

Leader column

Higher education and the global opportunities offered by MOOCs

If proof were needed of the huge impact that Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) are already having on the world of higher education, it came when Futurelearn – the UK's first provider of free, open online courses from top-ranking institutions – announced that ourselves and 11 other universities who signed up to Futurelearn in January have already been joined by the British Library and a further five universities, bringing the total number to 17.

On an international level, MOOCs were the number one issue the Indian education delegation wanted to talk about during a recent UK India Education and Research Initiative event. Just imagine it, you're a country with 1.2 billion people and only a tiny percentage of your 18-year-olds can access higher education. Suddenly, providing they have the technology, they can access some of the best lectures and content in the world – and for free!*

You can see the excitement but, as usual, it's not as simple as that. If we put our content online, can students in the remotest parts of the world become Leeds graduates? Absolutely not, or at least not yet! They may see some of our content but they won't have had the full experience that is the University of Leeds. Online, you can't create the environment, the research-led teaching, the experience of guided problem solving and critical independent learning or the full-on intellectual space that is a university. There are other aspects, too; volunteering, internship opportunities, societies, the Students Union, meeting new friends and being part of the University community – you can't get much of that very easily online. It's all those things, and more, from which our students derive value.

Whether we like it or not, MOOCs are going to be an important part of the future, so my message is to take a proper look at them,



think about how they relate to what you do, and how the University can benefit from the combination of our knowledge and skills with this massive opportunity to put ourselves on the global stage to showcase our content and quality. We've already been working on our own blended learning to improve our online content for current students. Our aim now is to use this existing talent in the University to put together a pilot of perhaps just two courses for Futurelearn by the autumn, so it's vital we get involved and that our initial efforts are of the very highest quality.

In terms of our immediate recruitment for 2013 entry the pressure is still on, but the early signs are encouraging. At the moment, we're ahead of our competitors in the percentages of students predicted to get ABB and where we were on conversion last year. We're also ahead on conversion in comparison with peers, but I must emphasise that it's still early days. All the extra work that people are doing is greatly appreciated but conversion is critically important and we must not be complacent. It's a highly competitive market that, these days, is never over until the student is registered and here on census day. We can lose students at every stage of the process, so we have to convince them that Leeds is the best place for them.

Leeds University Union have been incredibly responsive and helpful in supporting our recruitment efforts. They're helping tailor our message so it chimes with 18-year-olds and are providing student ambassadors who talk to prospective students about Leeds, which is a very powerful message. Of course, LUU itself is a great draw, with the facilities they offer and the opportunities they create, and their 90% score in the National Student Survey. A massive thank you from me to them – we are



very fortunate to have such a dedicated LUU leadership team.

We recently had our first dedicated open day for postgraduate taught students (PGTs) and postgraduate researchers (PGRs). It aimed to boost PG numbers and also make it completely clear to current UGs that we value them and would like them to stay with us. Of course, we also want UGs from other institutions to come and see what Leeds has to offer. PGT applications and acceptances are already significantly better this year and it looks as though there's a recovery in numbers under way.

International UG recruitment was actually up last year and there's ongoing work, led by the International Office, to look at where we might recruit increased numbers of international UGs. This is nothing more than focusing on effective implementation of the existing internationalisation strategy and developing a clearer operational plan for what we will do and how we will do it for international UG recruitment.

International PGT applications were down last year and there's been a lot of effort to address this. As a result, we have streamlined communications with our agents and international offices, and have a much better link to the Language Centre for students who need pre-session language training. Again, initial figures look as though we're already doing better this year. We need to keep an eye on this – and all other recruitment areas – during the coming weeks and months but it's pleasing that, so far, all our hard work is paying off and that things are going in the right direction.

*Harvard's provider, Coursera, has just started charging for an accredited module.