

MOOCs as Institutional Internationalization Strategy

First Italian courses on edx platform

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Abstract. Internationalization is currently high on the agenda for governance and policy decisions at HE Institutions around the world. It is also a subject of debate in the academic press, where it is often described as a positive force for inclusion and mobility. In a previous paper the authors cited internationalization as one of the four pillars of their institutional MOOC strategy at the University of Federico II in Naples, Southern Italy. This paper focuses on the decision of Federica Weblearning to become the first Italian university to deliver courses in Italian on the edx platform as an integral part of its internationalization policy. It sets out the strategic objectives for this venture, and explores the policy choices involved when a minority language partners with an external global provider. It looks at specific implications for marketing and communications, product differentiation, format and instructional design, and evaluation of results. Early observations emerging from the data are reported, and how these are influencing the roadmap for future collaboration.

Keywords: MOOCs, internationalization, edx,

1 Introduction and related issues

Internationalization has become a key element in EU Policy debate around Higher Education (HE) and has been moving higher up the HE governance agenda in recent years, such that “HE institutions are changing rapidly in response to increasing geopolitical and economic imperatives, to ‘become international’” [1]. Blackmore et al describe a new “prestige culture” that has arisen, influencing whether universities are perceived to be ‘excellent’ or ‘world class’ [2] and internationalization is frequently associated with success in terms of research funding, international staff and student recruitment, and co-authorship with international research partners [3] which are all factors that help to determine a University’s position within world rankings like QS. However, definitions of internationalization vary with some authors focusing on preparing students for a more global workplace by offering class teaching and tuition in English, and still others suggesting that internationalization has negative consequences like commercialization, diploma and accreditation mills [4].

Negotiations at governance level determined the aims of our own internationalization policy. Federico II has its own University Centre for Innovation and Experimentation in Multimedia Learning, Federica Weblearning, and its own platform with over 150 MOOCs that reflect the curricular content of on-campus degree courses. These are all open-access, but are designed as a response to local needs, offering flexible or blended delivery models and therefore enhance the university's core business of preparing student for degrees. In line with this public university's third mission, Federico II was interested in exploring knowledge-sharing and capacity-building in a wider social context through MOOCs, and, since Italian is the fourth most studied language in the world [5], whether MOOCs contribute to the dissemination of language and culture. National graduate numbers in Italy are low compared to the rest of Europe, so MOOCs were also seen as a possible way of improving university impact and reach, and thus attracting more student applications from further afield, both in Italy and abroad. It was decided to initiate a partnership with one of the leading international MOOC providers. A major challenge to see whether a minority language could achieve international reach via an English-speaking platform.

2 Platform choice

Various authors have described frameworks for comparative analysis of platforms for MOOC delivery and they include usability and interface, the range of specific features and interaction tools, information security [6] as well as the recoverable data referred back to provider institutions. The authors were also involved in benchmarking study of existing platforms in 2015 as background to their development of the EMMA platform [7] and described content in terms of Conole's twelve dimension classification. [8]. However, the conclusion in many cases is that the learner experience does not vary much from one platform to another [9]. From an institutional point of view, for the administration of a Public University like Federico II, a partnership with edX, a non-profit university-led platform that already hosted courses from prestigious universities around the world seemed to sit more easily. Federico II accepted the major challenge: to see whether a minority language, appearing for the first time, could achieve international reach via an ostensibly English-speaking platform.

3 Strategic product choice and differentiation

Federica Weblearning has a portfolio of over 150 MOOCs on its Federica.eu platform. These courses are curricular in nature, providing a flexible alternative, or support, to undergraduates for preparation of specific degree modules, or providing on-campus staff with opportunities for experimentation with new blended delivery models. Courses on the edX platform would address a broader target audience at home and abroad, especially Italian emigrants, lifelong learners who are speakers of Italian as a second language, or learners seeking to practise/improve their Italian language

skills. Edx assigns a Partner Manager to plan strategy and set down a road map for delivery and initial meetings focused on the following key decisions:

- How important are enrolment numbers? Create “one big ticket” item connected to local culture with obvious appeal like “The Pizza” to attract large numbers of learners, or use existing courses and remain with the Federica brief to provide quality, curricular courses and opt for lower enrolment numbers over a wider range of courses?
- Which disciplinary areas and what content opportunities exist that embody local culture and reflect local research and teaching excellence? Edx strongly recommends content widely-associated with Italian culture and recommends steering clear of subjects like Computer Science Programming that are offered by world leaders like MIT.
- Are existing pedagogic approaches and instructional design suitable for a wider public and non-native speaker audience or will modifications need to be made?
- edX courses offer a verified certificate track. How will Federica differentiate content for the two tracks? How important is certificate revenue as ROI, and over what time period?

