

MOOCs: A story of power, culture and change

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Aims & Objectives

This study aims to explore the drivers, development practices and long-term sustainability of MOOC development within Irish and British HEIs.

- O1: To identify the motivations driving MOOC development.
- O2: To examine how MOOCs are designed, developed and delivered.
- O3: To explore HEI perspectives on the future role, value and sustainability of MOOCs.

Contribution Snapshot

Date and Timeframe

2020-2026

Focus

- Open policy and governance
- Research, evaluation, or scholarly inquiry into open education

Disciplines

- Business, Administration and Law
- Education
- Information and Communication Technologies
- Teaching and Learning

What level(s) of your institution does this work affect?

Across multiple institutions

Frameworks, Policies, or Strategies Aligned

- National framework on the transition to an open research environment.
- HEA Strategy for teaching and learning in higher education.
- ATU Strategic plan.

Funding & Acknowledgements

This work is funded through professional development support from ATU.

Useful Resources / Links

<https://pure.atu.ie/en/publications/an-exploration-of-current-hei-mooc-development-in-ireland-and-the-uk/>

<https://oercommons.org/courses/mooc-development-toolkit/>

<https://www.independent.ie/regional/sligo/news/atu-says-its-free-online-courses-will-show-that-education-is-not-so-scary/a934057007.html>

Scholarly Contribution

This study has been widely shared at academic and community events across Ireland and the UK. It has featured at national and international conferences, including OER, EDEN, EdTech, ALT and ATU DigitalEd, as well as open sessions hosted across ATU campuses to engage educators and industry partners. The project has also contributed to sector practice through a suite of CC-BY licensed MOOC development toolkits and resources published on OER Commons, which are now used by practitioners within and beyond ATU. The study continues to inform discussions on effective and sustainable MOOC development across higher education.

Key Insights

- Power in open education work is negotiated rather than fixed.
- Institutional culture determines how open innovation is interpreted and supported.
- Strategic alignment is essential for sustaining open education initiatives.

Overview

Introduction

This doctoral study presents findings from a cross-country investigation of how Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are developed, embedded and sustained within Irish and British higher education institutions (HEIs). MOOCs began as open-education initiatives designed to expand access, strengthen public engagement and support digital pedagogy, while also offering a mechanism for institutional experimentation and learning. However, their long-term sustainability varies significantly across HEIs.

This study deepens understanding of how MOOC innovation unfolds in practice by foregrounding the experiences of the staff who design, deliver and manage these initiatives. The study investigates why HEIs develop MOOCs, how MOOCs are developed and their future within Irish and British HEIs.

The research sample

The study is presented from the viewpoint of a Senior Instructional Designer working in an Irish HEI, offering a perspective often underrepresented in existing research. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, it incorporates insights from 43 one-hour online interviews across 18 HEIs.

The sample includes 14 MOOC managers, 22 lecturers and 7 course designers working in both traditional and newer HEIs. MOOC managers hold a range of roles, including Deans, Teaching and Learning Managers and Project Managers, while course designers include Instructional Designers, Learning Technologists and Multimedia Developers.

Composite narratives

The diversity of MOOC experiences in the sample made it challenging to present findings clearly, so six composite narratives were developed to represent contrasting experiences across each role. Each narrative reflects a distinct MOOC experience, helping readers recognise aspects of their own institutional context. These narratives allow the study to explore open-education principles within HEIs and examine how staff navigate institutional realities that shape MOOC development. By centring lived experiences, the study moves beyond institutional narratives to understand MOOCs as innovation processes grounded in organisational context.

Analysis

The grounded conceptual analysis indicates that MOOC innovation exists along a spectrum. It also suggests that MOOC sustainability depends on power structures shaped by external control from MOOC platforms and internal managerial gatekeeping. MOOC innovation must navigate institutional cultures that seek to support new ideas while balancing diverse organisational agendas.

The analysis further shows that HEIs foster lasting change when staff at all levels can experiment with MOOC initiatives and explore how they might strengthen their practice. This highlights the value of bottom-up approaches in building a realistic foundation for MOOC sustainability within an HEI ecosystem. Additionally, innovation can often move beyond its initial purpose when it becomes intertwined with institutional strategy and broader sectoral trends.

Together, these insights inform my interpretive MOOC innovation framework, which centres on power, culture and change within HEIs.

MOOC Innovation framework

My interpretive framework illustrates how MOOC innovation is shaped by three interconnected concepts: navigating power dynamics, negotiating institutional culture and building and sustaining change.

Navigating power dynamics

MOOC innovation is a fluid, relational process, with influence shifting among senior leadership, commercial MOOC platforms and grassroots staff who carry out the work. This finding indicates that sustainability depends not only on who holds power, but on how that power is exercised, the resources available and the cultural norms that shape innovation-led change across the organisation.

