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# MOOC-Based Personalized Learning Experience (Ple) An Innovative Approach to Elective Courses

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This qualitative study explores the impact of Personalized Learning Experience (PLE) courses at a higher education institution from the perspective of undergraduate students. The PLE program requires students to take at least one of their elective courses in the form of MOOCs during their undergraduate studies. Drawing on interviews with six students across different faculties, the study identified four key themes that encapsulate the effects of PLE courses: (1) Certificate driven learning with a focus on occupation skill enhancement, (2) diverse course offerings to enhance personal and academic development, (3) learning flexibility, and (4) student satisfaction. The findings suggest that PLE courses offered through MOOC platforms allow students to broaden their academic horizons, gain valuable skills, and tailor their education to better align with their interests and goals. Furthermore, this study highlights the potential benefits of incorporating PLE courses in higher education institutions, emphasizing their role in promoting a more dynamic and student-centered learning environment.

## 1 Introduction

In today's fast-paced world, ubiquitous and continuous learning is not just an opportunity but a necessity for individuals to stay current and adapt to change. [4] discuss the MOOC pivot, highlighting the shift in focus from massive global access to more targeted, professional, and skill-based learning. This pivot presents an opportunity for MOOCs to be integrated into traditional higher education as they align more closely with the goals and objectives of formal degree programs. [5] also emphasizes the emerging "MOOC 3.0" era, in which MOOCs become more integrated into higher education, with greater acceptance of MOOCs for university course credits. This shift has led to an increased focus on the assessment and design of MOOCs, as well as their alignment with institutional standards [5].

One of the critical challenges in integrating MOOCs into higher education is the development of appropriate assessment methods to ensure that learning outcomes

are met [5]. [3] examines the state of art in MOOC assessment and recognition, highlighting the need for more innovative and effective assessment methods. She discusses various assessment methods, such as quizzes, peer assessments, and e-portfolios. Furthermore, [5] emphasizes the importance of assessment in the new MOOC world, arguing that valid and reliable assessment practices are critical for successfully integrating MOOCs into higher education.

Another critical challenge is ensuring MOOCs offer a comprehensive, engaging, and effective learning experience. Since MOOCs often involve self-paced learning with limited interaction between instructors and students, concerns may arise about the quality of education and learning outcomes. The design and delivery of MOOCs are pivotal in motivating participants toward self-directed learning [6]. As [6] suggests, MOOCs ought to be structured in a manner that empowers learners to assume responsibility for their education, fosters interaction, and provides opportunities for personal growth. By integrating MOOCs into higher education, an environment that supports self-directed learning and personal development can be cultivated [5]. Furthermore, according to a study examining students' experiences with MOOCs, those who could not complete the courses attributed their failure to a lack of time due to their university workload. This issue could potentially be mitigated by motivating students to earn credits through MOOCs [1, 6].

The future of MOOCs in higher education will rely on close collaboration between MOOC providers and traditional higher education institutions to ensure the quality and recognition of MOOCs for university course credits [5]. [3] suggest that higher education institutions, MOOC providers, and accreditation bodies should collaborate to develop a more coherent and transparent system for recognizing MOOCs as a legitimate source of university course credits.

The higher education institution researched in this paper recognizes the importance of empowering students to become lifelong learners and believes that integrating MOOCs into its curriculum could provide a solution. By incorporating MOOCs, students have the opportunity to experience this mode of learning before graduation, fostering self-directed learners capable of identifying emerging trends, determining personal growth paths, and acquiring essential skills for their careers. Ultimately, this approach can cultivate proactive learners who can navigate the ever-evolving landscape of knowledge and skillsets.

To integrate MOOCs into its programs, the higher education institution in question developed the Personalized Learning Experience (PLE) program. This program requires students to take at least one elective course from MOOCs, with a minimum of 4 ECTS and not exceeding 30 ECTS. Based on the university senate's decision, PLE can be completed in place of free or restricted electives. Departments determine which course slot(s) can be taken as a PLE course, and each department appoints a MOOC coordinator. The departments determine eligible MOOCs, and courses must be at the undergraduate or graduate level and in English unless

they are language courses. Passing grades only require obtaining certificates for all MOOCs taken, and the course is evaluated as “passed” or “failed.” Lastly, the PLE course does not count toward the semesterly ECTS limit, as it only enters students’ transcripts at the end of the semester upon the students submitting their certificates to their MOOC coordinator. Therefore, in theory, a student can complete multiple PLEs in a semester.

The university in question has a partnership with a major MOOC platform, which provides courses and seats. Students and departments determine several hundred courses they want available, with the majority of courses chosen by students through voting. Once courses are determined, students apply for seats at the beginning of the semester. Seat allocation is based on student’s year of study and whether they have completed a PLE or received a seat in previous semesters. Students are added to the program along with MOOC Coordinators, who are added as program administrators and can monitor students.

