'I've been astounded by some of the insights gleaned from this course': lessons learnt from the world's first careers and employability MOOC by both instructors and participants

Laura Brammar and David Winter

This article examines the design and delivery of the world's first Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) focused specifically on career and employability skills. It explores the context of MOOCs and why a university, such as the University of London, may choose to provide an open access learning experience particularly aimed at career development skills. The article examines the content choices and pedagogical design of the MOOC and provides an insight into the key learning points for the authors who were co-instructors on the course. Finally, it outlines plans for future iterations of the *Enhance Your Career and Employability Skills* MOOC.

● ●

Introduction

In 2011, Bimrose, Hughes and Barnes wrote in their report for the UK Commission for Employment and Skills that those within the careers workforce who felt less threatened by the developments of ICT in their field were able to identify:

> …a future where there would be a shift away from ICT used primarily to deliver information – to a range of services that not only expanded and complemented information giving, but offered added value in terms of the guidance process overall. (2011: 30)

In this paper we will describe one attempt to deliver such added value through the design and delivery of a MOOC entitled *Enhance Your Career and Employability Skills*.

MOOCs – what are they?

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are essentially short online courses which are open access, i.e. they are free of charge and do not have formal academic entry requirements. MOOCs also have the ability to support an indefinite number of participants which means the learning platforms they are hosted on, such as *Coursera* for example, are scalable to a huge extent.

Coursera is one of several MOOC providers based in the US, alongside *EdEx* and *Udacity*. In the UK, the Open University launched its own MOOC platform, *FutureLearn* in 2013. *Coursera*, established by two Stanford Computer Science academics in 2012, has now over 10 million students, or 'Courserians', studying 891 courses. It works with a range of respected global university partners to deliver MOOCs.

The University of London International Programme (ULIP), part of the University of London International Academy (UoLIA) is the oldest flexible and distance learning provider in the world offering awards to distance learners since 1858. The International

Programme has over 54,000 registered students in 180 countries, who are studying a range of over 100 programmes across both undergraduate and postgraduate level, in addition to diploma and certificate levels, across a wide variety of subjects. In 2012 it also became one of *Coursera's* partners and in 2013 became the first English HE provider to successfully launch a series of four MOOCs, on topics such as English Common Law and Creative Programming, with 91 per cent of participants rated their experience of taking a University of London International Programmes MOOC as 'Good', 'Very Good' or 'Excellent' in the student evaluation survey (Grainger, 2013).

Why do universities offer MOOCs?

Like many Higher Education Institutions, the University of London recognised the potential of MOOCs to attract a wider and diverse audience to their 'brand' and through a positive open access experience, to entice some of those MOOC students to join a fee paying course.

There was some evidence that a number of students who initially completed a ULIP MOOC went on to apply for a University of London degree programme (Grainger, 2013). Additional motivational factors for HEIs in offering MOOCs include the opportunity to be pedagogically innovative and also to enhance the offer to current distance learners.

Why a 'careers' MOOC?

It is this aspect of enhancing the distance learning experience which first led UoLIA to work with The Careers Group, University of London to develop and deliver the world's first careers and employability MOOC, alongside their academic subject MOOCs. UoLIA were increasingly aware of the need to support distance learners in their career development. Many of them are studying in order to enhance their career but do not necessarily receive the same level of careers support that on-campus students have available.

There is wider evidence from the University of Pennsylvania that participation in MOOCs is often associated with learner's career or career aspirations, with 44% taking MOOCs to gain specific skills to do their current job more effectively and 17% doing a MOOC so as to gain specific skills to get a job (Christensen, Steinmetz, Alcorn, Bennett, Woods, and Emanuel, 2013).

The attraction of a MOOC aimed specifically at career development may have been clear but how to design such a course successfully was less clear. How could we produce materials that would be relevant to individuals at many different career stages from a range of cultural settings and yet avoid being generic to the point of unhelpfulness?

Content design and considerations

Designing the content for such a broad audience required us to make some basic assumptions about the demographics of the participants who would engage with the MOOC: they would have some career experience, at least undergraduate level education and some sense of wanting to advance themselves further in their careers.

