THE ACCEPTABILITY OF MOOC CERTIFICATES IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are being undertaken by hundreds of thousands of participants globally. Reasons for taking these courses vary, such as improving employment prospects, especially in the technology sector, though the impact of these certificates has not been established. Factors identified as barriers to the acceptance of these certifications include user verification issues and a lack of familiarity of MOOC content. There are positive signs in employers recommending MOOCs for training purposes and a major MOOC platform collaborating with companies to provide a work placement scheme. The discussion regarding the value of traditional and online education also applies, as employers are seeking candidates who are technically skilled and ready for work, which is not guaranteed by a traditional degree certificate. This review provides a baseline collation of current opinion and research. Independent qualitative research and further literature review should be conducted to build an evidence base regarding the use of MOOCs and their certificates.

KEYWORDS

MOOC, Employment, Online Education, Certificate

1. INTRODUCTION

Since their inception in 2008, massive open online courses (MOOCs) have proliferated to become a major feature of the online education field. A variety of MOOCs are available, from those which attract tens of thousands of participants worldwide, to courses which are built to train a specific cohort. While some individuals undertake MOOCs out of personal interest, others intend to enhance their employability through gaining certification for completed courses. Although the completion rate of MOOCs is low (generally <10%), increasing numbers are finishing and achieving completion certificates (Jordan, 2014). This raises the question of how these courses and certificates will be received by potential employers, and how they will be viewed in comparison to education obtained through more traditional methods. It is important to compare the factors standing for and against the recognition of these courses in the employment process as part of the movement towards developing standards to be used by recruiters. To date this is a subject not comprehensively addressed in the literature, and this paper sought to review information published or posted regarding the subject thus far, and describe and discuss the points arising.

2. DISCUSSION

There are multiple discussion points concerning the use of MOOCs and their certificates for employment purposes. A central issue is that of the credibility of courses and certificates, and whether or not these can be taken seriously by employers (Krumrie, 2014, Ossiannilsson, 2014). Currently, MOOC providers are developing further methods of verification to reduce the likelihood of fraud or plagiarism by participants in both coursework and assessment, a problem which hinders trust in certificates (Boeckh, 2014). The use of webcams, keystroke analysis, valid photo identification and in-person test centres is being explored by the major MOOC providers in order to definitively verify the identity of participants and confirm that they have completed the work submitted in their name (Boeckh, 2014). At present these efforts are not infallible and

require refinement, though employers may choose to test prospective employees on relevant material in order to show up anyone who has falsely claimed to have completed a certain course, and it may be easy to identify these individuals during standard job interviews.

If the credibility of the MOOCs is deemed acceptable then the process of verifying the educational component of the MOOC certificate is crucial if it is to be meaningful to potential employers (Krumrie, 2014). A means of quantifying the knowledge given in courses is required so that the level of education attained is clear to those reading CVs, similar to the widely known qualifications of formal education. Moves towards awarding university credit to MOOCs began in 2013, and have continued in countries across the world. Students in many universities who complete MOOCs, (in most cases) purchase the end of course certification, and have their identity verified, can add the course to their university transcript (Haynie, 2015). This move by academia sets a positive precedent for the recognition of MOOCs in other sectors.

The notion of interpreting MOOCs on CVs is still novel and there are no established standards to aid recruiters in discerning the value of these courses or their impact on the candidate (Krumrie, 2014). Therefore, receptiveness may predominantly be a case of whether the recruiter is familiar with MOOCs and their terminology. Also, due to the novelty, companies may not have had the chance to hire or monitor employees who have previously completed MOOCs, a barrier which may potentially be solved in time. In a 2014 study of North Carolina based human resource professionals, it was found that only 31% had heard of MOOCs, consistent with the general public, though this increased to 50% for respondents from educational organisations. Interviewees who had heard of MOOCs stated they had researched these because of either management enquiries about using them to save costs within the company or through other employees who were undertaking MOOCs, rather than as part of updated recruitment guidelines (Radford et al., 2014). Coursera co-founder Daphne Koller stated in an interview in 2015 that this study showed that a significant uptake of MOOCs by employers was beginning (Koller, 2015).

While increasing numbers of businesses are looking to MOOCs and online education to reinforce or build workforce knowledge and skills, this hasn't translated into them being fully acceptable for recruiting purposes (Ng, 2016). They are seen by some as being a tool to further professional development in their workforce rather than justify the hiring of an individual (Ossiannilsson, 2014). Nevertheless, the use of MOOCs by employers is a positive step, and they are being utilised by companies recommending that employees undertake a certain MOOC available freely on online platforms, or larger institutions such as the NHS which are developing courses to target a particular element which they have identified as requiring improvement (NHS Improving Quality, 2015).

