

# LACE - A MOOC ON LITERATURE AND CHANGE IN EUROPE: MOOCS AT THE MA LEVEL IN A CROSS-OVER WITH CAMPUS TEACHING

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## Abstract

Literature and Change in Europe (LACE) is a network of seven institutions providing a common master course on Literature. These seven partners are KU Leuven (the lead partner), Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Aarhus University, Tartu University, Lisbon University, Universidad de Granada, University of Bologna. Each of the partner institutions provides a module to the course, which is followed jointly by students officially enrolled at the respective institutions, collaborating over the web. LACE involves also physical mobility by teachers and students. LACE participates in the project "OpenCourseWare in the European Higher Education Context: how to make use of its full potential for virtual mobility" and originally planned to offer the course in a standard OCW format. We went however one step further and offered it as a - truly open - MOOC with OCW content under a CC-BY-SA license. The stated goals for the university partnership that offers this MOOC were "internationalisation at home": attracting new groups of students to the course from different international backgrounds, more intensive peer activities such as richer forum discussions, enhanced exposure of the participating institutions to students outside of the LACE framework, and attracting possible PhD students. The MOOC was squarely targeted at the MA level (corresponding to 6 ECTS), required good knowledge of both English, European Culture and at least one other European Language and a solid introduction into literary theory.

In October 2013 LACE was launched for the first time as a MOOC on the Canvas.net platform, where it was followed both by the regular, registered students at the participating universities as well as MOOC subscribers. The course provides content using weblectures, articles, course texts and hyperlinks. Peer interaction is organised through assignments and forum discussions. Students who finished the course received a certificate of accomplishment. This pilot aimed to explore the interaction of MOOC subscribers and the regular university students, programmes and facilities. The paper documents the motivations, choices and experiences in setting up the pilot, and presents the results of both a survey at the beginning of the MOOC as well as usage data and student response after having taken the course.

Keywords: mobility, MOOCs, Open CourseWare.

## 1 INTRODUCTION: THE MIXED MOOC

Literature and Change in Europe (LACE) is a network of 7 universities who work together on literary theory and narratology [1]. LACE has been presented at many conferences [2][3][4]. While the partners work together in research, they also set up a collaboration for teaching. This has long been developed in the Erasmus framework. While the original goal was to start an Erasmus Mundus project, in the end it was preferred to start MOOCs. In this paper, we describe how we went forward with the first of these MOOCs. A proposal has now been submitted under the Erasmus+ call to offer 4 more MOOCs.

The MOOC "Literature and Change in Europe" [5] ran from October 2013 until December 2014. The specific feature we want to discuss in this paper is the fact that it involved both MOOC students as well as regular, university registered students.

## 2 PLANNING

The LACE course ran for 3 years on a Moodle platform [6]. On that platform, self-registration was turned off, so students could only be enrolled by the staff at the respective participating universities.

The course offered included preparatory texts for each module, weblectures, a lecture transcript, a forum discussion and an assignment.

Usually there was a teaching assistant at KU Leuven who supported the colleagues at the different universities to put the materials online, to register the students etc. There were also live chat sessions which were organized by the teaching assistant, but were held by the staff with the LACE students. These live chat sessions didn't work very well, in most part because of schedule issues for the different student groups.

For the MOOC project, this existing Moodle course meant that from the start, we had the following materials available for reuse on the MOOC platform:

- Lists of preparatory readings;
- Recorded weblectures for the 7 modules
- Advanced Lectures for 5 of the 7 modules
- An assignment for the 7 modules

The MOOC project was assigned to a project collaborator (co-author Stephanie Verbeken), who also contributed to other projects such as OCW KU Leuven [7] and OCW EU [8].