Students create an appropriate learning experience for themselves based on the type of elective they will complete by bundling courses as the ECTS values of elective courses at the university typically require students to bundle three to five MOOCs. Students obtain approval from their MOOC coordinator, and this process is usually very fast and easy for free electives. If students are completing a restricted elective, the learning experience becomes slightly less personal, as the courses must align with the elective’s restrictions, such as the “Humanities/Sociology Elective”, “Social Sciences Elective”, or “Departmental Elective”. If students cannot secure a seat or choose to do so, they can complete MOOCs from platforms not provided by the university. These courses are accepted as long as the MOOC coordinator approves the courses taken and the students provide their certificates.

## **2 Method**

This study took place at a private university in İstanbul, Turkey. Several students who completed a PLE course were contacted via email. Participants for the interviews were selected based on their availability. We interviewed one student from the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, and Faculty of Education and two students from the Faculty of Law, adding up to 6 students. Each student had completed a PLE at least once.

The interviews were conducted one to one over Zoom and Google Meets by the researchers. Before the interviews, the consent of the students and permission to take audio and video record of the interview were obtained. The interviews were semi-structured to leave foster deep conversation and potential serendipitous

insights. In the interviews, the participants were asked broad questions about PLE's possible effect on their study habits and learning, the advantages/disadvantages of taking PLEs over regular elective courses, and whether they recommend PLEs to peers.

A basic interpretive qualitative approach was chosen for the research method. In basic interpretive qualitative research, the outcomes are descriptively presented after the data is analyzed through induction to construct different concepts and theories. This approach was considered most appropriate by the researchers as it allowed for free exploration of how students made meaning of this innovative way to complete elective courses.

The data collected from the interviews were interpreted using Thematic Analysis (TA) [2]. TA can be performed across a variety of theoretical and epistemological approaches and fit in with both realist and constructionist standards [2]. We used the TA version that [2] developed in which the researcher takes an active role in organically coding the data to generate themes. They indicate that inductive approaches are particularly useful when exploring new terrain. Our analysis was, therefore, a data-driven analysis through induction; we had no prearranged coding frame. However, here, it is critical to mention that it is impossible for researchers to completely liberate themselves from theoretical and epistemological engagements when coding. We approached the data semantically in that we focused exclusively on the surface meanings of what was said during the interviews [2]. We took a realist approach to research. A theme was not necessarily produced due to commonality in the data; the researcher's judgment was needed to determine a theme [2]. As this study looked at individual experiences from a single data set (all interviews), themes were determined according to significance at each interview, data item, and level [2].

We specifically followed the next steps from [2] in our analysis but without being able to do "Doublecheck with the interviewees" as a devastating earthquake hit Turkey when member checks were scheduled to take place: 1) Familiarizing yourself with your data, 2) Generating initial codes, 3) Searching for themes, 4) Reviewing themes, 5) Defining and naming themes, 6) Producing the report, and 7) Double-check with the interviewees [2]. Each interview was coded individually by each researcher. After each, we held meetings. All researchers in meetings made complete agreements over codes. Similarly, we generated the study themes together in complete agreement over two meetings. Our research question for the study was as follows: What is the impact of PLE on a higher education institution from the perspective of the students? We found this to be a critical question as, to the knowledge of the authors, an analysis of a higher education course model that allows credits via MOOCs has not been conducted in the literature.

This study offers insights into the impact of PLE on higher education from students' perspectives but has limitations, including small sample size, selection bias

as participants were chosen based on their availability, which may have introduced selection bias, lack of member checks, and a single institution context. These factors may limit the generalizability and accuracy of the findings, and future research should address these limitations for a more comprehensive understanding.

### 3 Results

From the analysis of the data, four themes emerged, which are as follows:

#### 3.1 Certificate-driven learning with a focus on occupation skill enhancement

Students reported that the program contributed significantly to their career development, motivating them to obtain certificates that are recognized and salient within their respective fields. The effective content of the courses, designed to cater to occupational development, inspired students to pursue the program to acquire practical work skills and professional growth.

Student 1: "For the psychological counseling and guidance program, communication and empathy are important, so I took courses based on that."

Students highlighted the importance of being motivated by both learning and the prospect of earning certificates, demonstrating the program's success in addressing the needs of students who seek to enhance their occupational skills and advance their careers. A Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture students said the following:

Student 4: "Different certificates from different schools are in my portfolio. This is very critical for me."

Overall, the Personalize Learning Experience program is perceived as a valuable resource for students seeking to bolster their professional development through certificate-driven learning that emphasizes the acquisition of relevant, practical skills and soft skills they would have otherwise potentially been unable to acquire.

Student 5: "It changed my day-to-day interactions with my colleagues at work; that is the level of impact it had on me."

