



# *Exploring 'success' in MOOCs: participants' perspective*

Book or Report Section

Accepted Version

Liyanagunawardena, T. R., Parslow, P. and Williams, S. A. (2017) Exploring 'success' in MOOCs: participants' perspective. In: Bennett, R. and Kent, M. (eds.) Massive open online courses and higher education: what went right, what went wrong and where to next? Routledge, London, pp. 92-108. ISBN 9781472481986 Available at <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/68956/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.

Publisher: Routledge

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

[www.reading.ac.uk/centaur](http://www.reading.ac.uk/centaur)

**CentAUR**

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

## Chapter 7

### Exploring ‘success’ in MOOCs: Participants’ perspective

*Tharindu Rekha Liyanagunawardena, University College of Estate Management, Reading, UK*

*Patrick Parslow, University of Reading, UK*

*Shirley Ann Williams, University of Reading, UK*

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) have the potential to transform the global learning landscape as there are many reasons why institutions offer and students enrol in such courses. And, while relatively few students finish all parts of a MOOC, reaching the end point may not always be important, as the traditional understanding or measure of “success” and “completion” may not apply in this new environment where participation is voluntary and no monetary exchange is involved. The qualitative study outlined in this chapter employed semi-structured interviews to explore such perspectives of success and completion among MOOC participants. Analysis revealed emergent themes relating to completion, including two recurrent themes, one concerned with the individuals’ goals and intents, and another which more closely resembled the traditional learning metric based around completion of tasks at a satisfactory level. For example, obtaining a certificate was seen as an important accomplishment, but the acquisition of a certificate itself was not viewed as completion. Gaining a sense of closure was also viewed as being part of what completing a MOOC entailed. Further, it was shown that providing participants with an opportunity to set their goals and objectives for the course might help inexperienced participants embrace the different style of learning that a MOOC entails. The study also showed that, for some students,

after participating in several MOOCs over time their views of what constituted success in a MOOC had changed. These views are discussed below.

Keywords: MOOCs; success; completion; participant perspective

## **Introduction**

What is “success” in a course? In a time-limited traditional unit of study, with fixed assessments, it may be easy to reach a consensus, but when the course is more open-ended, and the learners engage to meet a wide variety of personal goals, it may be an open question. Participants in this study raised some of the following issues in the context of what constituted “success” with regards to completion of MOOCs:

... sometimes I kind of go back and the discussions are still going. And so that I felt that I hadn't really completed it because somehow it was carrying on without me – Mary

... being able to draw some conclusions about your own learning I think is the key element in completion – Paul

The term MOOC was first used to describe an open online course offered by the University of Manitoba in Canada in 2008 (Liyanagunawardena, Adams, & Williams, 2013) and by 2013 it was included in the Oxford English Dictionary; this illustrates the rapid rise of MOOCs within a short span of time. Two main types of MOOC have been identified in the literature (Daniel, 2012) – connectivist MOOCs (cMOOCs) and xMOOCs or ‘MOOC as eXtension of something else’ (Downes, 2013a). However, Bayne and Ross (2014) argue that due to the multiple pedagogic forms adopted in current MOOCs, the ‘[b]road-brush descriptions of MOOC pedagogy in terms of a cMOOC/xMOOC binary [relevant when MOOCs were young] are no longer representative or particularly useful’ (p.8, text in brackets added). They propose thinking about MOOC pedagogy at the ‘micro level of individual course design’. Certainly universities, governments, commercial and non-commercial organisations

have shown an increasing interest in various types of MOOCs (Yuan & Powell, 2013) despite empirical evidence showing that the large majority of participants in MOOCs do not complete the courses (Koller et al., 2013; Meyer, 2012).

Data on completion rates of many MOOCs are not readily available. According to Jordan's (2013) collated completion rates for MOOCs (as of 14 October 2014), the highest completion rate achieved was 52.1 per cent in MoocGdP#1 by École Centrale de Lille on the Canvas.net MOOC platform – however, many other MOOCs had completion rates below 10 per cent. In Jordan's work, “[c]ompletion rate” is typically defined as the number who earned a certificate of completion or “passed” the course but there is some variation in the data’. Clow (2013) – using empirical data from three online learning environments – shows that the high attrition seen in MOOCs is also seen in other online learning environments.

When data are presented saying that ‘x% completed the MOOC’, it tends to be compared with more familiar traditional educational settings where generally much higher completion rates are achieved. Indeed, Stewart (2013) claims that ‘[w]e insist on thinking about educational ventures in institutional terms even when those are “disruptions” to institutionalized education’. However, this view of completion as the main measure of success excludes many other factors which participants and other stakeholders may consider to be a benefit of enrolling on a MOOC. Some of these are discussed in more detail below.

