and thus improving HEI recruitment and enrolment. However, such a general argument is unlikely to work in the context of refugees, who are unable to pay for their entry into an HEI and possibly unable to access national funds.

To make MOOCs and online course provisions work for refugees (and other vulnerable groups), funding initiatives should not only target the development of MOOCs but also the delivery to these groups. This requires specific strategies in cooperation with governments and civil society organisations (see point 1 above). Whereas multiple governmental funding initiatives for refugees deal with scholarships, more attention should go to serving students with difficult life conditions embracing information and awareness raising; MOOCs, online courses and OERs meeting immediate needs; specific courses preparing for degree and micro-credential studies; and courses enabling students to complete their studies for an accredited degree at a European higher education institution.

The development costs and services of MOOCs for refugees may not benefit from the economies of scale, and furthermore, may have higher adaptive maintenance costs tracking the changing refugee demographics and situation. So, the business model for refugee MOOCs is different and makes the case that MOOCs represent an appropriate and cost-effective way to get refugees, especially those with professional, craft or trade experiences, into the formal economy and pump-priming their entrepreneurial efforts. So, there is a macro-economic business model based around an increased national tax base and national capability.

Therefore, dedicated funding must exist that can support countries and their HEIs in handling the costs and keeping their open educational programmes running. HEIs can apply the cost-benefit analysis presented in the MOONLITE project, for their open educational initiatives, following a triple-bottom line analysis. This analysis focusses on social, economic and environmental dimensions, although there is an argument for a quadruple-bottom line that recognises HEIs need to maintain or enhance their research, scholarly and academic productivity and outputs. Such an analysis will help contextualise the expenses of these programmes in a broad institutional context.

As part of this approach, new ways to use MOOC content and activities may emerge that extends their lifetime and contexts of application. A simple example of this process would be to translate existing MOOCs, that have been proved to be effective for a given social group, into minority languages to broaden the number of people who can benefit from them.

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