Nevertheless the challenge was to provide a learning experience which would enhance the 'digital career literacy' (Longridge, Hooley and Staunton, 2013: 9) of all our participants by addressing core principles of career management. We identified four high-level qualities that we wanted interaction with the course materials to increase in participants.

The distilled principles were:

- **Control**. We wanted all participants to have a greater sense of control over their career development leading them to be more proactive and to take the initiative.

- **Clarity**. To enable that sense of control we wanted participants to be better equipped to articulate their needs and goals through enhanced self-reflection.

- **Confidence**. We wanted participants to be better able to identify and articulate their strengths and to have confidence in their decision making.

- **Courage**. Given that career management in a rapidly changing, global market often involves stepping outside one's comfort zone in order to stay employable, we wanted to encourage participants to try new things in order to develop and grow.

Although expressed in more accessible terms, these elements relate to personal characteristics linked to success which feature in the wider career management literature: namely core self evaluations (Judge, 2009), career management self-efficacy (Ferris, Johnson, Rosen and Tan, 2012), career decidedness (Restubog, Florentino and Garcia, 2010) and proactivity (Strauss, Griffin and Parker, 2012). Within our definition of courage we also included elements of 'risk taking' from Planned Happenstance (Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz, 1999) and the idea of an incremental or growth mindset (Dweck and Leggett, 1988). In one of our polls, the vast majority of participants choose courage as the quality they felt they needed to develop in order to be more successful in their careers.

These principles informed the blend of activities which we offered participants, such as video lectures, interactive polls embedded within the videos, additional readings, reflective exercises, links to external websites and repeated links to relevant threads on the discussion forums where they could reflect on their learning and experiences. By these varied means we aimed to encapsulate each of the seven elements needed to develop digital career literacy which Hooley has previously outlined, from connecting to creating (Hooley, 2012).

Taking the principle of courage as an illustration, in week one, we linked this to the Test and Learn approach to career self-management (Ibarra, 2003) and we encouraged participants to engage with proactive activities linked to "crafting experiments" (Ibarra, 2002: 4) in order to help them learn more about their own career values and priorities. In week two, we linked courage to the need for participants to improve their skills by taking on more daunting developmental activities that would stretch them. In week three, we addressed attitudes linked to career success and the aspects of courage linked to proactivity and resilience were emphasised. Weeks four and five were about effective self-presentation, so courage took a back seat to confidence and clarity. In week six, we addressed

the need for courage to overcome social anxiety linked to expanding their professional network.

Pedagogical design and considerations

Although we had a free reign in the design of the MOOC we were limited by the expected number of participants and had to work within the prescribed 'learning model' of the *Coursera* platform. At the time we designed and delivered this MOOC, *Coursera's* learning model was essentially a 'teach-then-test' based approach; video teaching is tested through quizzes and peer assessment and that process is supported by 'help forums', mainly dealing with technical queries.

Instead of this, we wanted to move as far as possible to a model where we enabled clients to think and learn and reflect for themselves. This involved working creatively within the limitations of the platform and using the available teaching tools in different ways. We settled on a learning model based on the following activities:

- **Stimulating new thinking.** Using short video lectures and downloadable self-reflection activities, we encouraged participants to think in new ways about their career situations. Throughout, we encouraged active reflection and forum discussion on the material presented.

- **Applying it to your life.** Each chunk of stimulation led to a range of Core Activities that participants were encouraged to undertake which would have practical relevance to their career development. This could be further reflective activities or experimenting with new career directed behaviours, such as informational interviewing.

- **Sharing the results with others.** The activities were designed to produce concrete outcomes that the participants could report back to the MOOC community as Core Contributions using the Forums or the Peer Assessment system. This had a dual purpose of encouraging participants to complete the activities and of enabling participants to learn associatively rather than just instrumentally.

- **Receiving constructive feedback from peers.** Participants were then encouraged to ask questions about each other's Core Contributions and offer suggestions and refinements.

We chose to present our material in a sequence of six modules which we have summarised below:

1. **'What do you want?' Self-Awareness and Decision Making:** How to make good decisions in your career by developing a greater awareness of your career values.

2. **'What can you offer?' Skills Awareness:** How to identify what employability skills are, which skills employer want and how to develop them in yourself.