## **Benefits of MOOCs**

### *Benefits of MOOCs to institutions and facilitators*

Applying traditional metrics from higher education to MOOCs can be misleading due to the very different engagement contracts. In fact, Devlin (2013) writes that comparing

attrition rates in MOOCs and traditional courses is similar to comparing ‘apples with oranges’. In a traditional setting, students pay fees and enrol in courses. When students fail to complete university courses they have enrolled in, paying fees, it can adversely affect all parties – the student, their families, lecturers and the university. The Higher Education Funding Council for England monitors numbers of full-time PhD students completing within the allowed 4 years as a benchmark (HEFCE, 2013) – students failing to complete reflect adversely on the research profile of the university (LiyanaGunawardena, Parslow, & Williams, 2014). In the USA, retention rates are a benchmark used to determine the undergraduate colleges rankings of the US News & World Report (2015). Therefore, if one wished to increase overall certification/completion rates in MOOCs in order to increase their “standing”, the solution might be to restrict access (Ho et al., 2015). However, this would inevitably devalue the inherent concept of openness surrounding the MOOC initiative.

In addition to their openness, MOOCs are offered by institutions for other reasons including education access, experimentation and brand extension (Educause, 2012). For example, research-intensive universities such as MIT and Harvard use MOOCs, through edX, to understand students’ learning behaviour, in part to improve on-campus teaching. At the launch of FutureLearn ([www.futurelearn.com](http://www.futurelearn.com)), the UK’s main MOOC platform, the Open University’s Vice Chancellor Professor Bean was quoted saying “#moocs will be the digital shop front of unis [universities]” (Figure 1).

**[insert Figure 2.1 here – portrait]**

Figure 1. Tweet by the Open University

Similarly, the University of London’s international programme’s involvement in MOOCs was driven by three objectives: mission and profile (widening participation,

communicating the University's expertise in distance and flexible learning while raising profile); recruitment; and innovation and investment in degree programmes (the materials were intended to be repurposed) (Grainger, 2013). Thus it can be argued that MOOCs are offered with various aims – as a tool for marketing and brand extension, or for recruitment, to experiment with new methods of delivery, to project the quality of teaching and learning in the offering universities, and / or to serve a social good (Downes, 2013b).

#### *Benefits of MOOCs to students*

While MOOC facilitators may have different reasons for offering such courses – including practising innovative teaching, philanthropy and personal career advancement – similarly, participants in MOOCs also have different motivations and aims. They may sign up because they are curious about MOOCs, interested in trying online learning, interested in the subject matter and, for a small percentage, because the MOOC leads to a college credit. For example, in the University of Reading's first MOOC, *Begin programming: Build your first mobile game (FLMobiGame)*, the authors asked learners via the pre-course questionnaire, '[w]hat do you hope to get out of this course?'. Out of 3,606 responses received for the survey, 84.9 per cent wanted to 'learn new things'; 62.5 per cent wanted to 'try out FutureLearn or MOOCs in general'; while 44.4 per cent wanted to 'try out learning online'. FLMobiGame was one of the first courses on FutureLearn's beta-platform and a majority of people who joined the course did so to explore MOOCs, and more specifically the new platform.

However, it should be noted that MOOCs have some drawbacks. In contrast to the data above, it has been seen that many participants register for a MOOC never to return. By analysing data for Coursera courses in 2012, Koller et al. (2013) show that

despite enrolling for the course, only 50–60 per cent of participants returned for the first lecture. While many traditional courses require students to fulfil pre-requisites, most MOOCs are open to anyone. Given that MOOCs are “free”, students are not subject to monetary (and other) losses that could otherwise be incurred. Thus, MOOCs inevitably attract many more enrolments than would have been the case on a fee paying course. In some instances it may be all too easy (one button click) to accidentally register in a MOOC. In small classes the absence of an individual is noticed, in large classes this is not always the case. With massive numbers taking part in a MOOC, participants may feel invisible and this may help them justify their non-continuation.

### **Measures of success**

The Cambridge online dictionary defines success as ‘the achieving of the results wanted or hoped for’ whilst the definition given by Oxford online dictionary is ‘the accomplishment of an aim or purpose’. Both these suggest that “success” is the achievement of a pre-identified/known aim. In this respect, it is difficult to define monolithic success for a MOOC because different stakeholders (the institution offering the MOOC, facilitators of the MOOC, participants and the wider public) have different expectations that shape their view of success in a MOOC.

