Evaluating the use of a MOOC within Higher Education Professional Development Training.

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ABSTRACT
This paper evaluates the effectiveness of a massive open online course (MOOC) as a professional development tool in higher education. The transition from the MOOCs initial intended use as a low cost way for students to access education and aid their studies has evolved, from facilitating the Higher Education sector to the commercial sector. Findings indicate there is an increase in participation and satisfaction amongst higher education staff who undertook a MOOC compared to attending a workshop. This was primarily due to its flexibility. Recommendations from this study's findings highlight that staff were keen to engage with the MOOC format, but felt they needed face to face meetings as well to reinforce and discuss the key messages of the MOOC. In addition to this, time allocation within the workload model would be required for any future involvement as a staff development tool.

Keywords
"Professional Development", "Best Practice", "Traditional Staff Development", "CPD", "MOOC"

1. INTRODUCTION
This paper presents the findings from a study conducted at Hartpury College (higher education department) where teaching staff volunteered to participate in trialing a MOOC on blending learning as an alternative to traditionally delivered staff development days. MOOCs offer the opportunity for both educational and corporate sectors to provide a learning platform for a large amount of learners to have an education which is free from geographical and physical boundaries with minimal financial limitations [1, 5].

The move into using MOOCs in continued professional development [1,4, 6] (CPD) highlights the change in awareness and perception that providing specific CPD to staff is both more efficient and cost effective, and can be directed to individual staff development needs. Over the past decade online distinct learning programs have been expanding within the CPD market [1, 4, 6].

2. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION
Continual professional development is vital in all professions although it has been highlighted that it is vital for higher education academics [3, 4, 5]. This is because university academics need to keep pace with the continuous developments in both their subject field and also developments within teaching and learning.

Teaching and learning within the higher education sector is under increasing scrutiny as highlighted in the Green Paper of November 2015 *Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* [2] and also the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) review of the future of quality assessment. The Green Paper introduced the teaching excellence framework (TEF) which will aim to drive up teaching standards. CPD within higher education benefits both lecturers and students, and increases work ethic and productivity. Due to the introduction of TEF it is likely that CPD will become increasingly important. [1,6].

3. EVOLUTION OF THE MOOC
The initial intention of the implementation of MOOCs was to provide an educational opportunity for a mass audience, initially centered on lowering the cost and accessibility of college and university courses [4]. The majority of MOOC programs offer the opportunity to purchase a certificate of completion and varying levels of CPD certification. The year 2014 was highlighted as the 'year of the corporate MOOC' [1], with a surge in companies not only using existing courses as a form of professional development but creating and delivering them in specialist areas [1]. This turned the direction of the MOOC into a form of delivering specific CPD courses in key areas and facilitating a change in the way CPD is viewed and delivered.

Higher education is having to respond to rapidly evolving digital technologies. Dodson et al (2015) [1] state that MOOCs are relatively new, whereas Glance et al (2013) [5, 7] highlights that the MOOC concept is merely an extension of distance learning that has progressed from paper correspondence to video courses through to distant learning internet based e-courses.

4. RESEARCH METHOD
Ten academic members of higher educational staff volunteered to participate in a MOOC about blended learning, which ran over five weeks with four hours of allocated time per week. Staff were initially emailed to ask if they would like to partake in the course and be part of the study. Therefore, this was an opt-in staff development opportunity. Of 62 members of staff, 15 opted in – a total of 24% of all staff.

During week three of the course the researchers held a focus group to gain feedback on participants' experience of the MOOC and if they thought the content so far would help improve their teaching. Four key themes were discussed during the focus group - ; format of the MOOC, content, usefulness to teaching, and future development. Breaking down the elements of the MOOC from its delivery, design, time allocation, content and the reasons for volunteering, the researchers were able to build a picture of the aspects which may impact the MOOCs potential use as a professional development tool. At the end of the five week course 6 individual interviews were held to gain in-depth perceptions on the four main areas previously identified as well as its adaptability of such a program as professional development tool in higher education.

5. FINDINGS

Findings from the focus group highlighted that staff were struggling to keep up to date with the course on a weekly basis. Six members of the group acknowledged that they were behind on the weekly sessions due to other commitments being prioritized, with only two out of the ten allocating specific time each week to complete the session.

The academics who participated in the MOOC strongly believed that completing a MOOC which is specific to your own personal professional development rather than a generic staff development session, is extremely beneficial in many aspects. Such benefits include; staff utilizing the technology identified from the MOOC in enhancing lectures and reflecting on practice, as well as talking to people from other organisations on the forum boards and the organisation showing personal and professional investment in staff [1].

Through this approach it allows staff to engage who have a genuine interest in the area of study, rather than participate in more traditional staff development approaches which have been selected for them. Staff found the content engaging but would have liked programmed face to face sessions in conjunction with the MOOC to discuss the content with others and share their thoughts about implementing what they had learned. Although the forum was useful to gauge how blended learning is being implemented at other institution, staff felt that a discussion for staff a Hartpury would be more beneficial.

The environment plays a big part in the engagement and participation of MOOC and staff development. Having a different location allows separation from the environment where there is the immediate pressures of teaching. The researchers found that certain academics preferred having staff development in a separate location as this increased their engagement in a new topic. A suggestion made during the focus group was to meet on a weekly basis and complete the MOOC as a group. This would allow staff to complete it in the recommend time, which seemed to be a key.

Results from the interviews supported the main finding from the focus group conducted in week three, that time allocation, the MOOCs design, content and the environment with which it is conducted all contribute to the participation and completion rates of the course. Of the 6 interview conducted 3 had participated and completed the course with 3 volunteering to participate in the course but did not complete it.

The primary reasons why the 3 members of staff did not complete the course was due to three factors. Time commitment, the members felt that with other teaching commitments and administration requirements they did not have the time to complete the course based on the recommended hours. Secondly loss of interest, after the first week the members felt that the course was no longer of enough interest to pursue. The last factor was the lack of face to face interaction to discuss areas of interest and sharing good practice.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Through this study it was recommend that MOOCs were used as a professional development tool but used in conjunction with face to face workshops and small information sessions.

It was highly recommend by the participants to have a discussion group in addition to participating in the MOOC to support the learning achieved. In this particular case the MOOC highlighted various tools and applications which can be used within teaching. Therefore an additional discussion group would allow the group to share good practice; talk through the digital applications, discuss with others possible integration of such technologies in practice, and trying them out as a group.

Creating a 'bank' of MOOCs which covers the professional areas of Hartpury would provide the opportunity for staff to select which MOOC they would be most interested in completing. However from the findings of this study it is recommended that participation in a MOOC is allocated within the staffs' workload in order for it to be completed, productive and reduce the potential 'drop-out' rate.

Caution is advised with rolling out a MOOC program to all staff, as in order to recognise the CPD credits the certificate of participation is required. This has a financial cost which would need to be taken into consideration by Hartpury. The organization may want to consider funding for CPD certification, as participants were keen to have a record of their participation.

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