The POERUP *External Evaluation* of the FutureLearn community

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FutureLearn
https://www.futurelearn.com

- To bring together a range of free, open, online courses from leading UK universities, that will be clear, simple to use and accessible

- To draw on the UK Open University's expertise in delivering distance learning and pioneering open education resources to underpin a unified, coherent offer from all of its partners

- To increase accessibility to higher education (HE) for students across the UK and in the rest of the world

FutureLearn – disclaimer/ethics

- This is an external evaluation of FutureLearn done for the POERUP project, part-funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the EU, with a focus on the community-building aspects in respect of staff.
- It is based on desk research and interviews of stakeholders in the FutureLearn community.
- No views are specifically attributed.
- No confidential information was made specifically available, none has been knowingly used.

Overview

- The evaluation process

- Overview of FutureLearn

- The FutureLearn Community

- Sustainability, Success Factors, and Replicability to other EU countries

The Evaluation Process

Evaluation process

1. Selection of FutureLearn (spring 2013)

2. Initial desk research (spring 2013)

3. Preliminary interviews and discussions (summer 2013 – decided a case study was premature)

4. Stakeholder interviews (March 2014)

5. Report ready April 2014 – paper to IRRODL

FutureLearn Overview

FutureLearn Overview #1

- A private company wholly owned by UK Open University
- Launched in December 2012 with 12 HE partners
- New MOOC platform has been developed
- First MOOCs available from October 2013
- 26 university partners including Open University
- 1 from Eire, 1 from New Zealand, 1 from Australia
- A few more "expected"
- Also British Library, British Museum, British Council

FutureLearn Overview #2

- Initial HE partners were arguably less experienced in OER and e-learning than was typical of UK research-led institutions

- But with over 20 UK HEIs now involved the majority of Russell Group and some other high-level English universities are in FutureLearn – some with significant e-learning experience beyond FutureLearn including in MIT and Coursera and many online DL MSc programmes

- Though there are some surprising holdouts

FutureLearn Overview #3

- Content owned by partner HEIs
- Platform is owned by Open University
- Partner institutions have control over how and when courses are provided
- FutureLearn supports the Creative Commons license but partner HEIs can decide themselves about the appropriate licensing for the course content.
- HEI partners might offer additional optional resources that require payment by learners, or offer additional services of interest to learners that come with a price attached
- FutureLearn is likely to offer additional paid services in the future in order to make the service sustainable but the core remains open and free
- All learner content is published under a [Creative Commons NC BY ND licence](#)

The FutureLearn Community

Based on desk research and interviews
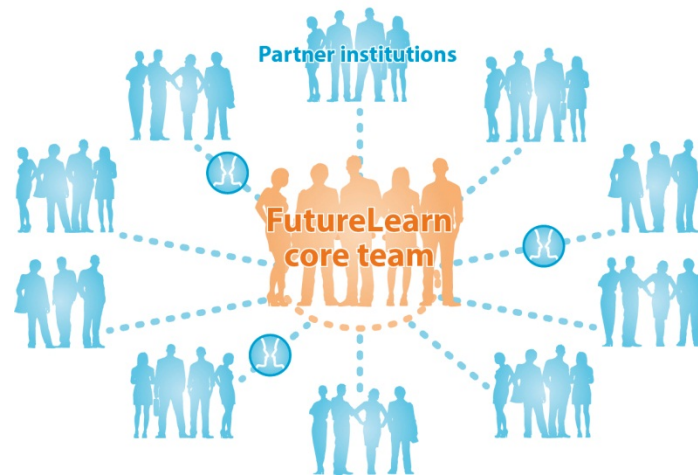
FutureLearn Community