Downes (2013b) suggests treating ‘the MOOC for what it is: a network’. This entails evaluating whether it has the properties of a successful network. He further differentiates between individual successes, and suggests that ‘MOOC success emerges as a consequence of individual experiences’. That is, the MOOC network is a system, and the success of that system should be measured in terms of the emergent properties, not by a reductionist approach.

### *Success for institutions*



Creating a MOOC, as with any other course, requires resources. These can be either voluntary (educators spending their free time) or institutionally allocated. Return on investment, especially when an institution invests in a project, becomes a measure of success of the project. For example, if student recruitment was an objective of the MOOC, the number of paid students converted from the MOOC could be an indicator of success. Non-academic goals such as branding, innovation, and/or recruitment achieved by a MOOC can also be captured – for example, by using questionnaires to attract responses – and used as measures of success. In an institutional context, these success measures are generally reported to higher management, who may never have participated in MOOCs to ‘feel’ the difference between them and the traditional online distance learning courses. For these non-MOOC participants, it is possible that traditional metrics of higher education are still guiding their view of “success”.

A recent research group meeting of FutureLearn partners discussed how to measure success in a MOOC. Conclusions drawn from this discussion stressed that “what success is” varies for different stakeholders. From an institutional perspective, success is lacking if a MOOC harms their reputation, whereas attracting high numbers of registrants/participants, or doing well in ratings on course recommendation sites, such as coursetalk.org, could be considered a “success” if the primary purpose of offering a MOOC was to do with promotion or marketing.

#### *Success for students*

On the other hand, participants’ perspective of what constitutes success in a MOOC is often based on their own goals and objectives (Cormier, 2010), and therefore differs to an institution’s view of success in a MOOC. Cormier (2010) discusses further, in a video, various ways of students succeeding in a MOOC, including getting a sense of the

topic, getting course credits and developing a new learning network. He suggests five steps to achieving success in a MOOC – orient, declare, network, cluster and focus, and states that ‘MOOCs are open – that includes being open to different ways of success’. Nevertheless, defining success based on an individual’s goals has methodological issues, for example their changing intents over time, a point which appears to be borne out by this study. These philosophical and methodological issues are discussed in Hendricks (2013).

*Completion: a measure of “success”?*

‘Completion’ in a MOOC may be difficult to define. For example, if the traditional metric of completion is applied, all who gained the certification, statement of accomplishment or who reached the end point (depending on the course) would be considered completers of the MOOC. However, as some MOOC participants dip in and out of MOOCs to participate in topics of their interest, labelling them as non-completers is inappropriate.

Furthermore, registration generally does not stop at the beginning of the MOOC, as is the case with traditional programmes <sup>1</sup>. Participants who register in courses after they commence may not have sufficient time to work through them. This introduces another complication with MOOCs – ambiguity (at least for some participants) regarding when they should move to the next week, task or activity. For example, a participant may have been in a discussion for Week 1, which had received interesting discussion points from late starters in the final week of the MOOC. In contrast, in a traditional setting, even where online discussions are present, because there will be no new entrants (other than class participants who log into the system late) a discussion’s

---

<sup>1</sup> MOOCs that offer paid-for certification tend to close registration for paid-for students within a certain time after the start of the MOOC.

start–end may be more visible or the facilitator/lecturer may summarise and finish the discussion. For example, the FutureLearn platform has a ‘Mark as Complete’ button for each activity and participants are encouraged to identify when they have completed the activity.

Liyanagunawardena (2014) discusses a participant’s experiences of completing a MOOC – she obtained all badges awarded for the course, but the lack of participation in the social aspects of learning and networking meant that the learning process for her was ‘incomplete’. Further, Bentley et al. (2014) reported on a collaborative autoethnographic study where they found that ‘[c]ompletion and success are not synonymous’ for their participants in a cMOOC. Thus, completion – and therefore perhaps “success” – in a MOOC may also be difficult to determine due to the nature of the offering.

The difficulty and possible unsuitability of applying traditional educational metrics therefore makes the measurement of success and completion in MOOCs a challenge. “Openness to success” – coupled with the absence of penalties for non-completion – lead the researchers to question what is success in a MOOC and what does it take to complete a MOOC? In this paper, the authors explore “success” and “completion” in MOOCs from participants’ perspectives.

## **Methodology**

This research investigated MOOC participants’ perspectives using an ethnographic approach – it should be noted that the researchers themselves are MOOC participants as well as MOOC facilitators. MOOCs are a relatively new socio–technical innovation and their nature is still being established through a process of dialogue amongst participants and educators. These ideas should gradually converge, allowing a set of definitions that

are agreed to by consensus. The method of semi-structured interviews, guided by a set of questions, were used in this study because they reveal the participants' views more fully, creating an example of social constructivism.