Negotiating institutional culture

HEIs adopt different approaches to MOOC development. In some cases, MOOCs refine digital teaching practices; in others, they prompt more substantial organisational change, such as piloting digital learning units or shifting strategy to strengthen open-education activity. This finding indicates that institutional culture, rather than the adopted MOOC model, determines whether innovation becomes embedded.

Building and sustaining change

HEIs with clear strategic alignment around MOOC development are more likely to support or repurpose their MOOCs. In some institutions, MOOCs are maintained as part of widening-access or engagement strategies, in others, a shift toward a for-profit agenda drives their use as an introduction to accredited courses. The findings also indicate that where alignment is unclear or contested, MOOC activity often slows, is deprioritised or evolves into other forms of online provision.

Summary

This study shows how open-education initiatives evolve within real institutional contexts. The composite narratives offer a grounded view of innovation work and the interpretive framework supports decision-makers in transitioning MOOCs from short-term experiments to sustainable practice.

Overall, the study demonstrates that MOOC innovation is shaped by institutional priorities and culture, highlighting the importance of strategic alignment and staff agency in sustaining open education within Irish and British HEIs.



Scholarly Approach

This study followed a transparent and rigorous scholarly process informed by a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). Ethical approval was obtained through the university research ethics system and all participants provided informed consent. Interviews were conducted in an open, flexible style to support co-constructed meaning and reduce the risk of imposing researcher assumptions. Throughout the study, I engaged in ongoing reflexivity to acknowledge and manage the influence of my professional experience in MOOC development.

Data collection and analysis were carried out through recognised grounded theory procedures, including constant comparison, memo writing and iterative questioning. These processes ensured that emerging concepts remained grounded in participants' accounts. Coding moved from line-by-line analysis to focused and theoretical coding, and each stage was documented to maintain a clear audit trail. Categories were strengthened through theoretical sampling and the deliberate search for alternative or conflicting perspectives.

Composite narratives were used to present the findings in an accessible way (McElhinney and Kennedy, 2022). These narratives combined multiple participant experiences while staying true to the data and reflecting the diversity of perspectives across roles and institutions. This approach supported readers unfamiliar with MOOC development and helped ensure that no single viewpoint dominated the findings.

Credibility was enhanced through the comparison of data across 43 interviews and 18 institutions, which provided variation in context and practice. Decisions made during analysis were recorded and revisited to ensure consistency and transparency. The final interpretive framework was developed through repeated testing against the data to confirm that it represented the processes shaping MOOC innovation in Irish and British HE.

Open Outputs

Kearins, L. (2025) 'The professionalisation of MOOC production in Ireland and UK HEIs', Association for Learning Technology (ALT) CPD Webinar, 12 November.

Kearins, L. (2024) 'MOOCs for Education in ATU Galway – An exploration of current HEI MOOC development in Ireland and the UK', Public Event, Atlantic Technological University Galway, 13 November.

Kearins, L. (2024) 'MOOCs for Industry in ATU Sligo – An exploration of current HEI MOOC development in Ireland and the UK', Public Event, Atlantic Technological University Sligo, 4 November.

Kearins, L. (2024) 'ATU Change Makers Club – An exploration of current HEI MOOC development in Ireland and the UK', Internal Event, Atlantic Technological University, 23 October.

Kearins, L., Moran, C. and Share, P. (2024) 'Why do HEIs build MOOCs? PhD study across Ireland and the UK', DigitalEd Conference: Digital Horizons – Navigating Transformation in Higher Education, Atlantic Technological University Galway, 3–4 September.

Kearins, L. and Auge, C. (2024) 'Course development supports from the ATU HigherEd4.0 Project', DigitalEd Conference: Digital Horizons – Navigating Transformation in Higher Education, Atlantic Technological University Galway, 3–4 September.

Kearins, L., Moran, C. and Share, P. (2024) 'An exploration of current HEI MOOC development in Ireland and the UK', EDEN Annual Conference PhD Symposium, University of Graz, Austria, 16–18 June.

Kearins, L., Moran, C. and Share, P. (2024) 'The current landscape of MOOC development in Ireland and the UK', EdTech Conference 2024, Atlantic Technological University Sligo, 30–31 May.

Kearins, L., Moran, C. and Share, P. (2024) 'Is the MOOC still alive?', OER24: Open Education Conference, Munster Technological University, Cork, 27–28 March.

Kearins, L., Kambamettu, M., Augé, C. and Gallagher, K. (2024) 'MOOC Design Toolkit: Supporting a lean MOOC development process in ATU', OER24: Open Education Conference, Munster Technological University, Cork, 27–28 March.

