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Rectors' Conference (HRK)
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**HRK position paper on
MOOCs in the context of
digital teaching**

HRK German Rectors' Conference

The Voice of the Universities

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The HRK is in favour of further investigation of the possibilities offered by developing digital teaching formats by identifying the potential and the problems of "Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)" and deciding on this basis whether they could generate added value for individual universities. MOOCs are not suitable models for saving costs. It is to be determined whether higher education institutions should offer digital teaching formats via commercial platforms or whether independent alternatives should be developed.

i. **The HRK is in favour of further investigation of the possibilities offered by developing digital teaching formats.**

Digital teaching formats include e-learning, web 2.0 applications and net-based Open Educational Resources. MOOCs are a particular format associated with Open Educational Resources. MOOCs are therefore just one of many forms taken by digital teaching. Where possible, the higher education institutions in Germany have investigated all the digital innovations in teaching and work with those digital teaching formats which prove useful.

ii. **MOOCs present potential, but also problems and risks.**

In some specific configurations, MOOCs can generate added value. These include university marketing, transitional programmes, standardised events for mass attendance, minor subjects, "blended" formats, seminar-like and interdisciplinary content and certain areas in professional development and cooperation with other higher education institutions. The format has potential in its range and options for collaboration, for example. However, this can only be realised if it is accompanied by intensive supervision. Problems and risks extend to free access, integration in the course of study, the usually relatively high drop-out rate and legally uncontested identification of individuals taking examinations. Broad-based introduction of MOOCs could jeopardise the diversity of teaching. MOOCs on their own are not sufficient for extensive personal development: other aspects of education are also necessary.

iii. **MOOCs consume a great deal of resources and are therefore not a tool with which to effect savings.**

Any thoughts of using MOOCs to economise, particularly on personnel, are wide of reality. High-quality MOOCs require even more funding, plus more personnel for moderation, accompanying tutorials and technical support. If more than just a few MOOCs are to be produced, the higher education institutions will require additional external funding.

- iv. **The HRK notes that there are providers who operate problematic funding models for MOOCs.**

Individual, usually private suppliers advertise MOOCs initially as free of charge and later request fees from participants for teaching materials, special supervision, examinations and certificates. Many MOOC products are part of a culture of "free products" that dominates the Internet but is in effect non-existent. It often conceals a mechanism to document users' personal data and track their behaviour for commercial purposes later on.
- v. **The HRK therefore expressly rejects the use of learning profiles for commercial purposes in association with online teaching, with particular reference to the implementation of MOOCs.**

The universities fulfil their special duty of responsibility towards their students in this way. Obtaining and using such profiles may only be for the purposes of quality assurance or improvement or for academic research on learning. Data protection in the form of explicit consent on the part of the students must be provided without fail. There is also the ethical question of whether higher education institutions want to encourage students, either directly or indirectly, to use questionable educational products.
- vi. **MOOCs can be used as an additional component in an internationalisation strategy.**

On the one hand they can be used to encourage competitiveness and mobility. However, on the other, they are not a substitute for visits to other countries. With their availability worldwide, they can contribute to cultural diversity, but also generate cultural uniformity by standardisation.
- vii. **Within the prescribed curricula, university teachers decide whether, when and to which extent digital teaching is to be used.**

This is in line with the freedom to teach guaranteed in the constitution. Freedom to teach relates in this context to the implementation of the prescribed degree courses, modules and type of teaching. Teachers at higher education institutions which have a particular mandate to provide teaching remotely, are bound to this agreement.
- viii. **The HRK recommends that the higher education institutions position themselves to take strategic account of these issues in their approach to the digitalisation of teaching.**

This strategy should consider the priorities and target groups of the institution in question. The universities must investigate whether they offer their digital teaching formats through a commercial platform. Alternatively, platforms for each higher education institution or groups of institutions and centralised platforms are also options.

This HRK position paper supplements the publication "[Potential and problems of MOOCs in the context of digital teaching](#)" (in German only), which gives an overview of the current status and the possible applications and application scenarios.