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Universitat Politècnica de València's Experience with EDX MOOC Initiatives During the Covid Lockdown

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In March 2020, when massive lockdowns started to be enforced around the world to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, edX launched two initiatives to help students around the world providing free certificates for its courses, RAP, for member institutions and OCE, for any accredited academic institution. In this paper we analyze how Universitat Politècnica de València contributed with its courses to both initiatives, providing almost 14,000 free certificate codes in total, and how UPV used the RAP initiative as a customer, describing the mechanism used to distribute more than 22,000 codes for free certificates to more than 7,000 UPV community members, what led to the achievement of more than 5,000 free certificates. We also comment the results of a post initiative survey answered by 1,612 UPV members about 3,241 edX courses, in which they communicated a satisfaction of 4.69 over 5 with the initiative.

1 Introduction

As soon as March 11, 2020, when massive lockdowns started to be enforced around the world to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, edX, the global MOOC platform, mobilized to help its university partners support their students and maintain learning continuity with an initiative called RAP (Remote Access Program) [3]. The initiative saw the creation of an edX-partner community group, where members could access at no cost the courses and programs of any other member. In a few days, more than 60 edX partners from all over the world joined the program, adding 800 courses to deliver blended and independent learning opportunities for students and professional development for faculty and staff through June 30, 2020 [4]. Building on this success, and recognizing the ongoing need of colleges and universities globally, edX took the step of expanding its offerings to provide free course access for any accredited educational institution, and it continues to do so with its OCE (Online Campus Essentials) solution [1]. The courses for this initiative

were drawn from the catalogue of courses of the edX partners that decided to participate offering their certificates for free.

Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV) recognized these two initiatives as powerful tools to help during the pandemic, so it offered the certificates of its most in-demand courses to those institutions in need.

At the same time, UPV also saw it as a great opportunity to give access to high quality educational content to its community during the lockdown, so an automated mechanism was created to let its member access the free certificates.

2 Description of Rap and OCE

2.1 How Both Initiatives Worked

For RAP all participating members got access to the program after confirming their participation. For OCE the accredited academic institutions filled a form in a web page and signed an agreement with edX.

EdX emailed csv text files with promotional codes to each customer institution. These codes had to be distributed to users to be redeemed when purchasing the certificates of the courses included in each initiative.

All RAP participating members could ask edX for an unlimited number of codes during the initiative.

The students had to enroll in the courses and use the codes before the end of the initiatives, but they could finish the courses later (if the course ending date was after the end of the initiative). The only condition was that the course was published and open for enrollments during the initiatives.

2.2 Global Impact of the Courses of UPV in the Initiatives

6,057 learners asked for a certificate of UPV's courses in the RAP initiative and 7,750 in the OCE initiative, 13,807 in total. As the initiatives were active for 4 months, this means that they generated almost 3,500 extra verified-certificate enrollments per month, what implies a 3.5-fold increase over the average number of verified certificate enrollments during 2019, that was about 1,000 per month.

Around 27% of the verified certificate enrollments in UPV's courses generated from the initiatives were from UPV members, what demonstrates an interest by UPV's community to get verified certificates from our courses that we had not detected. For the other 73%, edX reported enrollments from 1,844 different institutions and the data we gathered shows that we had enrollments from 17 different countries.

The average completion rate of the courses with the free certificates was 33% (39% if we consider only the Spanish speaking countries).

3 Use of the Initiative by Universitat Politècnica de València

3.1 Code Distribution System

To use RAP initiative as a customer the challenge was to create a system that could distribute thousands of codes with minimum administrative overhead. We decided that the best way to distribute the codes was to create an automatic mechanism, gathering the users' requests through a website that enforced the policy of use and distributing the codes by email.

To avoid the misuse of the codes, we asked edX that the codes created for UPV had to be used in an edX account made with an email from the institution's official email domain. Taking into account that we could ask for an unlimited number of codes, and that the codes could only be used from an edX account made with an institutional email address, the policy that was created was letting users ask for 5 codes per email address, accepting only email addresses from upv.es domain.

The website also included a listing of the institutions that were offering courses in the program and some instructions about how to make an account and how to use codes. It was developed as an open source tool and the code can be downloaded from <https://github.com/leosamu/edx-covid19>.

Once the system was ready and tested, emails were sent to the different groups of the university community. First an email was sent to staff and faculty, that are smaller groups and, once we checked that the system was working well, an email was sent to the student groups, one school at a time. After one month of the start of the initiative, a reminder email was sent to the different groups.

3.2 Summary of RAP Initiative Use by UPV Community Members

UPV distributed 24,613 codes to 7,712 of its students, faculty and staff, what means that around 22% of its 35,000 community members asked for at least one code. The data provided by edX shows that 15,744 of the codes provided to UPV were redeemed and that 5,202 certificates from different institutions were obtained (a 33% completion rate). It also shows that around 27% of UPV codes were used to get certificates for UPV courses.

Given the success of the UPV courses among the UPV community members and, as edX gives its members the possibility to offer free codes for their courses to their communities, we decided to set up a follow up initiative to distribute codes for UPV courses to UPV members using the same system with a new server.

At the moment of writing this article, 5 months after setting up the new service, 2,116 codes had been sent to UPV students, staff and faculty.

3.3 Post Initiative Survey

At the end of September 2020, almost 3 months after the end of the RAP initiative, a survey was sent to the 7,712 users that had asked for codes during the initiative. The survey was anonymous and was opened for responses until the end of November, when data were collected and analyzed.

1,612 users answered the survey giving their opinion about 3,241 edX courses. 54% of them declared themselves as students, 8% as unemployed, 25% as UPV staff or faculty and 13% of them said they were working outside UPV. They declared that, on average, they have requested 3.8 codes, they had used 3.2 codes, they had obtained 1.8 certificates and where in process of achieving 1.1 certificates more. Their satisfaction with the initiative of codes for free certificates was 4.69 over 5 and their perception of the quality of the courses was, on average, 4.04 over 5. When asked about the usefulness of the MOOCs they had taken for their career the average result was 3.65 over 5 and 97.9% said that they were going to take more MOOCs in the future.

4 Conclusion

The data gathered shows that edX was right, there was a need for quality on-line learning during the lockdown, and that our courses were well accepted by institutions around the world.

The use of the initiative by the UPV community was a big success, with a third of the community asking for codes, 5,000 certificates awarded and a very high valuation of the initiative by our users, who also consider that the courses are high quality and that they are valuable for their career. It has been so successful that we are continuing it with a new initiative with codes for our own courses.

The system and process we created to distribute the codes to our community have demonstrated to be simple and robust, being able to distribute thousands of codes with minimum human intervention.

We are participating in a new initiative by edX called Open Campus Essentials that gives access to registered academic institutions for free to courses following a

subscription model until the end of July 2021 [2]. 16 of the 145 courses included in the catalogue are from UPV. We have also enrolled in this initiative as a customer institution and we are now testing the system to offer this new subscription model to our community.

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