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Proposal for a Poster Presentation: Access and Widening Participation

Title: "Scoping the Delivery of an LL.M Degree by Massive Open Online Course"

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Part 1, Abstract:

This poster seeks to develop a rationale for the development and delivery of an LL.M (Master of Laws) degree by way of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC).

LL.M enrolment has entered a period of recent decline (HEFCE 2013: 17; HESA 2014). Much of this decline can be accounted for by the difficulties associated with competing obligations which limit both available time and flexibility, geographical constraints, immigration and financial limitations (Swain 2013; HEFCE 2013: 19).

This poster reports on work in progress by the authors to develop an 'LL.M by MOOC' in a bid to overcome these barriers to access. The aspects represented here relate to the scoping phase of the project. In particular it presents the results of a literature review undertaken over the summer of 2014 and the results of focus groups of existing and prospective LL.M students at Nottingham Law School, Nottingham Trent University.

Part2, Poster outline:

MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) activity has become increasingly prevalent (Waldrop 2013), with many major institutions repackaging existing face-to-face learning experiences and making these available online (xMOOC) or, alternatively, developing more interactive, connective experiences (cMOOC) (Kay et al. 2013). The MOOC is also widely recognised as a tool by which to expand the reach of Higher Education (Boyatt et al. 2014) by helping to overcome the barriers that prevent students from accessing courses within traditional Higher Education institutions.

In the UK, a consortium of universities are working together to provide courses via a shared online platform under the umbrella of the *FutureLearn* project, and there has been significant encouragement from government in this regard, including from Universities Minister David Willets (Times Higher Education 2013). What has not developed, however, is provision of the type proposed by our project, namely the delivery of an entire LL.M degree by way of a MOOC.

This poster forms part of that wider project to develop, deploy and evaluate an 'LL.M by MOOC' as a means to break down some of the barriers facing students wishing to access LL.M study. The focus of this poster is in establishing the barriers to participation in LL.M courses as perceived by prospective students, and to identify the characteristics of a MOOC which this group regard as likely to overcome these obstacles to enrolment.

The initial phase of the work is in the form of a literature review, surveying important contributions to academic writing on this topic. A key part of this exercise is the assessment of the best model or

models to be deployed in meeting the key aims of the project; in particular widening participation and extending access to postgraduate legal education of this kind.

The most frequently identified obstacles to prospective student's participation in academic postgraduate programmes are: fees and living costs and the availability of financial support (Catchside 2011); geographical limitations on physical attendance; immigration restrictions (Thomas 2012); and incompatibility with competing professional and domestic demands (Wakeling and Hampden-Thompson).

Some of these issues have been, in part, addressed by a growth in the availability of distance-learning provision, however, this has not dispensed with the issue of finance and must be viewed in the context of a declining market for this type of programme amongst international students, and the significant debt burdens carried by recent graduates from English universities (Coughlan 2013).

These issues are identified in particular through the results of analysis of focus group work undertaken with existing students on Nottingham Law School's academic LL.M courses, including its distance-learning provision. Further, analysis of application data and, in particular, surveys of those applicants declining the offer of a place on an LL.M programme, identifies key trends in the enrolment rate based on the reasons given by applicants for choosing not to take up the offer of a place.

Analysis of the focus group exercise also provides data on the stated preferences of those students currently enrolled on the LL.M courses – including by way of distance-learning – of a model by which a MOOC could be utilised in the delivery of an academic LL.M programme.

The focus group work will be informed both by the findings of the literature review and by the results of analysis of applications data, identifying common characteristics of students declining the offer of a place on the campus-based or distance-learning LL.M programmes and identifying recognised modes and patterns of delivery which might be deployed in an 'LL.M by MOOC'.

The poster draws conclusions as to obstacles to participation in LL.M study, as to the various models through which a MOOC-based programme might address these obstacles, and by proposing a model which meets student preferences and needs.

References:

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♦ Coughlan, S., 2013, 'Postgraduate Courses "Social Mobility Barrier"'. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-21357311

♦ HEFCE 2013, Postgraduate Education in England and Northern Ireland, Overview Report 2013.

♦ HESA 2014, Higher Education Statistics Agency. Statistical First Release 197, Table 3. Available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/freestatistics

♦ Kay et al. 2013, 'MOOCs: So Many Learners, So Much Potential…' 23(3) IEEE Intelligent Systems 70-77.

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♦ Thomas, E., 'Competing Globally: The Impact of Government Immigration Policy on UK Universities.' Speech delivered on behalf of Universities UK. Available at: http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/CompetingGlobally.aspx#.U7U4IXkg-Uk

♦ Times Higher Education, 2013, 'The Podcast: David Willetts on MOOCs'. Available at: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/podcasts/the-podcast-david-willetts-on-moocs/2006308.article

♦ Wakeling, P. and Hampden-Thompson, G. (2013) 'Transition to Higher Degrees across the UK: An Analysis of National, International and Individual Differences', Higher Education Academy.

♦ Waldrop, M; Nature Magazine, 2013, 'Massive Open Online Courses, aka MOOCs, Transform Higher Education and Science' Available at: http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/massive-open-online-courses-transform-higher-education-and-science/