Face-to-face interviews and email dialogues were used to collect data. Each face-to-face interview lasted about 30–35 minutes, were audio-recorded with permission, and later transcribed in full. Interview transcripts were shared with participants and clarifications, where required, were obtained by email. Respondent verification was used to increase the quality of data used in the analysis.

The population studied were MOOC participants, that is people who had already registered and/or participated in one or more MOOCs. Our small sample consisted of 11 participants (four males and seven females). Seven face-to-face interviews and five interviews mediated via email (one participant was interviewed twice, first using email and then face-to-face) were conducted. This study was an initial stage of a planned wider investigation, so participant recruitment was limited to the host institution. Volunteers who replied to an email invitation circulated within the university were contacted to be interviewed. Because of participants' enthusiasm to voice their views, some of them passed on our invitation to former colleagues and family, thus creating a snowball effect – therefore the sample was not a random selection. Snowball research strategies are generally employed to access hidden and hard-to-reach populations (Atkinson & Flint, 2001) who cannot be categorised into a particular demographic group. The easiest way to recruit more participants for this research would have been to advertise the study within a MOOC offered by the authors' institution. However, the authors chose not to do this because the research would not have captured the vivid experiences of learners on various different MOOC platforms. Thus the snowball effect

in this instance allowed efficient recruitment of volunteers for the research project. The interview extracts presented here are anonymised. The research was approved by the University of Reading Research Ethics Committee.

Initial data collection was carried out from August–September 2013 and the second round of data collection was carried out 18 months after the first round of data collection (February–March 2015). In the latter survey participants were contacted via email and six participants (out of the initial 11) responded.

### *Analysis*

Out of the 11 transcripts (one per participant), three were chosen at random and were independently analysed by the first and second authors. Firstly the transcripts were topic-coded (Richards, 2010) then were analytically coded for identifying themes. The identified themes were then clarified for consistency in coding. The remaining eight transcripts were coded (four each by the first and second authors) and checked for consistency by all authors. New emerging themes were also considered. NVivo 10 and MS Excel 2007 software tools were used for the analysis.

### *Demographics*

Participants' ages ranged from 34–58 years, with an average age of 47. All participants except one had a Bachelors or higher level of educational qualifications. This high level of education was unsurprising as the sample was drawn mainly from the academic and support staff of a British university. Recent research has also shown that the majority of MOOC participants have a Bachelors degree or higher (Christensen et al., 2013; Grainger, 2013; Ho et al., 2015). Participants had registered in between one and seven MOOCs (average 3.5, median 3) while the number of MOOCs participated in ranged between one and six (average 2.7, median 3). Participants of the project had registered

in a total of 39 MOOCs, participated in 30 of them and completed 13 (Table 1). The number of completed MOOCs varied from zero to four per participant.

Table 1. Participated MOOCs by participant

Participant pseudonyms	Type of work	No of MOOCs participated	Topics mentioned	Types of MOOCs
Ann	Academic	4	Child nutrition and cooking; Science of gastronomy; EpiGenetics; Introduction to art	xMOOCs (Coursera)
Bord	Manager	4	Functional programming principles in Scala; Maps and the geospatial revolution	xMOOCs (Coursera)
Josie	Non-academic	1	Social psychology	xMOOCs (Coursera)
Joyce	Non-academic	6	Programmed cell death	xMOOCs (Coursera)
Kyle	Academic	1	CCK08	cMOOC
Mary	Academic	1	Eco systems	xMOOCs (FutureLearn)
Mira	Academic support services	2	Archaeology's dirty little secrets; Branding	xMOOCs (Coursera, FutureLearn)
Paul	Academic	3	CCK08; Open education; FutureLearn trial	cMOOCs; xMOOCs (FutureLearn)
Rita	Academic support services	3	EpiGenetics; Introduction to human physiology	xMOOCs (Coursera)
Roy	Manager	4	Nutrition for health promotion and disease prevention; Exercise physiology: Understanding the athlete within	xMOOCs (Coursera)
Terry	Non-academic	1	The secret power of brands	xMOOCs (FutureLearn)

## Results and discussion

The participants' definitions of completion and success in MOOCs had interconnecting themes. Bentley et al. (2014) reported that '[c]ompletion and success are not synonymous terms for these learners and a definition of success is constructed by each participant'. In our study, only two participants viewed completion and success as being linked, in contrast to Bentley et al. (2014). Completion was largely viewed in terms of finishing all tasks and assignments to a satisfactory level (six participants) although a slightly higher number of participants invested 'completion' with individual meanings

(seven participants). Two participants viewed completion as both achieving all tasks and fulfilling individual goals. For example:

Seeing it through to the end and doing all the assignments which perhaps is the obvious thing. But being able to draw some conclusions about your own learning I think is the key element in completion – Paul.

