

# **(M)OOCs in Iceland: Language and learning communities**

Sólveig Jakobsdóttir<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Education, University of Iceland (soljak@hi.is)

## **Abstract**

An overview is given of experiences of MOOCs in Iceland. An open online Icelandic language course from 2004 at the University of Iceland (UI) has been popular and remains open. A work group, formed in 2013 by the president of the UI, analysed the MOOC landscape and gathered data about students' use of MOOCs and OERs. Recommendations included trialling integration of international MOOCs in UI courses. In 2014, opportunities for participation in MOOCs were provided in four courses, in some cases as group activity with discussion of experiences. Other developments include a 2015 open online course for professional development on ICT in teaching and learning. Over 300 teachers were registered and emphasis was on the use of social media and supporting a learning community. Results from these cases indicate importance of MOOCs for professional development but the role of language, culture and learning communities needs further attention.

## **Keywords**

MOOCs, distance education, language, communities of practice, learning communities

## 1 Introduction

University of Iceland (UI), the leading university in Iceland, was established in 1911 but until then, the few Icelanders who got to study at the tertiary level had to travel abroad. Graduate programs were unavailable in most areas of study until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Internet revolutionised access in the country to scientific writing and research and facilitated the development of academic programs at the University of Iceland and other higher education institutions in the country. A distance learning program online with campus sessions (Jakobsdóttir, 2008) was developed at the Iceland University of Education (IUE) in the early to mid 90's equalizing access to teacher education (Jóhannsdóttir, 2010). In 2008 IUE merged with IU and became the School of Education within UI. There was a wide gap between the institutions regarding online learning. About two thirds of the 2,382 IUE students were distance learners in the school year prior to merger but only about 3% of the 9,783 UI students (Geirsdóttir et al., 2007). A work group before the merging of the two universities recommended that the UI would open access to many more of their programs for distance learners. However, these plans were not put into action, perhaps partly due to the financial crash in the country which occurred around the same time and the merger. Most UI programs and courses remained closed for distance learners. Among exceptions were UI Icelandic Online courses, first offered in 2004, which were open for anyone on a continuous basis. At the same time worldwide, online teaching and learning was developing at the university level and MOOCs emerged as a form of distance education. Institutional strategic planning in relation to MOOCs became increasingly common, and at the end of 2012 - “The year of the MOOC” the president of UI started a work group which examined the “MOOC landscape” and made recommendations for the UI in relation to online and blended learning. At that time stories had been circulating about courses in the UI engineering department where some students chose not to show up in classes, but only for final exams because they were taking similar courses for free at elite US universities (MOOCs). The following year a project

group of academics tested the use of MOOCs within UI courses.<sup>1</sup> These and later developments will be described further in this paper.

## 2 MOOCs in Iceland

### 2.1 Icelandic Online: courses 2004 to present

Around the world there are few and scattered learners of Icelandic as a second/foreign language (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2004). Icelandic is a highly inflected language and challenging for beginning learners. The designers of *Icelandic Online* predicted that distance CALL (computer assisted language learning) could provide good solutions for studying small languages like Icelandic. In 2008, 13,000-14,000 students had signed up for the Icelandic Online site and there were ca. 2,300 active users and 500 daily visitors (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2008). Recent analysis of the participation in seven courses at the site for the last eight years shows that there were about 140,000 visitors with 43,000 active learners (Friðriksdóttir & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2015). There have been three delivery modes available for the courses: self-study online, blended mode (used on the UI campus with a tutor/in a course but self-directed); and a distance mode (online with a tutor and a fee). Preliminary findings indicated completion rates from 2% to 18% across courses. The highest retention is in the blended mode. Further studies are being planned to better understand factors influencing learners' decisions to withdraw or persist and to see how or whether the courses have supported language acquisition. The courses have had great impact on access to the study of modern Icelandic (Hafsteinsson et al., 2013).

### 2.2 UI work group 2013: MOOC landscape, UI strategy

The workgroup examined 14 providers of MOOCs (active in February 2013) or open courseware<sup>2</sup>, which were listed on Mooc.ca<sup>3</sup> (Hafsteinsson et al., 2013).

---

<sup>1</sup> I, the author of this paper, was a member of both of these groups.