4 Course format and instructional design

As the first Italian University on the edX platform to offer courses in Italian language, Federica opted to deliver a broad and representative range, based on teacher availability to participate in this new MOOC venture but also on cultural association with Italy, and Federico II research and teaching excellence. One year into the partnership, Federica Weblearning was offering 40 MOOCs on the edX platform, and many of them in the areas of Arts and Culture, Archaeology and Engineering. Courses were launched in batches of 10-12 at a time and were offered twice a year. They were instructor-led in the first edition and then in self-paced mode in the second. In 2018 it was decided to deliver the 7 Introductory Political Science MOOCs on edX too. These courses were the product of a collaboration between Federica Weblearning and the International Political Science Association (IPSA) with Federica providing the expertise in online course creation and delivery and IPSA providing content specialists of world renown as the authors. The language of instruction for these courses was English, and the aim to promote cutting-edge research in Political Science and raise awareness on a broader societal level of issues like democracy, regime change, inclusion, and race.

The edX authoring suite proved user-friendly and Federica formats translated reasonably easily to the new environment in terms of format, though edX courses are more video-intensive than Federica courses. More complex changes were twofold and required the hiring of teaching assistants. The courses were shortened from the 12 lessons reflecting the 12 weeks of an academic term to a more manageable average of 8 lessons and a slightly “lighter” approach advocated. A battery of assignments to improve student engagement in a self-learning rather than blended environment were prepared and added, as well as detailed end-of-lesson assessment tests. And the edX platform requires transcripts of the original language of the course for the onscreen visualization, and these had to be produced manually.

5 Marketing and publicity

The edx enrolment strategy has upcoming courses on the Home page for a longer period, allowing for a longer enrolment period compared to Federica. Appealing course descriptions and lively trailer videos on the Home page attract learners. Welcome and informational mails are sent to enrolled learners 1 month and 1 week before the course starts, as it launches, and then weekly during the course. Information about new courses is sent out to learners on the edx mailing lists according to relevant algorithms. However, targeting potential learners is a complex issue for a minority language like Italian, and a minority language starting out on the platform. Registration on the edx platform, which includes learner demographics, only allows for specification of 1 language, and so it is almost impossible to reach second-language speakers or learners of Italian.

6 Evaluation metrics

In collaboration with edx and the demographic and learner data provided to partner institutions on edx dashboards, the main KPIs that were set for determining the success of the Federica internationalization strategy and product choice were:

- Enrollments – general learners
- Enrollments - Italian learners
- Comparison of enrolment rates between first and second wave delivery
- Certificate Revenue

7 Findings and discussion

Overall, the top 5 courses that proved the most successful in terms of our KPIs were the introductory courses to wide-reaching aspects of Political Science, authored by leading academics in the global Political Science community. These courses were delivered in English language and one in Spanish. They registered more than 23,000 enrolments overall, with approx. 2,500 learners on each course, and a 100% increase in enrolments over the last 6 months. Learners came from 120 different countries in the first edition and 143 in the second, with a predominance of American and Indian learners, and UK learners in third place.

The courses that were delivered in Italian scored much lower in terms of overall enrolments and comparison of enrolments between the first and second editions. As can be seen in Fig. 1 below, the top-scoring course in Italian had only half the enrolments of the top course in English.

Course title:	Enrolments	Certificates:
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L'italiano nel mondo	1.373	15
Negoziazione e comunicazione efficace	1.086	28
Psicologia dell'apprendimento	825	14
Comprendere la filosofia	741	11
Disegno tecnico industriale	657	5

Fig. 1. Table showing the 5 most popular Italian courses in terms of enrolments and certificates

However, the completion rates, and number of certificates issued as a percentage of enrolments, were very similar. General observations resulting from our analysis of emerging data is that self-paced function, allowing learners time and space to organize their own learning, seems to lead to higher enrolment rates and more certificates. The importance of an appealing About page was confirmed as 30% of learners decide whether or not to enrol based on the course presentation on the About page. In response to feedback from edx and learners, we are working to make a more obvious differentiation between the learner experience on the Verified and Audit tracks.

In terms of the specific goal of internationalization via the delivery of MOOCs on the international edx platform, our experience points to the success of soft skills like negotiation and communication. However, enrolment numbers confirm the difficulty for a minority language like Italian to reach out to Italian learners around the globe. In terms of lessons learned, there is a need to target a much broader public through branding and content that is widely-associated with Italian culture - like Fashion, Mediterranean Diet and Pizza and Product Design – as well as local areas of excellence like arts and cultural heritage management. However, the large institutional partnership of a platform like edx, allows for a different form of internationalization, for example, collaboration with other edx partners who are renowned for their teaching of the Italian Language.

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