To migrate from the common Moodle course to the MOOC, we took steps at several levels: preparation, organization, technology, pedagogy:

- Preparation
  - A thorough literature and experience review of the MOOC phenomenon, including talks with several colleagues who were engaged in successful MOOC projects at other universities;
  - Defining a position on specific MOOC-related issues;
- Organization
  - A strategic discussion within the LACE partnership to come to a common understanding and definition of goals;
  - Communicating and setting up an action plan with the MOOC teachers;
  - Working through a deployment plan with our MOOC platform contact;
  - Setting up a planning for the teachers;
- Technology
  - Selection of the platform we were going to use;
  - Conversion of the Moodle materials onto the MOOC platform;
  - Elaborating the MOOC content-wise;
  - Recording new materials, such as introduction videos;
- Pedagogy
  - Defining good information for candidate MOOC students;
  - Creating a Study Guide;
  - Adding interactivity, such as quizzes;
  - Creating a MOOC activity calendar.

### **3 PREPARATION**

Of course, before venturing into this MOOC we looked into the MOOC discussions and the specifics that would attract us to use this format [9].

In 2013, MOOCs attracted a multivocal chorus of criticisms, filling up education topic space in reputed newspapers as well as in dedicated educational blogs and journals, in a clear counterbalance to the 2012 hype. That doesn't mean however that all criticisms have equal merit: many have to do with the typical inflated expectations in the hype cycle [10].

Most observers understood that MOOCs had possible implications for a very wide range of topics such as educational business models, for educational practices, for academic publishing, for teaching,

recruitment etc. In comments we found mainly online, we identified a cluster of hotly debated topics: the MOOC business model [11], the dropouts, the diversity issue and the innovation value. For our project, which is not situated at the institutional level, we found the topic of the business model less relevant, but we reformulated it as the target group definition. In what follows, we shortly explain our findings for these points.

### **3.1 Target group definition**

While MOOCs are advocated as open to anyone who decides to register, it is clear the “general public” as such is segmented, and it is difficult to make educational materials that fits all. After consultation in the partnership, we decided to target a very specific group of people: students outside of our current university network, with a solid education in Literature and Literary theory, preferably at a master’s level, and with an advanced knowledge of English and at least one European Language (from the current consortium). So, from the start, it is quite clear we were not aiming for 40.000 enrolments.

### **3.2 The dropout issue**

Given the fact that the interest in MOOCs was triggered in the first place by the huge reported enrolments for the early MOOCs, it is of course quite normal that questions are being asked what happened with all those “students”. Soon, it emerged that dropout rates were as staggering as enrolment numbers: only a fraction of the MOOC enrolments proved to be real students in a meaningful sense of the word [12][13].

While we understand that for MOOC providers the enrolment numbers are important, the literature shows you need to interpret these numbers (eg. the ratio between enrolments and real participants) with care: first of all, the definition of “successful participation” can differ depending on the learning goals set and the viewpoint of the student. When a teacher sets up a course with a particular outcome in mind, he/she can have an expectation that the student has to complete the course up to a certain level to succeed. But for a MOOC student, it can be that his or her motive to follow the MOOC is much more limited, and that he/she considers his/her limited participation as a success.

For us, we did not aim for huge numbers, but were looking for students who would like to engage in the course discussions. We hoped to enrich the course by having more and higher quality participation. So, we were looking to measure success in terms of the quality of the forum discussions.

To promote continued participation in the course, we offered a certificate of accomplishment to students that would complete a sizable part of the assignments. And of course, those students that were also registered with one of the partner universities would get their credits when they completed the course. Credit students could opt to do a larger number of required course assignment or produce a paper on one of the topics.

### **3.3 The diversity issue**

MOOCs were romanticized for offering education to the many in developing countries who do not have access to higher education, and so a natural deduction was the expectation that you could diversify your audience with a more international composition. This is not necessarily the case however, as some critics pointed out: in some cases there is actually more diversity in your classroom than in your MOOC [14].

Statistics tend to show a preponderance of US and Western European, relatively well trained students amongst MOOC participants, something that proved true for this MOOC also. In our case, we had a clear goal on the diversity: we wanted to attract students from university environments outside of our LACE network, in particular looking for students from Central Europe and Latin-America.

### **3.4 Innovation value**

An often heard criticism of MOOCs is that they enforce traditional teaching rather than introduce innovation [15][16]. Our motive to offer LACE as a MOOC wasn’t really inspired by a quest for innovation. Choosing for distance learning technologies was natural since we wanted to develop our education on the basis of our research network. That is not as such innovative since it is the core mission of research-intensive universities. The MOOC format was just the most current and advanced format of providing online learning to students on multiple campuses.