3. **'Are you ready to find success?' Career Readiness**: How to strengthen and develop the qualities and behaviours that make you ready to further your career such as self-efficacy, resilience, the ability to create opportunities either within organisations or through your own business.

4. **'How do you express yourself?' Articulating your experiences:** How to articulate your skills and experiences to employers and academic selectors in written applications and through your online brand.

5. **'What impact do you make?' Making a good impression in person**: How to make a positive impact in face to face interactions such as meetings, interviews and presentations.

6. **'How do you build fruitful relationships?' Networking online and in person**: How to establish and maintain relationships with people whose acquaintanceship could bring about some professional advantages.

However, another key pedagogical aspect which we had to take into consideration was lack of control we as 'instructors' had over the 'route' our participants took through our material. Whilst we may have presented our material in a sequence of six modules, covering standard career management topics from self-awareness to networking, we needed to be open

to the fact that many participants would not choose to progress with the course in a linear fashion, but rather select a sequence, or explore individual modules, in a way that suited their immediate needs.

We could no longer presume that our students had already covered the materials in weeks one to three, for example, just because they were engaging with week four. We needed to articulate our concepts in a way which acknowledged our learners' decision making about where to start, whilst at the same time making them curious about the rest of the material; 'If you find this difficult, you might find it useful to do A from Week B first. Equally, if you feel happy with this, you may be interested to now explore Y from Week Z'.

This in turn reminded us of our practice as guidance professionals. So often with clients you need to start where they are, rather than where you'd expect or prefer them to be. They are the starting point and we use our time with them to cross reference to other aspects of their career development to raise awareness of their other needs. In this way as instructors on the MOOC we began to reframe our role as facilitators, who co-curated the sequence and shape of the learning with our participants. This co-curatorial element was also particularly strong within the discussion forums.

With a few gentle nudges, participants learn from each other about their career development

A MOOC focused on career development, such as ours, whilst comprehensively informed by the academic literature was also distinct from discipline specific MOOCs in a number of ways. For example, unlike many MOOCs, we were keen to not only condone but actively *encourage* plagiarism between our learners. Similar to the harnessing of 'collective intelligence' which Hooley, Hutchinson and Watt's refer to (2010a: 11) we wanted our students to learn from each other and replicate similar stories of career learning and career decision making though the means of the discussion forums which were an integral part of the MOOC.

However, not even we expected the scale, diversity and enthusiasm for the discussion forums which occurred. As well as polls in the videos we also had reflective questions with direct links to related forum threads. Furthermore, learners were given the opportunity to start their own threads in areas of interest. With nearly 3,000 (2,855) individual discussion threads by the end of the course there were over 20,000 (20,521) forum contributions and almost 93,000 (92,994) forum views.

Some of the most popular threads linked directly to activities embedded within a respective video lecture, such as 'How will you know your career needs are being satisfied?' which alone attracted nearly 1000 posts (962) and almost 10,000 views (9,156). Other popular threads were entirely generated by the participant community such as one entitled 'Confused and Delusional' which was begun by an individual musing on the challenge of simultaneously having a diverse range of career ideas.

The most rewarding elements of the forums were when students supported or even coached each other with no 'interference' from the guidance practitioners:

> **Student A:** I am attending this course to understand why I have lost any wish to work at all. I become very lazy and frustrated. Does anybody has similar experience and what you would recommend to do?

> **Student B:** Hi, I can relate to your situation in some respects. Are you not doing much to find other work because you feel discouraged or because you are comfortable in this job?

> **Student A:** I have started to think about your questions you have pointed out. I have never thought about me like this.

These exchanges reflect a heutagogical approach to teaching and learning (Blaschke, 2012) which can be seen as an expansion of 'self-directed' learning to 'self-determined' learning. Within this theory, the focus is on learner-directed activities which enable learners to understand not only 'what they learn' (content) but also 'how they learn' (process). Within this context the notion of an 'instructor' expands to that of a 'mentor' whose role is to support the

learner's own identification of their educational goals and their confidence and capability to achieve those goals. Web 2.0 distance learning experiences such as this MOOC are particularly suitable for this form of learning as they provide a rich landscape for such learner-generated content and autonomous learner collaboration.