Completion of the MOOC would be read all of the materials and I think completion is coming to the end and being satisfied the knowledge, the new knowledge that I have is right, is academically correct – Mary.

Participants defined success in MOOCs in terms of learning new things, completing assignments, viewing all lectures from start to finish, engaging in and enjoying the course, and being able to apply knowledge in their lives. The respondents mentioned these themes with different frequencies. The overall frequency of the three most recurring concepts is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Success concepts and frequencies

Concept	No of participants	Overall reference frequency
Success as completion of tasks at a satisfactory level	4	8
Learning new things	6	10
Success as individual	6	12

Two main themes emerged from the data – success as an individually variable concept, and success as entailing the completion of tasks at a satisfactory level. The researchers considered acquiring new knowledge as being individual because something that is new to one participant may not be new to a more knowledgeable participant in the same MOOC. Thus, the large majority of participants (10 out of 11) considered success in MOOCs to be an individual achievement. In fact there was only one participant who viewed success primarily as being completion of all activities of the MOOC:

Success for me is completing assignments to the best of my abilities and also, though not as much fun, doing the exams too, not to mention listening multiple times to all videos – Bord.

Further analysing this view, it can be seen that Bord too adds an individual element (working to the ‘best of my abilities’) to his definition of success. On the other hand, all other participants who viewed success as being completion of activities also considered it to have an individual element. For example, in this interview extract, the participant, Josie, is building her case to justify what she believes to be success in MOOCs and identifies it as being different to what is traditionally accepted as success in academia:

I mean you could say – your initial response could be I started it, I finished it. But that is not necessarily what the success is [...] I guess success is did I, have I come away from that even if it is just one thing that I have learned that I didn’t knew before. That could be the success. I don’t think it is the traditional academic view of success ... – Josie.

From the themes that emerged from the data, it could be seen that the majority of participants viewed both success and completion to have individual meanings, contrary to what the researchers had expected. Because the majority in the sample were staff members of a higher educational institution, researchers expected participants to compare MOOCs to traditional educational offerings with similar metrics for success and completion. However, the participants were instead challenging the applicability of traditional metrics to MOOCs. It is an open research question whether the participants’ experiences in MOOCs, which they all accepted to be very different to their traditional learning experiences, have helped in forming these views.

It was also seen that some participants had not yet adapted to the style of MOOC learning. For example, one participant of the study was struggling to come to terms with the nature of MOOCs because it was so different from her traditional experiences of learning.



I felt that naturally my personality would be to do something and complete it and move onto the next bit and complete it and move on to the next bit and complete it until I reach the end of the course from start to finish. Finished being that, you know, I have answered the questions and viewed the videos or whatever. But what I found was that you can flick backwards and forwards in a MOOC and even though you have gone forward to the next activity, people were still on the activities before that – previous activities. They would still comment on them. So that sometimes I kind of go back and the discussions are still going. And so that I felt that I hadn't really completed it because somehow it was carrying on without me – Mary.

Uncertainty about when a MOOC has ended or the level of commitment needed for an activity can cause difficulties for participants. Mary stated that she had spent far more time simply reading discussions than she had expected, which had left her with little time to look at the learning materials. In a traditional classroom the educator is responsible for many tasks including providing information, organising time and structuring learning activities, but in MOOCs the learner is responsible for self-directed learning (Kop, 2011). Participants not familiar with independent learning can find the MOOC learning experience a challenge.

Mary also felt that, in the MOOC she took part in, an activity's end had become a 'moving target':

I didn't know whether I wanted to go back and carry on reading or whether I wanted to be satisfied that I had done that task and moved on. So actually I have no idea what the view of success is [in a MOOC] because my view of success is finishing something but it is such a moving target that I don't know whether I will ever feel that I have finished – Mary.