On the other hand, the LACE example has been used at the KU Leuven university as a showcase for possible educational innovation at the institutional level, and was presented at a crucial meeting of the university education board to decide on a KU Leuven institutional MOOC project. So while innovation wasn't planned, there was certainly some impact on innovation.

While the previous points will continue to be hotly debated while we just move on with MOOCs, there are unfortunately also some real issues that need to be tackled by universities and teachers who want to do MOOCs: sustainability and something we would like to call the "calibration issue".

### **3.5 Sustainability**

In regards to sustainability [17], for us, the possibility to re-issue the course each academic year was of utmost importance, so we faced a sustainability issue, as we didn't count on institutional support. This means the burden on the teachers should be as low as possible, and the technical requirements quite low. Fortunately, most of the LACE partners had no difficulties in producing the weblectures, and the Canvas environment proved easy to use.

### **3.6 Calibration**

With the calibration issue we mean that many university courses are not on the introductory level, but are follow-up courses that are targeted at students in a specific phase in their curriculum, eg in a third BA. Course curricula have been designed with a sequential consistency in mind so that enrolled students are ideally prepared for the contents of a specific follow-up course, such as, eg, "Spanish Grammar II" or "Multivariate Analysis part B" etc. It is typical for current MOOCs that they address broader topics, incorporating the introductory level, leading to concerns MOOCs could become infotainment rather than education.

In our case, the LACE MOOC is exactly the 6 ECTS course as it is presented to our registered students at the participating universities. So no calibration has been done whatsoever. This of course might be a factor explaining the relatively low number of enrolments.

## **4 ORGANIZATION**

At our annual LACE meeting in January 2013 the MOOC project was proposed to the LACE consortium, and a review was made whether some modules would need an update. All partners agreed to go ahead.

At KU Leuven, a project assistant was assigned to this task, who setup an implementation and deployment plan, and – most importantly – conceived a communication plan with the partners, who all took care of one of the 7 modules of the MOOC course.

## **5 TECHNICAL STEPS**

The partner at KU Leuven took charge of the decision on selecting the MOOC provider that would host the LACE MOOC. Since this was not in the context of an institutional policy, providers such as Coursera or edX were not an option, and Udacity was deemed to have a portfolio that was too distinct from the subject of literature. A decision was made to work with Canvas, since we already had experience with the Canvas E-Learning platform.

At first, the Moodle content was transferred to [canvas.instructure.net](http://canvas.instructure.net), where we just opened a course on an individual teacher account. This allowed us also to get a look and feel of the environment. After partners felt comfortable with it, we contacted Canvas to explain we wanted to deploy a MOOC on the basis of this instructure course.

Canvas assigned a contact person who guided us through an intake Skype telcon and laid out a timeline to produce and deploy the MOOC. From our side, an MOU signed by the rector was needed, as well as an instructor release by the lead professors (in this case only the teachers from KU Leuven, not of the other partners). Canvas did the conversion from the course on [canvas.instructure.com](http://canvas.instructure.com) to [learn.canvas.net](http://learn.canvas.net).

We also got very good information on Canvas as to what functionalities we would integrate into the first run of the course. We chose, for example, not to integrate social media at this stage yet.

Quite early on, a text was needed for the canvas.net homepage for some promotion of the course, with a detailed list of expected activities and prerequisites. We also produced a teaser video for the course, hosted on Youtube.

A specific issue was the fact that a course on Literature unsurprisingly builds on a lot of reading, in many cases peer reviewed journal articles. Many of those articles are digitally available on the campus of partner universities, but might not be accessible to MOOC students due to copyright issues. Therefore, an effort was made to check whether the required literature was publicly available through open access. In some cases however this was not the case and it proved hard to replace this content by open content.