#### 3.2 Diverse course offerings to enhance personal and academic development.

The results reveal that students perceive the program as offering diverse course options that contribute to their personal and academic development. Students

appreciate the opportunity to take MOOCs as elective courses, addressing the deficiency in elective course options within their departments.

Student 1: “As a psychological counseling and guidance counselor, there were not any elective courses that I thought would develop the skills I needed, so I turned to PLE.”

The program enables students to experience unique learning opportunities and access courses from other disciplines, promoting interdisciplinary learning and personal interest development. Furthermore, the diverse course and content offerings, including courses from high-quality universities, foster various learning experiences while emphasizing the importance of elective courses for self-improvement.

Student 6: “Courses made me say: I never thought about this issue in this respect... Not only in the field of law but also in other fields, ... it gave me different perspectives ...”

The variety and richness of perspectives motivate students to engage in learning and focus on self-development, ultimately enhancing their educational experience.

### **3.3 Learning flexibility**

Further, the results emphasize the program’s adaptability to individual needs and preferences. The program’s structure allows students to learn at their own pace and space, providing flexible time management options that cater to different learning preferences and schedules and easing the students’ stress.

Student 6: “There is no homework you have to hand in regularly, and there aren’t lessons you have to be at. It keeps the schedule more flexible, and that makes it very pleasant.”

This flexibility extends to various aspects of the program, such as diverse assessment methods and the opportunity to earn credit.

Student 5: “That is because we can count them out of the course credits ... This means that if I pass all my courses ... , I can finish school almost a term early.”

However, it is important to note that Student 4 indicated that the program required self-regulation as he would often forget to do the assignments of the MOOCs he took. Overall, the Personalize Learning Experience program offers significant flexibility, empowering students to create a personalized learning journey that aligns with their unique needs, interests, and schedules.

### **3.4 Student satisfaction**

Lastly, during the interviews, students repeatedly expressed satisfaction with various aspects of the program, including the effective content and the time efficiency it offers. The development in the field of personal interest and the dual advantage



of earning both credit and certificates contribute to the overall positive experience. Furthermore, students reported that the program's success has led to a snowballing of suggestions, with many participants recommending it to their peers.

Student 5: "I recommend this to all my friends."

This satisfaction extends to the enjoyable nature of the courses, which cater to personal interests and promote personal development. The inclusion of courses from high-quality universities and the program's ability to ease the stress on GPA further enhance the students' satisfaction with the program.

Student 2: "The process went very well for me because I had the opportunity to take the courses that interested me from good universities."

Student 3: "... it is another good thing that there isn't a certain grade in the transcript for it and that it does not affect your GPA."

However, Student 6 said that the pass/fail nature of the course worried her as it is believed that this is not a good look in the transcript when applying to a graduate program. In summary, however, the Personalize Learning Experience program has garnered positive feedback from students, who appreciate its effectiveness, enjoyability, and focus on personal interests and development.

## 4 Conclusion

The findings of this research resonate with the broader literature on integrating MOOCs into higher education, emphasizing the potential of MOOCs to contribute to the students' personal and professional growth [4, 5, 6]. The Personalized Learning Experience (PLE) program's success in enhancing students' occupational skills and promoting interdisciplinary learning is consistent with the emerging "MOOC 3.0" era discussed by [5], which emphasizes the integration of MOOCs into higher education curricula.

The PLE, in a way, overcomes the robust assessment problem of integrating MOOCs into higher education curricula, which [5] and [3] discussed, by allowing students to create their own learning experiences as the university employs MOOCs only for elective courses. In fact, the committees for the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, and Faculty of Law decided not to allow PLE for departmental elective courses (a type of restrictive elective) in their programs due to the assessment problem. This left PLE to be a free elective dominant program in which students seem to be motivated, as can be inferred from the results of this study, to complete courses without skiving. Relatedly, the PLE overcomes the challenges of ensuring MOOCs offer a comprehensive, engaging, and effective learning experience [6] by not only partnering with a quality MOOC platform that provides courses from esteemed universities but by also appointing

MOOC coordinators who can view courses and decide on their appropriateness. In fact, most MOOC coordinators pay close attention to the number and quality of summative assessments in a course among other design elements. Moreover, as multiple authors in the past indicated, the program was able to overcome self-regulation concerns by crediting MOOCs [5, 1, 6] as a part of graduate programs.

In conclusion, the PLE's success in this study highlights the potential of integrating MOOCs into higher education to empower students to become lifelong learners [4, 5]. The themes that emerged in this research emphasize the importance of MOOCs in addressing students' current diverse needs and preferences. However, close collaboration between higher education institutions, MOOC providers, and accreditation bodies is essential to ensure the quality and broader recognition of MOOCs for university course credits [3, 5].

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