This dilemma faced by Mary is not uncommon. For example, '[l]earners who are new to MOOCs, and who are not familiar with self-directed learning, often struggle to find their place within a MOOC' (Koutropoulos & Hogue, 2012). Milligan et al. (2013) have also reported that prior experience in learning in MOOCs is an important factor for

engagement especially in cMOOCs. A more informed study participant knew what to expect from a MOOC and how to set her own objectives for the MOOC:

I had quite a good idea [about MOOCs] because I've been to conferences and heard about it and so we kind, I kind of knew a bit about MOOCs before joining [...] I think that a lot of freedom to direct it yourself in terms of when you want to study, how much you want to engage with it, how much you wanted to do with the discussion boards – Mira.

This shows that participants who are familiar with MOOCs before starting a course are at an advantage as they 'knew' what to expect:

One of the things I found very valuable when I went to a conference and we were discussing MOOCs was the fact that the guy who was leading it, who was one of the very first kind of pioneers of MOOCs [referring to Dave Cormier], said '*what's really difficult is that you have to set your learning objectives yourself*', and people who haven't had experience of maybe learning in various ways wouldn't necessarily know, so they'd go in to it thinking '*yeah I'm going to do it*' but they wouldn't necessarily think about what they wanted to get out of it – Mira.

This is the difference in approaching MOOCs with and without setting one's own objectives – it shows how important it is to know what 'you' want from the MOOC. In this regard, pre-course questionnaires could be designed to prompt participants to think about what they wanted to gain from the MOOC and to set their own learning objectives, which then could be used in an end-course questionnaire or reflection to gauge their progress/success.

In presenting views of success and completion, participants also mentioned the certificates offered in MOOCs and their value to them. Though the word 'certificate' had a frequency count of 18 in the interviews, only three participants had mentioned it. Out of those, 13 occurrences came in one interview (Table 3), which illustrates that some topics were of great significance to some individuals, whilst less so to others.

Table 3. Reference to ‘certification’ in interviews

Participant	Number of references to ‘certification’
Ann	13
Mira	3
Joyce	2

Ann was motivated by the offer of certificate even though she recognised that she would never be using it:

I must admit I’m motivated by getting a certificate as well, to complete the MOOC, not necessarily the certificate, because I’m not going to use it for anything, it’s not like I’m going to attach it to my CV or, you know, it’s like, it’s um, finishing and I suppose the certificate is proof that I finished. So yeah, I probably am motivated by the certificate even though I am never going to use it – Ann.

Similarly, another participant, Mira, also strived to get one – for her it was an ‘accomplishment’. For Ann, it signified the completion of the course. She also suggested that completion is not just about getting the certificate. Being a lecturer in a related discipline, Ann did not need to watch all the lectures to complete assignments that were used to grade participants for certification:

I might have a certificate for the Gastronomy, Science of Gastronomy MOOC but I didn’t watch the final couple of weeks of lectures, so I probably can’t say I completed it even though I have the certificate so it can’t be just the certificate; I think it’s, it’s watching the majority of the lectures and doing the assignments would be necessary to complete it. Now I feel like a failure! [laughs] – Ann.

This conflict about what constitutes course ‘completion’ is similar to Liyanagunawardena’s (2013) description of her MOOC experience. A recurrent theme in the data was that participants in MOOCs wanted to feel a sense of ‘closure’. For example, one participant (Paul) pointed out that for him the sense of closure was more important than completing a course. Paul had taken part in three MOOCs at the time of

interviewing but had not received any certification, badge nor a statement of accomplishment in a MOOC. However, despite not completing all tasks, he felt that he had completed the first MOOC he participated (CCK08) because he was able to draw conclusions about his own learning and gain a sense of closure:

With my definition, I have completed the first one, I may not have done all the assessment and assignments in that one but I drew a lot of conclusions about my own learning and about the nature of connectivism which is what the MOOC was about. [I was] involved in lot of good discussions, which we followed through to recent times, so I would definitely say I have completed it. Second one, Open Learning one, I did not complete as such. And my feeling of non-completion is not so much about seeing it through to the end but I didn't get to reflect on it properly to know what I have to do, to do it better – Paul.

Drawing closure to learning in MOOCs was identified as being the application of knowledge (two participants), a sense of closure (one participant), reflecting on own learning (one participant), and obtaining a certificate (two participants), showing that this was an important aspect of the experience.

Only two out of the 11 participants had taken courses with different platforms. This seemed to suggest that once a participant joins a MOOC platform they tend to stick with the same platform. However, not exploring other platforms may hinder their chances of finding other interesting courses.

In the follow-up, 18 months later, they were asked again about their MOOC participation, other formal learning and what “success” with respect to learning in MOOCs meant to them (Table 4).