The development of such proactive competencies would clearly be helpful to an individual who needs to successfully navigate the unpredictable complexities of the modern workplace. Yet how much appetite is there really for such online self-determined learning regarding career development rather than for academic disciplines?

Appetite for new model of service delivery using remote access technology is massive

As the first MOOC of its kind, the level of interest in the *Enhance your Career and Employability skills* MOOC was untested. Given that career development was often cited as a reason for pursuing a distance learning qualification our project partners UoLIA were confident that interest would be high amongst their students. However demand beyond that cohort was completely unknown.

What transpired exceeded any of our expectations: 157,396 students registered from 204 countries across the globe with 89,157 (57%) of those registrants going on to participate in the course in some way. The latter figure is particularly significant given the common drop out between registration and participation on many MOOCs (Grainger, 2013). Details of participants' engagement are summarised here:

- 948,944 unique videos watched
- 39,832 quiz submissions
- 14,740 peers assessments
- 14,922 forum posts
- 2,850 discussion threads
- 89,665 forum views

Figures one to six illustrate the biographical, geographical, educational and professional diversity of the participants on the MOOC:
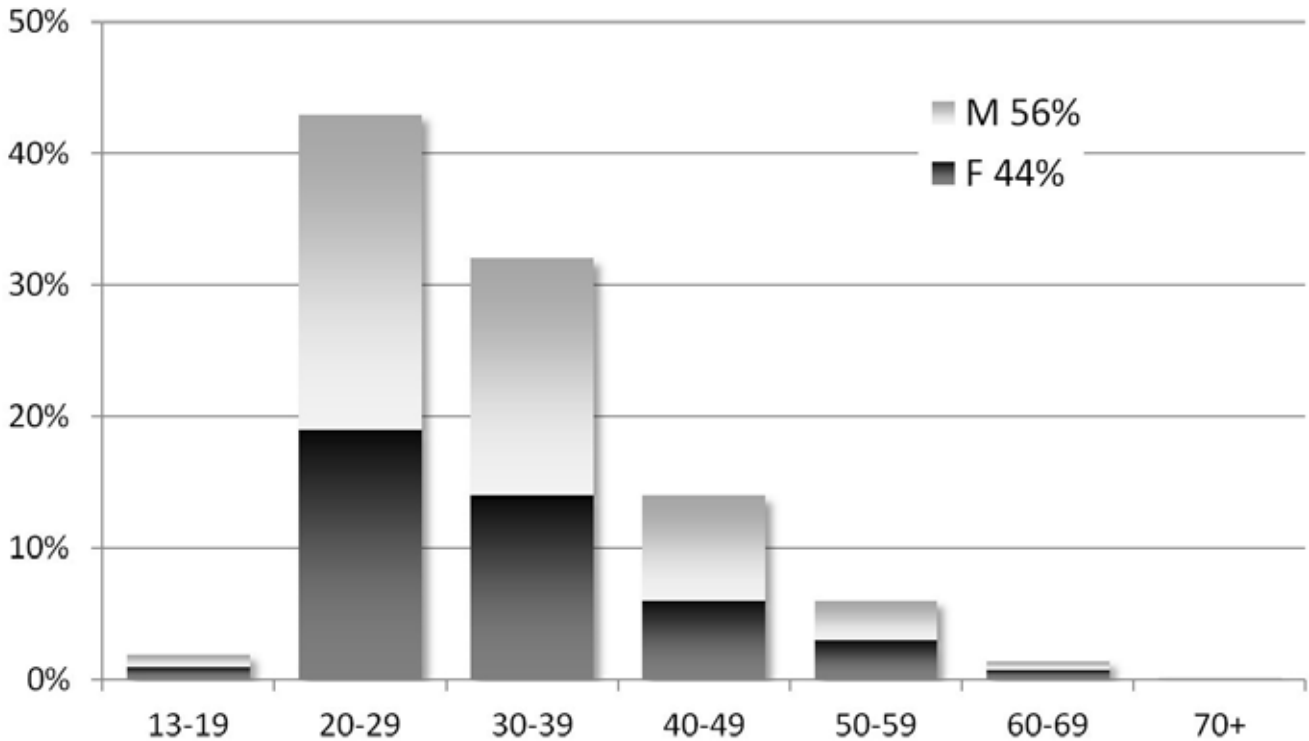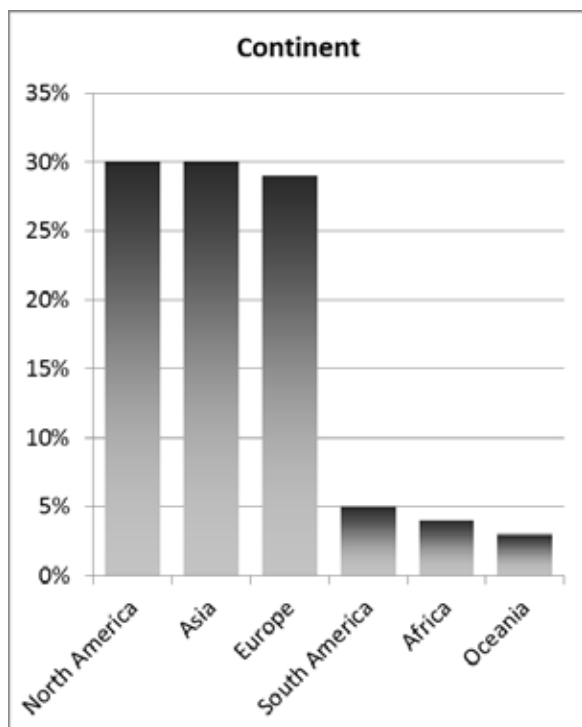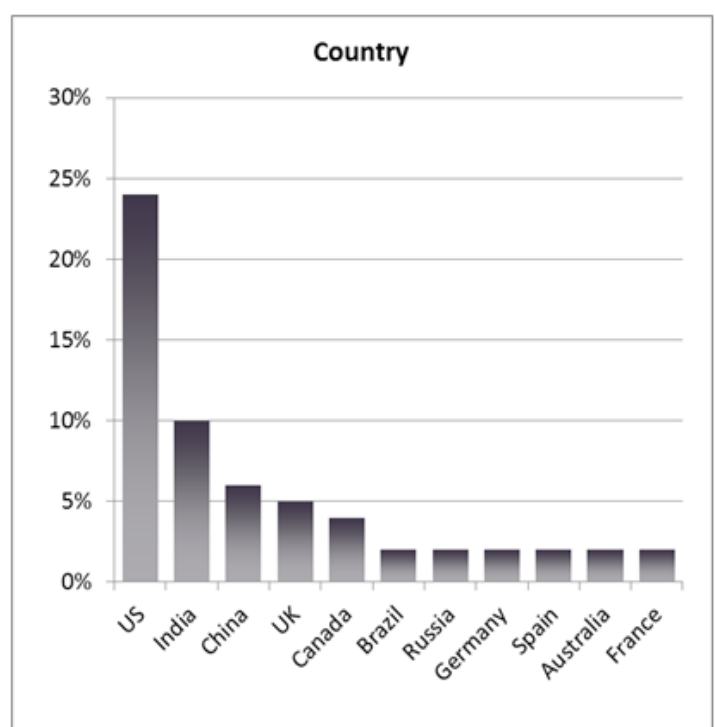
Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Education status

