Online courses and social responsibility toward learners
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When we develop and validate traditional degree programmes great emphasis is placed on ensuring that applicants meet entry criteria for enrolment, and that students gain a quality experience to reach their academic and employment potential. If a student drops out, course leaders will be concerned for their welfare, and the institution will try and understand why an individual has left. Indeed, with the advent of escalating higher education fees in the UK in 2013, strategies for "retention" and "completion" are all important, not just in terms of economics (minimising lost income if a student leaves and minimising the student's debt), but in terms of social responsibility to ensure students from all backgrounds are successful (1).

It is interesting therefore that the same ethical stance is not placed at the doors of online courses.

The internet has given the public a tremendous means of accessing courses whether for fun or to gain credentials. Massive-scale courses such as those offered by "The Challenge" lead thousands of learners though the skills of online marketing and the use of social media. Instructional videos are blended with vibrant forums led by expert mentors (2). A similar model in more recent years has been applied to education with the advent of the MOOC (massive online open course), and access to truly open courses and open educational resources are being encouraged by governments (3).

Despite this activity, little is published about who takes online courses and why? Clearly a huge body of user data becomes available via the large-scale education platforms, but this doesn't provide a rich insight into user attitudes and behaviours. Some research explains why students drop out of online courses, stating information overload and difficulties keeping pace with assessments (4), but little is known of the experiences of the general public who now have access to all this learning. As an educator I am concerned that if people gain a negative experience, it may reduce their desire to participate in education in any form in the future.

The aim of this research is to take a broader stance. Who takes online courses in general and why? What are the personal attributes that drive completion? What do parents think about the prospect of online courses becoming part of their child's education? Methods will include questionnaires distributed online, and face-to-face interviews with volunteers. The target demographic will be those who have participated in online courses and those who haven't. The outcomes of this work will build a picture about online course users, and discuss the social and ethical stances that should be displayed to those wishing to learn "any time, any place, any where".

(1) Thomas L (2012). What works? Student retention and success. Available: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/retention/What_works_final_report.pdf

(2) The Challenge (2013). Available: http://www.challenge.co

(3) European Commission (2012). Consultation on "Opening up Education". Available: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/consult/open_en.htm

(4) Willging PA and Johnson SD (2009). Factors that influence students' decision to dropout of online courses. Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, Volume 13: Issue 3