## 6 PEDAGOGICAL STEPS

An important addition to the MOOC, when compared to the Moodle course, is what we call the “study guide”. When the Moodle course was delivered to on-campus students, much of the goals, expected outcomes, context etc. were provided by the teachers directly to the student group. With the MOOC, this wasn’t an option and we thought it would be important to instruct students how they should go about actually studying the course, since a course is more than a set of informative texts: it is a way to come to understand the subject, to effect learning rather than simply convey information.

Also, quizzes were added, first on the first two modules and due to the success also to subsequent modules, to allow the students to quickly test whether they had understood the main points of the readings and weblectures. This format proved popular with students.

Forum discussions were important, with students formally tasked to submit reading summaries in which they had to compare texts onto the forum, and asking the students to reply to at least two other students’ posts.

## 7 MOOC DATA

The MOOC ran from October 2013 to January 2013, organized in 7 two-week modules + a second part with advanced readings.

In total, by the end of the course, 416 people had registered as a student in the MOOC, 15 were registered in a teacher role, 6 as observers and 3 as course designer. This is of course a relatively small number of students for a MOOC, but compared to the Moodle courses, it is a step change, since normally we had between 15 and 25 registered students. In the MOOC, 22 of the 416 students were registered students at one of the partner institutions.

As for the age distribution (Figure 1), rather typically for a MOOC we see that the age of participants is higher than that of regular university students, with a sizable group older than 24.

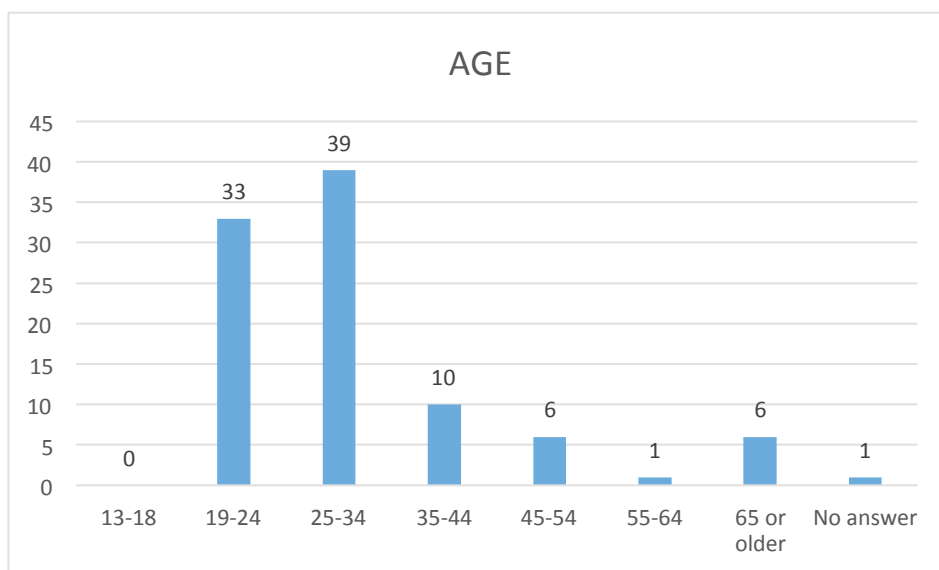


Figure 1

Unsurprisingly, many students originate (Figure 2) from Western Europe (the subject of the course was very Europe oriented) and the US. Although only a few MOOC students actually came from the target groups to which would like to expand to (Latin America and Central Europe), those proved to be amongst the most active students, and some have since applied for a PhD at our institution.

