THE CHALLENGE

The University of Derby, a public institution in Derby, England has a stellar reputation for real-world learning with a focus on employability. Having long offered flexible options for virtual learning, the University hoped to leverage demand for massive open online courses (MOOCs) as a way to increase student engagement and showcase their pedagogical theory.

Early in 2015, the Head of Derby’s Academic Innovation Hub, Syed Munib Hadi, was challenged by administrators to create a MOOC strategy that was open, sustainable and focused on providing relevant learning experiences. He soon found a solution that would enable all three: Canvas Network. As an extension of the Canvas virtual learning environment (VLE), Canvas Network is an open online learning platform with a mission to promote openness and innovation in education.

“University of Derby chose Canvas Network back in 2015 after doing an extensive MOOC platform search. Along with having the most intuitive user interface, the other main advantage was the complimentary instructional design consultancy service offered by Instructure,” said Hadi.

Derby saw considerable success with five MOOCs on Canvas Network over a 10-month period, including: “Understanding Autism, Asperger’s & ADHD”, “Digital.Me: Managing Your Digital Self”, “Innovating in Operations Management” and “Bridging the Dementia Divide: Supporting People Living With Dementia” (offered twice).

KEY FINDINGS

- More than 25,000 learners enrolled in five MOOCs offered by the University of Derby on Canvas Network over a 10-month period.
- Among those learners who enroled in free Derby MOOCs, more than 200 subsequently enroled in the University’s fee-based courses.
- Monetary gains from the institution’s free MOOCs included an enrolment impact of over £1.15 million the first year and more than £42,000 in brand recognition.
“WE SEE MOOCS AS A TOOL WHERE WE CAN ACTUALLY IMPLEMENT NEW THINGS, NEW IDEAS, JUDGE IT, RESEARCH IT, LOOK AT THE DATA, AND TRY TO BRING IT BACK TO AN ONLINE OFFER.”

SYED MUNIB HADI
Head of Academic Innovation Hub, The University of Derby (UK)

THE STRATEGY

According to Hadi, Derby’s MOOC success was based on a three-part strategy, which involved developing an open approach, actively experimenting with pedagogy and conducting market research. Here’s how they developed and implemented their MOOCs.

Developing an open approach

Beyond offering courses that would provide real and relevant learning experiences, the University’s Innovation Hub wanted to push innovation further by adopting truly open MOOC development practices. To achieve this objective, Hadi and his team adopted policies under OpenUpEd, a MOOC quality framework that puts learners at the centre. Its tenets include: openness to learners, digital openness, independent learning, media-supported interactions, recognition options, a focus on quality and a spectrum of diversity.

For Derby, the open approach paid off. The high-quality learning experiences showcased in their MOOCs reflected the quality of courses offered to traditional students—and prompted nearly 1% of the more than 25,000 learners who enrolled in MOOCs on Canvas Network (over 200 people) to enrol in the University’s fee-based courses. To further their open policies, the Innovation Hub shared their completed MOOCs to Canvas Commons, a learning object repository, for use by educators at other institutions under Creative Commons licenses.

Actively experimenting with pedagogy

While traditional academic institutions attract a fairly homogeneous student body, MOOCs attract diverse learners from all over the world, with varying education levels and from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The challenge is in designing courses with broad appeal that take into account the free, drop-in/dropout nature of many open courses.

According to Hadi, “We see MOOCs as a tool where we can actually implement new things, new ideas, judge it, research it, look at the data, and try to bring it back to an online offer.”

As part of their research, the Innovation Hub team set out to test what they call the Modular Approach, which is focused on micro-learning, micro-credentialing and flexibility in sharing one’s learning path. This approach differs from traditional methods because it offers ways to measure success other than completion rates, factoring in the many students who log in to MOOCs and learn but who don’t have time to complete a typical six-to-eight week course.

Hadi’s team also looked at ways to provide structured and guided learning experiences to potentially thousands of learners. The result was an automated experience that gave learners the feeling that the course was tailored for them. They also created tools and mechanisms to record micro-learning achievements, which they believe should be taken into account when gauging retention numbers for MOOCs.

Conducting market research

To select the right courses at the right time, Derby’s Innovation Hub team first conducted market research. They looked specifically at the relevance of each course topic to the market, key national priority areas for skills shortages, the university’s academic strengths in each subject area and public demand for skills.

THE FUTURE

For the University of Derby, partnering with Canvas Network provided an open, flexible and customisable solution that enabled the institution to experiment and push pedagogy forward. The MOOC strategy implemented by the Innovation Hub team resulted in pedagogical innovations that are now influencing teaching and learning university-wide—and have led to significant monetary gains with an enrolment impact of over £1.15 million the first year and more than £42,000 in brand recognition.

The Innovation Hub team was invited to share their research and initiatives with government officials and multinational organizations, as a way to help them understand that MOOCs can be a valuable resource to upskill the workforce in key areas of skills shortages, both nationally and internationally. To learn more about the University of Derby’s research and findings about MOOC development, read Supporting Diverse Learner Goals Through Modular Design and Micro Learning.