- (focus is currently on staff aspects)
- At this stage the community is similar to many consortial models in the last 10 years but more isolated than the typical "joint Masters" consortium funded by EU etc
- A team at each HEI develops each of its own offerings, with support from the centre
- The offerings do not form part of some larger whole (e.g. full MSc programme)
- There is as yet little cross-linking of HEI teams but there is some informal linking in some subjects, and on technical issues, and this is likely to grow
- The community did not grow from the earlier OER community round the JISC OER Programme, it had more to do with professional links of managers through e.g. HELF and professionals through associations such as ALT

Community in pictures

The Social Configuration of FutureLearn

Maintaining the community

- There are regular face-to-face meetings which are "very valuable" (for UK members…)
- No sophisticated collaboration tools are used
- Joint working occurs e.g. when prioritising bug fixes and discussing work-arounds
- It will require more time to develop deeper learning and knowledge sharing within the community

Other findings

- HEI manager of FL does 0.25 on FL tasks
- "we've learned a lot on copyright" [good training]
- "we used JISCLegal but non-UK aspects of that are weak"
- "we're thinking of embedded MOOCs"

Sustainability, Success Factors, and Replicability

Sustainability

- Training workshops around the use of copyright issues have helped partner HEIs to become aware of possibilities of new licensing possibilities
- Partner HEIs see the added value of generating expertise in online education in general (particularly relevant to those with less experience in online)
- Partner Institutions use the FutureLearn platform as a marketing mechanism and to reach a wider audience
- Partner institutions and FutureLearn will have the opportunity to offer additional (paid) services on the platform

Lifelong Learning Programme

Not Critical Success Factors

1. Government funding. Very little if any government funding has gone into FutureLearn. The former massive funding of OER by JISC has all finished and the Online Learning Innovation Fund fell with the last government.

2. The national role of the OU. The "national role" of the OU ebbs and flows over the years and the last period of a formal national role for the OU was under the last UK government.

Critical Success Factors

1. The strong support by David Willetts, Minister for Universities (in England) and Science (in UK), expressed by him to university rectors

2. The personal qualities, networking abilities and charisma of Martin Bean, the Vice-Chancellor of the Open University

3. The relatively comfortable financial position of leading English universities after the new fee settlement

Other success factors

1. The recognised abilities and reputation of many OU staff in e-learning and distance learning in particular

2. The long track record of the OU in OER, achieved largely with US Foundation funding not UK government funding

3. The hegemonic position of the OU in undergraduate distance learning and an oligopolistic player in postgraduate distance learning

4. The massive knowledge base of the OU in terms of market research globally in distance learning, eclipsing such other agencies as there were, most of whom have (relatively) shrunk in influence

5. The potential link of MOOCs to global marketing of high-cost masters programmes in English, an unregulated market with uncapped student numbers – even a low conversion ratio from MOOCs is useful

FutureLearn platform

- "Clean and simple", mobile-friendly, adaptable to many devices
- Limited functionality, "clunky" for developers, not necessarily a criticism – compare OU use of FirstClass for nearly 20 years
- "platform support can be a bit stretched at times"
- Will it be found in non-MOOC courses?

Replicability

To other EU countries

And to other parts of HE sector…?

England HE marketplace – full-time

	UK/EU	**Overseas**
Under-grad	Quotas (still) but no cap on ABB+ students Fee cap of €10 000/yr	No quotas No fee cap: market forces Fees >> €10k/yr
Post-grad	No quotas No fee cap: market forces Fees usually > €10k	No quotas No fee cap: market forces Fees >> €10k

Lifelong Learning Programme

Simple economics

- Additional HEI staff cost for 1 year FutureLearn with 1 MOOC: €50k

- Additional income: one EU u/g student: €30k (note quotas but also ABB+ and future easing)

- Additional income: one o'seas p/g student: €15k

- So how many new students do you need to get?

Final comments

- "we can get to lots of people"
- "it's a stepping stone"
- "a window to the international scene"
- "CPD might be a market"
- "good research is coming out" (but issue with NDAs in terms of wider links from FL research network e.g. to ALT)

Questions and comments on relevance to other countries?

Thanks for listening
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