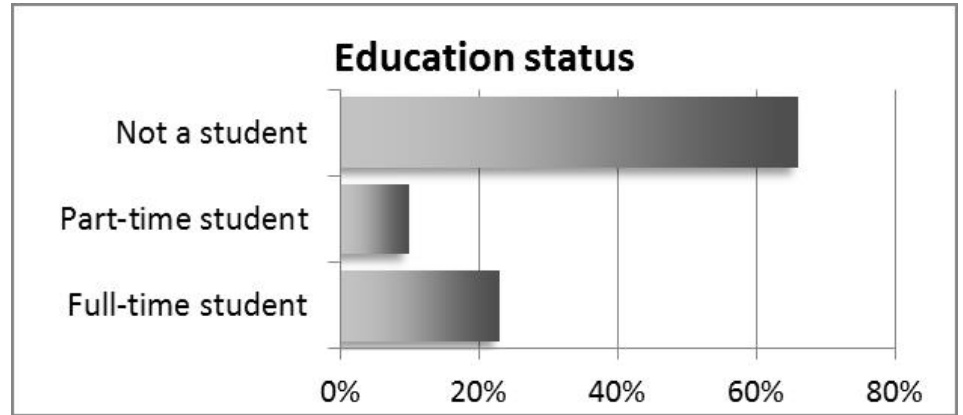**Figure 5**
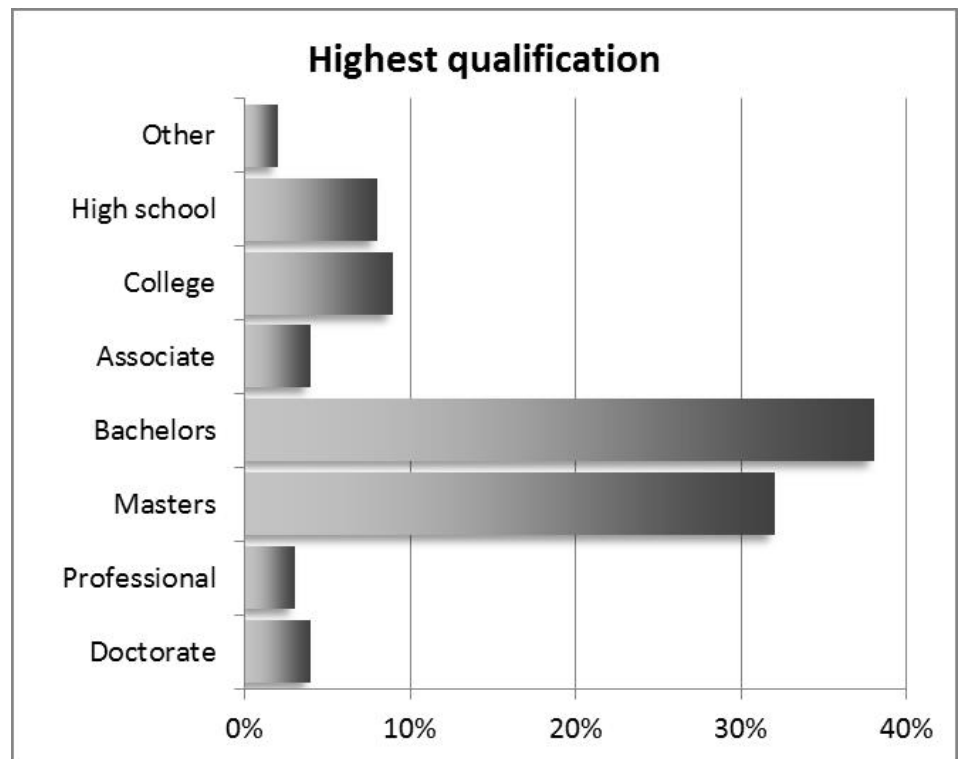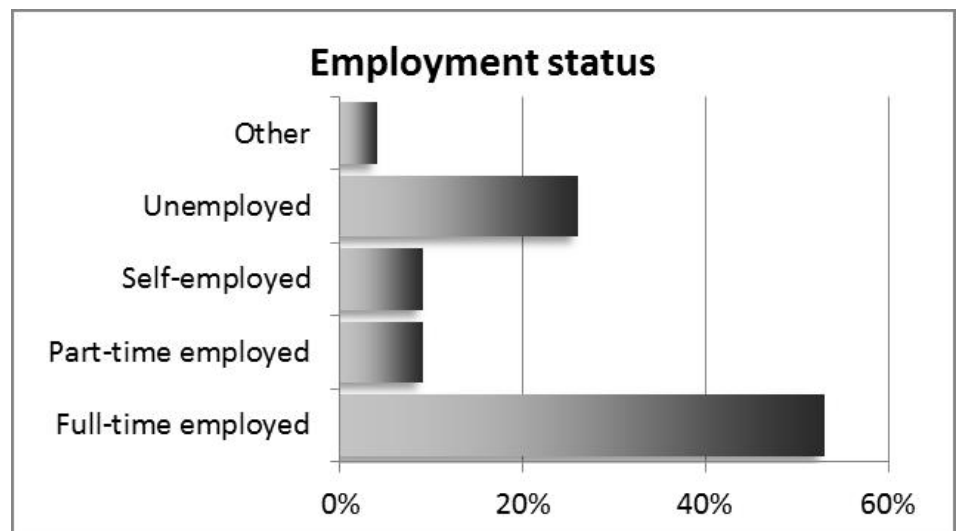
Highest qualification