Table 4. Courses taken in the 18 months after the first interview

Name	Number of MOOCs taken since the first survey	Provider platforms	Formal learning/training
Mira	2	Coursera, FutureLearn	Paid-for course inspired by MOOC

Roy	3+	edX	Yes
Josie	3+	Same provider Coursera	No
Bord	3+	Coursera, edX	No
Kyle	0		Yes
Paul	0		No

Three out of the four participants who had taken MOOCs since the first data collection have tried other platform(s)/provider(s) – only one participant remained with the same platform/provider. Further, only one participant had pursued her interest inspired by a MOOC with a paid-for university course.

In addition, in the follow-up almost all participants described “success” in MOOCs as being a learning journey – none of them associated success with completion of tasks or activities in MOOCs. Some of the responses received for the question “What do you consider a success with respect to learning in a MOOC?” were:

Helping people to develop their interests and achieve their own personal learning goals.

Feeling you can learn without feeling guilty if you don’t complete or keep up to the weekly schedule – Mira.

Nicely structured learning taking you on a journey – Roy.

The fact that you learn something – however small. You’re still developing, pushing yourself forward and taking on a new experience – Josie.

Both applying the knowledge in my career and applying it to further learning. Also, I advertise to colleagues to join MOOCs so we all can have a similar knowledge in technical areas – Bord.

Learning new things and/or increasing my personal learning network – Paul.

This suggests that as participants get used to the concept of MOOCs they tend to appreciate the ways in which MOOCs differ to formal learning programmes where success is associated with completion.

### **Limitations and future work**

This paper presented findings from a small sample that was not a random selection. Participants in the sample were highly educated and were from a research university in the UK. Furthermore, in the 18-month follow-up, only six participants responded. Thus the findings here cannot be generalised to the general population, although they provide interesting insights into participants' perspectives of the MOOC experience.

An interesting avenue of investigation would be to explore the views of success and completion in MOOCs among different stakeholder groups and their individual experiences. This would shed light on whether participation in MOOCs changes the perception of success and completion that would otherwise be shaped by the traditional metrics used in higher education.

## **Conclusion**

This study indicates that MOOCs offer a different learning experience for some participants to that which they are accustomed to, validating Kop's (2011) findings. Participants who were not aware of the nature of MOOCs, and who had not thought about their objectives before taking one, were likely to feel overwhelmed by the MOOC learning experience. Milligan et al. (2013) identified prior experience as an influencing factor in participants' engagement and in this research it was seen that awareness of MOOCs helped participation. Participants viewed both success and completion to have two base components – an individually variable concept and the completion of tasks at a satisfactory level, which would generally be similar to the traditional view of completion and success. Obtaining the certificate or the statement of accomplishment in a MOOC in itself was not considered a measure of completion, although it was a motivator and provided a sense of accomplishment. Gaining a sense of closure, by

reflection, application of knowledge, or obtaining the certificate, was important for the participants in this study.

It can be seen that defining individual objectives for participating in MOOCs is an important part of gauging success and completion for a MOOC participant (Cormier, 2010). Thus, providing an opportunity for inexperienced MOOC participants to think about ‘what they want to achieve by participating in the MOOC’ through a pre-course survey, an activity, or by some other means, is likely to help them in their MOOC experience. In fact, questioning MOOC participants about what they want to achieve and revisiting their goals during and after completion of the course may not only help participants in achieving their goals by keeping track of their progress, but also allow deeper understanding of MOOCs and participants’ expectations (changing or static) of them. Similarly other stakeholders, such as the providers, may want to consider what they want to achieve by offering/preparing a MOOC and looking for measurable ways of detecting success. This could lead to further research comparing the factors for success for participants with those of stakeholders.

As the learners get used to the concept of MOOCs they tend to appreciate that the nature of MOOCs differs to that of other formal learning programmes where completion is associated with success.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Ms Katalin Hanniker for her help with proofreading the article.

### **References**

Atkinson R., & Flint, J. (2001). Accessing hidden and hard-to-reach populations: Snowball research strategies, 33. Retrieved from <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU33.html>.