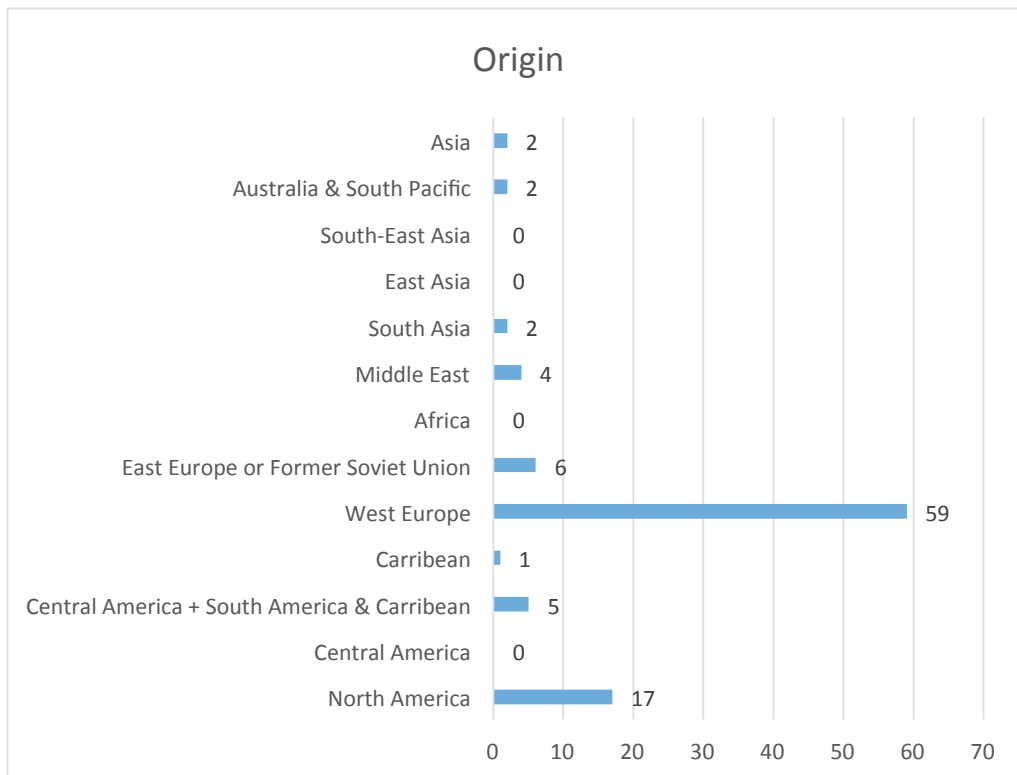


Figure 2

As for the Educational level (Figure 3), we see that indeed we are targeting quite high with a larger number already having a Master's degree, as was recommended in the MOOC advertisement.

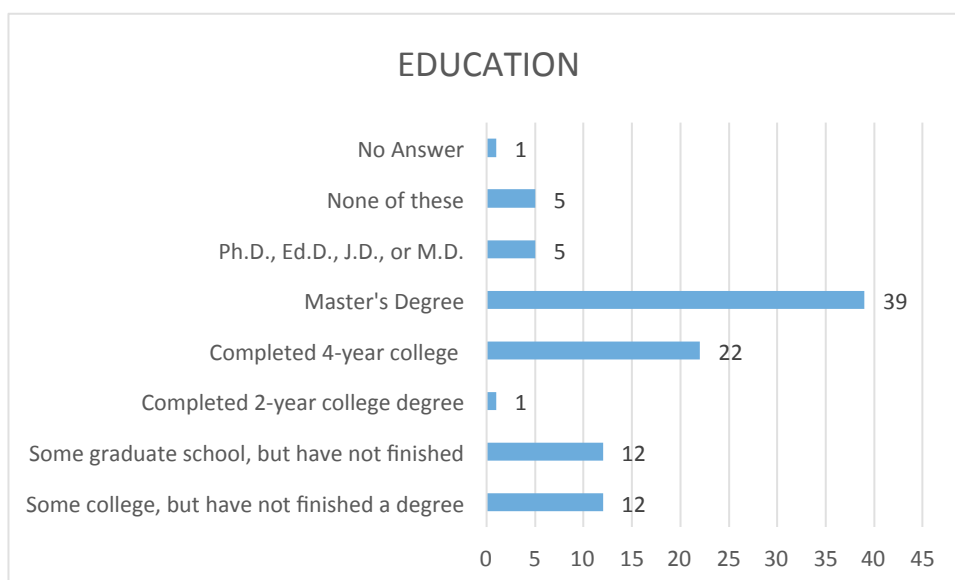


Figure 3

Learning about the subject was the key motivation (Figure 4); students could indicate multiple motives, course completion was a goal for 52 of them, 13 applied for the certificate of accomplishment, 22 were regular students, who obtained their credits.