Figure 6

Employment status

Beyond this quantitative data which reveals the mass appeal of online career development, the forums are littered with qualitative examples of reflection in action from participants across the globe articulating genuine moments of career development learning as they explored the activities:

> I looked back at when I felt particularly stressed and identified these as when other people had too much control over my life. Made me realise having choice over the structure and priorities of my day is very important. This in turn made me realise I am probably not good at delegating as I don't trust others to do the job properly!!

> I've been astounded by some of the insights gleaned from this course, for example I had no idea that being an expert was important to me. It is a common element within the themes of my life.

> It is insightful doing the activities AND writing about the results. It forces you to identify the real feelings, frustrations and values by putting a name to them.

Perhaps most significant, and most moving, was the transformation of the MOOC discussion forums into a space where participants not only explored their own career development processes and choices but also took solace and support for hearing similar experiences from their global peers:

> It's kind of a relief to see so many people have similar experiences, similar ups and downs, needs and emotions in similar situations. In a way it is inspiring. So many people need – like me – recognition, a sense of purpose and achievement, and some room to grow. If we think about that while working with other people, we can probably contribute a lot to creating a more satisfying workplace for ourselves and others…

The post course evaluation survey illustrated that participating in the MOOC had been a positive experience in terms of career management with 93 per cent reporting that they felt more confident about how they will approach their career development in the future as a result of the course and 91 per cent reporting specific actions they will take as a result of the course.

With this high success rate, could this form of online career management delivery be utilised elsewhere?

This mode of delivery of career development can be applied in a wide variety of settings

As figures one to six demonstrate, the breadth of appeal of this MOOC is significant as it indicates that such online career development delivery could be applicable in a range of settings, from schools through further and higher education and into employment. Given the initial assumptions we made about our demographic, we were surprised by that fact that some of participants were teachers who told us they were using the materials in schools.

Beyond educational establishments, recent research (Radford, Robles, Cataylo, Horn, Thornton and Whitfield, 2014) has indicated that an increasing number of employers are interested in potential employee's engagement with MOOCs as a positive indicator of qualities such as motivation. Furthermore, 83% of employers were using, considering using or could see their organisation using MOOCs for professional development purposes.

Whether in the workplace or in school this mode of delivery of career development has shown itself to be malleable enough to appeal to a diverse cohort and could be an innovative and cost effective way of meeting the career development needs of a range of audiences. It could be argued that MOOCs such as this one, reflect the technological changes which Hooley, Hutchinson and Watts once identified as having 'the potential to increase the efficiency of service delivery within the career support market, to enhance existing services, and to develop new paradigms of career support.' (2010b: Executive Summary).

Careers theories can be 'evaluated' by huge cohorts due to massive research potential of MOOCs

Our final key learning point relates to the opportunity MOOC cohorts provide to gain evaluative feedback on career development concepts and ideas. Indeed it is the 'massive' element of the MOOC which is

particularly interesting from a theoretical standpoint. For the first time we were able to gain feedback on aspects of different careers theories from cohort sizes far larger than we could have accessed within our respective academic institutions.

Furthermore, we were able gather data relating to key areas of interest in our field, from skills recognition to interview etiquette, from a huge variety of participants located across the globe. Indeed, the potential for MOOCs to provide rich research data is now being explored more explicitly by platform providers such as *Coursera.*

Final thoughts

Perhaps the overriding lesson from the *Enhance your Career and Employability Skills* MOOC is that there is obviously a great demand for careers and employability support, with many people feeling lost and confused in their careers. Indeed this need stretches across age ranges, time zones, level of education and stages of employment experience.