The value of traditional education when hiring is being brought into question, adding another dimension to the discussion on online education (Ma, 2015, Ng, 2016). Some employers, such as Ernst and Young, are blinding recruiters to the details of candidate's university education, and more non-graduates than ever are being hired at Google for jobs which would typically require a degree elsewhere (Andersen, 2014). It is being found that graduates are not leaving university with technical skills which are directly applicable to the working environment – meaning that employees must undergo further training before they are competent to work independently anyway. A recruiter polled by the Success Communications Group noted that a person with online certification usually uses this method as they are balancing full time work alongside their studies and may therefore have more real-world job experience which is attractive to employers, as well as demonstrating their time management skills (Larson, 2013). This being said, the traditional degree and where it was achieved are still the more valued commodities among employers in general, with the element of interpersonal and leadership skills which are developed during the course of degree programmes being as important as entry technical skill level in many settings (Larson, 2013). However, looking to the future, the recruitment environment is changing and the need for any certificates at all may diminish (Winkler, 2014).

This is particularly true in the technology sector, in which a feature of growing importance in recruitment is a practical demonstration of the candidate's abilities, rather than a piece of certification (O'Connor, 2013). The use of portfolios or coursework allows recruiters to see physical evidence of what the applicant is capable of, rather than a certificate of their expertise in a general broad subject (Belleflamme and Jacqmin, 2015, Ng, 2016, Kirsner, 2013, O'Connor, 2013). It was suggested that MOOCs could play a role in this due to the continuous collection of data from students over the duration of the course in order to build a profile of participants which may be of interest to prospective employers (Belleflamme and Jacqmin, 2015). This data and the end products of practical and projects can give a clear picture of what a participant can produce and the manner in which they go about this. However, as mentioned before the reliability of this is subject to increased measures of user verification. Also, with online platforms such as GitHub and Dribble also acting

as repositories for portfolios, MOOCs must strive to offer that bit more to students (Ng, 2016). The equivalent in traditional education is the large scale final year dissertation or thesis which gives a comprehensive overview of the student's skills and standard of work; this has the additional benefit of being supervised by Professors or lecturers who can provide trusted references for job applications.

Branching out from issuing certificates to participants, an Open Education Alliance has been launched by the MOOC provider platform Udacity in cooperation with employers such as Google, AT&T, Intuit and Autodesk (Thomas, 2014). These sectors are working in partnership to equip students with the technological skills required to work for these companies, with a view to potentially hiring Udacity "graduates" (Belkin and Porter, 2013, Thomas, 2014, Ng, 2016). This is a promising avenue for MOOC providers to prove the employability of their students, and demonstrates a show of faith from industry.

It is important to consider the participant perspective on what they have gained from MOOCs in terms of employment prospects. A 2015 survey of Coursera MOOC finishers found that 72% of the 51,954 respondents reported having gained career benefits from participating, and 52% had undertaken courses with a primary aim of improving their career. Of those aiming to develop their career, a third reported a tangible benefit of partaking in MOOCs, from finding a new job or receiving a promotion as a result. An even higher percentage, 85%, stated they had received less quantifiable benefits such as enhancing their skills for a current job or improving their candidacy for a new job (Zhenghao et al., 2015). The longer time lag between tangible benefits being seen compared to more abstract benefits may mean that the number of MOOC participants achieving pay increases or new jobs could still increase over time. Although this survey was conducted by Coursera's own staff, there is a clear demonstration that many of those who complete MOOCs are able to use these qualifications or certifications to advance their career.

What is for certain is that freely choosing to partake in a MOOC demonstrates the participant's interest and passion for a subject above and beyond the norm. Courses delivered through online platforms by the likes of MIT, Harvard and Stanford are not easy to pass, and with completion rates of MOOCs generally below 10%, finishing the course and receiving the certificate shows perseverance and dedication, though this fact may not be widely known (Zheng et al., 2015). For a student to go out of their way and complete multiple courses shows them to be motivated, creative, entrepreneurial, and self-starters, traits which are key for success in the technology sector and attractive in others (Ng, 2016, Zheng et al., 2015).

3. CONCLUSION

Currently, the acceptance of MOOCs for employment purposes is warming up but is still not a mainstream phenomenon. Pushes by major MOOC providers to increase uptake of these courses by employers through work placement schemes and academic recognition are reaping benefits, and these efforts should be continued until recruiters can fully recognise their worth on a CV, though provider platforms must address issues with validity. The greater deal of flexibility in MOOC provision compared to traditional education allows providers to observe and adapt to contemporary trends. Besides the surveys published, this review relied heavily on online editorials and opinion pieces due to the lack of peer-reviewed literature. As yet, the majority of hype surrounding MOOCs is generated by those with a vested interest in the courses, so the general consensus of opinion on these courses is not immediately clear through literature and online article review and it would be useful to conduct independent interviews with companies and recruitment agencies. This paper provides a collation of current opinion and provides the baseline for future research. The long term impacts of MOOC participation on prospective employees are yet to be fully understood, however positive moves towards the acceptance and recognition of MOOC achievements are being made by industry.

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