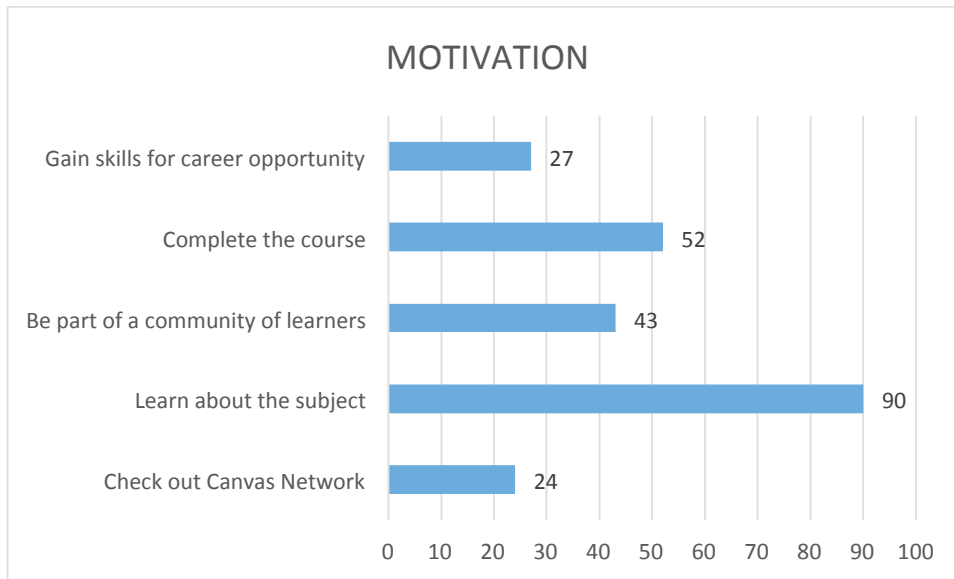


Figure 4

On the method of discovery – how the students learned about the course – (Figure 5) we see that web searches are still particularly strong, even though other sources such as social media gain importance.

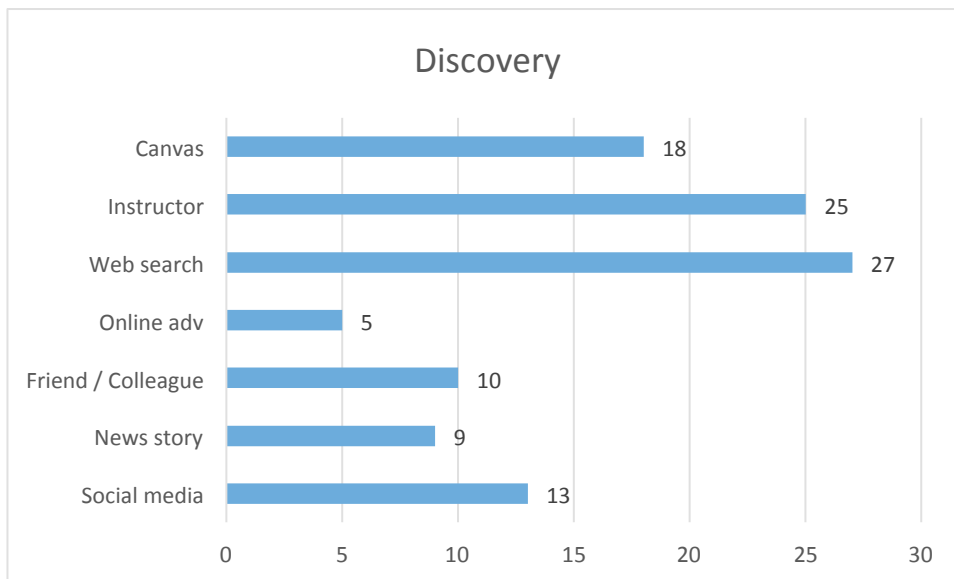


Figure 5

Since this course was uncalibrated for the MOOC format and mirrored the real programmed 6 ECTS course in the consortium, the workload was anticipated to be very high (a 6 ECTS course amounts to about 180 hours of study time, spread over 13 weeks classes + 5 weeks study and exam period, giving close to 10 hours/week). We see that students expected a much lower number of hours a week to spend on the course, but their anticipation was quite high for a MOOC, probably due to clear indications in the course advertisement (Figure 6).