The help we gave, though high quality, was not especially tailored and addressed some very fundamental principles of career management. It is clear that the tens of thousands of people who took this course were unaware of these core principles, despite their established inclusion in much of the literature. Given that the majority of participants were university educated, a possible conclusion is that the university system, whilst getting people into work, is failing to equip them to deal with the most common career issues that they will face in their careers. It is also possible that our cohort consists of individuals who have never sought or received careers support before even when it was available.

In the next iteration of the MOOC, due in summer 2015, we will investigate this question by explicitly asking about their previous experiences of careers support. Even if it is a case of people not taking advantage of the opportunity to learn career development skills, this should strengthen the resolve and motivation of careers professionals at every stage to help their clients realise that they will depend on these skills in the future and that online learning may be an effective way to enhance those skills.

References

Blaschke, L. M. (2012) Heutagogy and lifelong learning: A review of heutagogical practice and self-determined learning, in *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning,* 13, 1, 56-71.

Bimrose, J., Hughes, D. and Barnes, S.A. (2011) *Integrating new technologies into careers practice: Extending the knowledge base.* London: UKCES.

Christensen, G., Steinmetz, A., Alcorn, B., Bennett, A., Woods, D. and Emanuel, E. J. (2013) The MOOC phenomenon: who takes massive open online courses and why? *University of Pennsylvania, nd Web*, 6. http://m4ed4dev.linhost1.jbsinternational.com/sites/default/files/the_mooc_phenomenon.pdf (accessed 15 December 2014)

Dweck, C. S. and Leggett, E. L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review*, 95, 2, 256–273.

Ferris, D.L., Johnson, R. E., Rosen, C. C. and Tan, J.A. (2012) Core self-evaluations a review and evaluation of the literature. *Journal of Management*, 38, 1, 81-128.

Grainger, B. (2013). Massive open online course (MOOC) report 2013, *University of London International Programmes report 2013*. http://www.londoninternational.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/mooc_report-2013.pdf (accessed 15 December 2014)

Hooley, T. (2012) How the internet changed career: framing the relationship between career development and online technologies, in *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling,* October 2012, 29, 3-12.

Hooley, T., Hutchinson, J. and Watts, A.G. (2010a) *Careering Through The Web. The Potential of Web 2.0 and 3.0 Technologies for Career Development and Career Support Services.* London: UKCES.

Hooley, T., Hutchinson, J. and Watts, A. G. (2010b) *Enhancing Choice? The Role of Technology in the Career Support Market.* London: UKCES.

Ibarra, H. (2002) How to stay stuck in the wrong career. *Harvard Business Review*, 80, 12, 40-48.

Ibarra, H. (2003) *Working identity: Unconventional strategies for reinventing your career*. Boston: Harvard Business Press.

Judge, T.A. (2009) Core self-evaluations and work success. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18, 1, 58-62.

Longridge, D., Hooley, T. and Staunton, T. (2013) Building online employability: a guide for academic departments, University of Derby. http://derby.openrepository. com/derby/bitstream/10545/294311/1/building%20 online%20employability_finaljm.pdf (accessed 15 December 2014)

Mitchell, K. E., Levin, S. and Krumboltz, J. D. (1999) Planned happenstance: Constructing unexpected career opportunities, in *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 77, 2, 115-124.

Radford, A. W., Robles, J., Cataylo, S., Horn, L., Thornton, J. and Whitfield, K. E. (2014) The employer potential of MOOCs: A mixed-methods study of human resource professionals' thinking on MOOCs, in *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 15, 5, 1-25.

Restubog, S. L. D., Florentino, A. R. and Garcia, P. R. J. M. (2010) The mediating roles of career self-efficacy and career decidedness in the relationship between contextual support and persistence. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 77, 2, 186-195.

Strauss, K., Griffin, M. A. and Parker, S. K. (2012) Future work selves: how salient hoped-for identities motivate proactive career behaviors. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 97, 3, 580.

For correspondence

Laura Brammar,
Senior Careers Consultant,
The Careers Group,
University of London

Laura.brammar@careers.lon.ac.uk

David Winter,
Head of Consultancy and Research,
The Careers Group,
University of London

David.winter@careers.lon.ac.uk

Articles