- Bayne, S., & Ross, J. (2014). The pedagogy of the massive open online course (MOOC): the UK view. Higher Education Academy report. Retrieved from [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/elt/HEA\\_Edinburgh\\_MOOC\\_WEB\\_240314.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/elt/HEA_Edinburgh_MOOC_WEB_240314.pdf)
- Bentley, P., Crump, H., Cuffe, P., Gniadek, I., Jamieson, B., MacNeill, S., & Mor, Y. (2014). Signals of success and self-directed learning, In U. Cress & C.D. Kloos (Eds.), *EMOOCs 2014 the European MOOC Stakeholder Summit Proceedings, Lausanne, Switzerland, 10–12 February 2014* (pp. 18–25), Retrieved from <http://www.emoocs2014.eu/sites/default/files/Proceedings-Moocs-Summit-2014.pdf>.
- Christensen, G., Steinmetz, A., Alcorn, B., Bennett, A., Woods, D., & Emanuel, E. J. (2013). The MOOC phenomenon: Who takes massive open online courses and why? Retrieved from [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2350964](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2350964)
- Clow, D. (2013). MOOCs and the funnel of participation. *Paper presented at the LAK'13: 3rd International Conference on Learning Analytics & Knowledge, Leuven, Belgium*. Retrieved from <http://oro.open.ac.uk/36657/1/DougClow-LAK13-revised-submitted.pdf>
- Cormier, D. (2010, December 8). Success in a MOOC [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8avYQ5ZqM0>
- Daniel, J. (2012). Making sense of MOOCs: Musings in a maze of myth, paradox and possibility. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 3. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/2012-18>.
- Devlin, K. (2013, February 3). MOOCs and the myths of dropout rates and certification. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-keith-devlin/moocs-and-the-myths-of-dr\\_b\\_2785808.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-keith-devlin/moocs-and-the-myths-of-dr_b_2785808.html)
- Downes, S. (2013a, April 9). What the 'x' in 'xMOOC' stands for. Retrieved from <https://plus.google.com/109526159908242471749/posts/LEwaKxL2MaM>.
- Downes, S. (2013b, March 18). Evaluating a MOOC. Retrieved from <http://halfanhour.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/evaluating-mooc.html>
- Educause. (2012). What campus leaders need to know about MOOCs. Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/c7gqj65>
- Grainger, B. (2013). *Massive open online course (MOOC) report 2013*. University of London, London, UK.
- HEFCE. (2013, July 26). Postgraduate research degree qualification rates improving. Retrieved from <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2013/name,82785,en.html>
- Hendricks, C. (2013, June 05). Difficulties researching the effectiveness of CMOOCs. Retrieved from <http://blogs.ubc.ca/chendricks/2013/06/05/difficulties-researching-cmoocs/>
- Ho, A. D., Chuang, I., Reich, J., Coleman, C. A., Whitehill, J., Northcutt, C. G., ... Petersen, R. (2015). HarvardX and MITx: Two years of open online courses Fall 2012–Summer 2014. Retrieved from <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2586847>
- Jordan, K. (2013, July 27). MOOC completion rates: The data. Retrieved from <http://www.katyjordan.com/MOOCproject.html>
- Koller, D., Ng, A., Do, C., & Chen, Z. (2013). Retention and intention in massive open online courses. *EDUCAUSE Review*, May/June, 62–63.



- Kop, R. (2011). The challenges to connectivist learning on open online networks: Learning experiences during a massive open online course. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 12(3), 19–38.
- Koutropoulos, A., & Hogue, R. J. (2012, October 8). How to succeed in a MOOC – Massive online open course. *Learning Solutions Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://goo.gl/T3BPr>
- Meyer, R. (2012, July 12). What it's like to teach a MOOC (and what the heck's a MOOC?). *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/cdfvvyqy>.
- Liyanagunawardena, T. R. (2014). MOOC experience: A participant's reflection. *SIGCAS Computers and Society*, 44(1), 9–14.
- Liyanagunawardena, T. R., Adams, A. A., & Williams, S. A. (2013). MOOCs: a systematic study of the published literature 2008–2012. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 14(3), 202–227. ISSN 1492–3831.
- Liyanagunawardena, T. R., Parslow, P., & Williams, S. (2014). Dropout: MOOC participants' perspective. In: *EMOOCs 2014, the Second MOOC European Stakeholders Summit, 10–12 February 2014, Lausanne, Switzerland* (pp. 95–100).
- Milligan, C., Margaryan, A., & Littlejohn, A. (2013). Patterns of engagement in connectivist MOOCs. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching (Special issue on MOOCs)*, 9(2), 149–159.
- Richards, L. (2010). *Handling qualitative data: A practical guide* (2nd ed). London: Sage.
- Stewart, B. (2013, May 5). Not a hand up, University of Venus blog, *Inside Higher Education*, Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/university-venus/not-hand>
- US News & World Report. (2015). Highest 4-Year graduation rates. Retrieved from <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/highest-grad-rate>.
- Yuan, L., & Powell, S. (2013). MOOCs and open education: Implications for higher education: A white paper. *JISC CETIS (Centre for Educational Technology & Interoperability Standards)*. Retrieved from <http://publications.cetis.ac.uk/2013/667>.