The majority of the providers were US-based (others from Australia, Ireland, the UK, and international/UN), and English was the main teaching language. Alison offered 500 courses (not all free, unclear how many were at the university level), Coursera offered over 300 and Udemy 260 but most providers offered 7 to 92 courses. Number of students listed in each course was variable (from one to tens of thousands). This finding resulted in the workgroup deciding to rather use the concept OOC than MOOC when translating it into Icelandic (Icelandic: "opið netnámskeið"). Pedagogical models also varied by provider with Coursera advertising mastery learning (xMOOC) and Alison interactive self-paced learning. Open Learning and P2P learning appeared to provide cMOOCs and Udacity and edX advertised varied teaching methods. OLI emphasised learning by doing and interactive simulations. The workgroup collected data from UI students in a survey open in April and May 2013. There were 503 answers (from 14,009 registered students, only 4% participation rate).<sup>4</sup> Of those who answered 12% had completed a MOOC course, 20% had explored a foreign MOOC course without completing it and 75% had used open educational content (e.g. on Youtube) in their courses. In the work group report, challenges in relation to MOOCs were discussed including finances, certification and testing, drop-out and self-discipline, and course evaluation. One chapter addressed the issue of language as it is the official policy of the UI (from 2004), supported by a 2009 national parliamentary resolution, that the spoken and written language of the UI is Icelandic in teaching, research and administration. The main teaching language in most programs of study is ex-

---

<sup>2</sup> Alison, Open Learning Initiative (OLI), Coursera, edX, MIT Open courseware, Open Learning, OpenLearn, P2P University, Stanford's Free Online Courses, Udacity, Udemy, University of the people, Wikieducator content, Open Yale Courses

<sup>3</sup> Mooc.ca is provided by Stephen Downes and George Siemens as a place to host MOOC news and information.

<sup>4</sup> These included 60% undergraduate and 74% female participants (UI statistics showed 68 and 65% respectively during the time of the study).

pected to be Icelandic especially at the undergraduate level. The workgroup warned against a possible trend where students, particularly undergraduates would be able to substitute MOOC courses entirely for UI courses taught in Icelandic. The recommendations by the workgroup included that each of the five UI schools would consider the design of more UI MOOCs (e.g. geology, Medieval Icelandic Studies) with special funding which would also be used to explore MOOC integration within two to three courses in each of the five schools of the UI.

### 2.3 UI MOOC project group 2014: MOOC integration in UI courses

The UI decided to go ahead with integration of MOOCs. At the end of 2013 a project group advertised for faculty members. Eight answered, six attended the first meeting, and teachers of four courses in the Schools of Humanities (SH), Health Sciences (SHS) and Education (SE) participated in the trial (Hafsteinsson, Geirsdóttir, & Haraldsson, 2014). The courses and associated MOOCs are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of UI courses in a trial with MOOC integration

Course (School)	No. of students	Associated MOOCs	Providers
Computers and language (SH)	12	Corpus Linguistics	FutureLearn
Biostatistics I (SHS)	5 out of 70	Statistical Reasoning for Public Health	Coursera
Learning and teaching on the Internet (SE)	12	K-12 Blended & Online Learning	Coursera
Distance education (SE)	17	Several <sup>5</sup>	Coursera; University of Alaska

<sup>5</sup> Two groups of 5 to 6 students all selected the same course: K-12 Blended & Online Learning. One group of 5 students selected different courses: K-12 Blended & Online Learning.

The experiences of the teachers and students in these trials were mostly positive. Students felt, for example, that the courses were well organised and fit well into the UI courses involved. The learning communities formed in some cases may have been important as students could help each other and were kept on track and being evaluated by the UI academic staff. In the two courses within the School of Education, students were not only taking the MOOCs for the content but also evaluating and examining MOOCs as such because the experience linked well with the main focus of the courses involved. One group of graduate students, who had all signed up for an xMOOC Coursera course, felt that even if they were very positive at first they became more critical as the course progressed. Learning was more “parrot style”, not really academic, with automatic testing and the content too much linked to US culture. However, they saw great potential in participating in MOOCs for professional development.

#### 2.4 Other experiences: ICT and professional development of teachers

From 2014 all has been rather quiet regarding MOOCs at the UI from the administrative standpoint. However, grass root developments include continuing informal trials at the School of Education with nesting of MOOCs within courses and as an option for students who need credit and signing up for independent “reading courses”, for example, in the area of ICT and media in education. An example of this is a pair graduate students (co-workers at an upper secondary school) who registered for a course on Python programming with the intent to create an OER resource for Icelandic programming teachers.

Another example is a 2015 course developed by a group associated with the Icelandic Education Plaza (Jakobsdóttir et al., 2013) which is linked to UI and supports the professional development of Icelandic teachers. The group won a grant from

---

ing, Gamification, How viruses cause diseases, Digital citizenship and ethics in educational technology. One student chose Introduction to finance.

the Icelandic Ministry of Education and Culture to run a year long course on ICT in education for practicing teachers. The course is mostly organized like a cMOOC but in a hybrid mode. It is online (webinars, Facebook, blogs) but includes an optional campus session (4 hour) and a minimal registration fee (ca. 40 euros). Well over 300 teachers signed up for the course and preliminary data indicates that the participants have been very happy with it and this form of professional development (Thayer, 2015). A study on the course is in the planning stages. Other recent examples include an involvement of UI faculty in the Nordic Network of Adult education. The network recently did a feasibility study and recommended the design and development of a Nordic education MOOC for teachers in the field of basic skills for adults (NVL, 2015).

### 3 Conclusions

Smaller countries and universities have to think carefully about why and if they should design or open up courses to the world. Language is an important issue and in some cases it may be more important to focus on learning opportunities at the national or local level rather than the whole world. In that case the concept "massive" is a relative term. As an example over 300 Icelandic teachers represent about 0.1% of the population of Iceland and 6- 7% of all teachers at the primary and lower secondary level in the country.<sup>6</sup> Results from the experiences reported in this paper indicate great potential and importance of MOOCs for professional development. MOOCs oriented towards smaller language areas may become extremely important and can reach a high percentage of the target groups involved even if participation is hardly on a "massive" scale. Such MOOCs could perhaps be referred to simply as OOCs. For small universities that may not be able to offer a large selection of courses MOOCs can also be very useful. However the role of language, culture and learning communities needs further attention.

---

<sup>6</sup> Statistics Iceland (<http://www.hagstofan.is>) reports 4596 teachers in 2014 at that school level.

## References

- Arnbjörnsdóttir, B. (2004). Teaching morphologically complex languages online: Theoretical questions and practical answers. In P. J. Hendrichsen (Ed.), *CALL for the Nordic Languages*. Copenhagen Studies in Language. Copenhagen: Samfundslitteratur.
- Arnbjörnsdóttir, B. (2008). Kennsla tungumála á netinu: hugmyndafræði og þróun Icelandic online [Teaching Languages Online: The Development of Icelandic Online]. *Hrafnaving*, 5, 7-31.
- Friðriksdóttir, K., & Arnbjörnsdóttir, B. (2015). Tracking student retention in open online language courses. In F. Helm, L. Bradley, M. Guarda & S. Thouësny (Eds.), *Critical CALL – Proceedings of the 2015 EUROCALL conference Padova, Italy* (pp. 1-6). Dublin: Research-publishing.net.
- Geirsdóttir, G., Pálmadóttir, H., Ólafsson, R., Jakobsdóttir, S., Pálmason, Þ., & Jóhannsdóttir, Þ. (2007). *Mótun stefnu í fjarkennslumálum hins sameinaða háskóla - Lokaskýrsla verkefnishóps* [Shaping the distance education policy for a joined university - final report]. Reykjavík, Iceland: Kennaraháskóli Íslands, Háskóli Íslands.
- Hafsteinsson, H., Geirsdóttir, G., & Haraldsson, R. H. (2014). *Skýrsla verkefnastjórnar um vefstudda kennslu og netnámskeið* [Report from a Project group on web-facilitated and online teaching and learning]. Unpublished report: University of Iceland.
- Hafsteinsson, H., Rögnvaldsson, E., Freysteinsdóttir, F. J., Geirsdóttir, G., Ómarsdóttir, S. S., Jakobsdóttir, S., & Helgason, S. Þ. (2013). *Skýrsla starfshóps háskólaráðs um vefstudda kennslu og nám* [Web-facilitated teaching and learning: Report of a work group for the University of Iceland Council]. Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands.



Jakobsdóttir, S. (2008). The role of campus-sessions and face-to-face meetings in distance education. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, 2008(II). Retrieved from <http://www.eurodl.org/materials/contrib/2008/Jakobsdottir.htm>

Jakobsdóttir, S., Sigurdardóttir, A. K., Thayer, T., Pétursdóttir, S., Thorsteinsdóttir, T., & Eiríksdóttir, H. R. (2013). EducationaPlaza – Teachers' professional development. In M. F. Paulson & A. Szucs (Eds.), *EDEN 2013 annual conference. The Joy of learning: Enhancing learning experience improving learning quality. Conference proceedings* (pp. 975-986). Budapest: European Distance and E-Learning Network.

Jóhannsdóttir, T. J. (2010). *Teacher education and school-based distance learning: individual and systemic development in schools and a teacher education programme*. (doctoral thesis), University of Iceland, Reykjavík. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/1946/7119>

NVL. (2015). *MOOC for Nordic education for teachers in the field of basic skills for adults; a feasibility study*. Nordisk Netværk for Voksnes Læring. Retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/epale/en/resource-centre/content/mooc-nordic-education-teachers-field-basic-skills-adults-feasibility-study>

Thayer, T. (2015). *Samspil 2015 - UT áttak Menntamiðju: Milliskýrsla til RANNÍS* [Samspil 2015 - The EducationPlaza ICT course: Interim report]. Reykjavík: EducationPlaza.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> This li-

cence lets others distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon this work (even commercially) as long as credit is provided for the original creation. This is among the

most accommodating of CC licenses offered, and recommended for maximum dissemination and use of licensed materials.