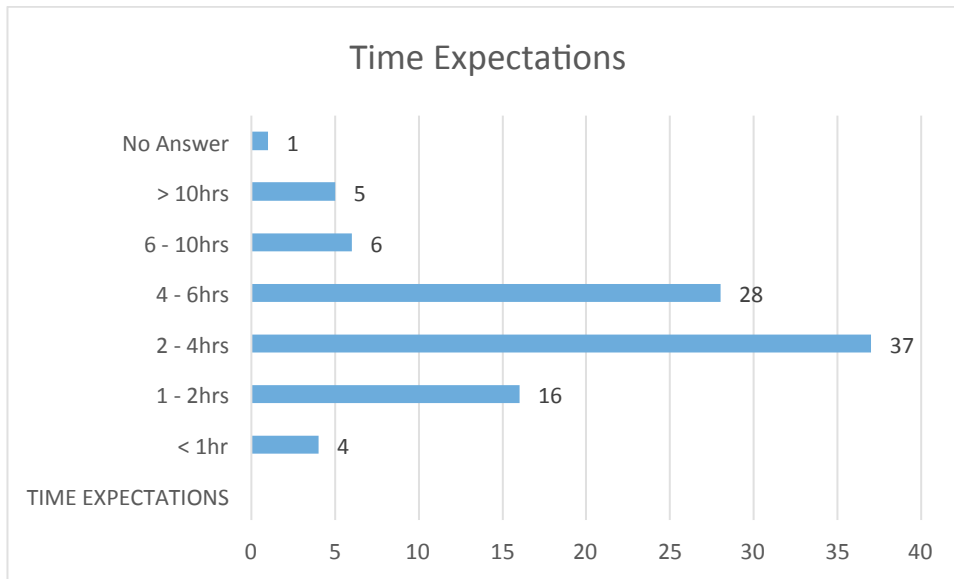


Figure 6

## 8 EVALUATION

About 280 students were enrolled at the start (as said, by the end it were 416!). On average, more than 100 were active throughout the course. Only 18 students completed the end-of-course survey. Thirteen applied for the Certificate of Accomplishment, 22 went for the credits at their home university. The 18 respondents to the survey were generally satisfied, but of course this is in no way a basis to evaluate the experience of the more than 400 enrolled students. In a next run of the course, more specific attempts will be made to get input from a larger group of participants.

Those who sat out the course until the bitter end and participated in the end-of-course survey seemed quite undeterred by the heavy workload (Figure 7). The course got a good rating, but of course this is only a rating given at the end of the course by a small sample of the total attendants (18 out of 416 enrolled students) (Figure 8).

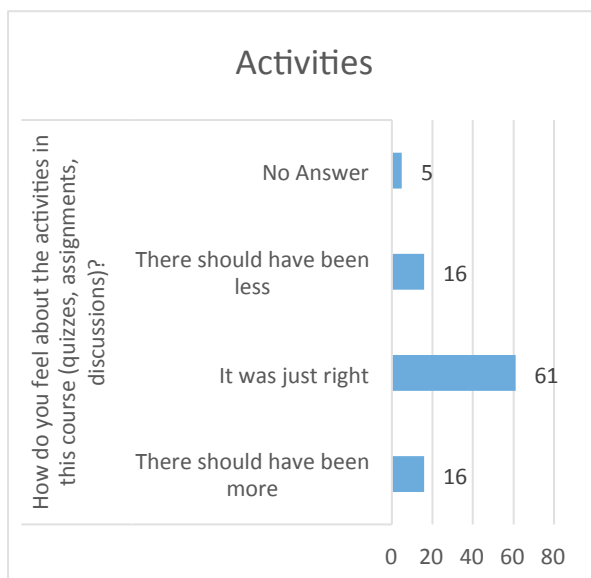


Figure 7

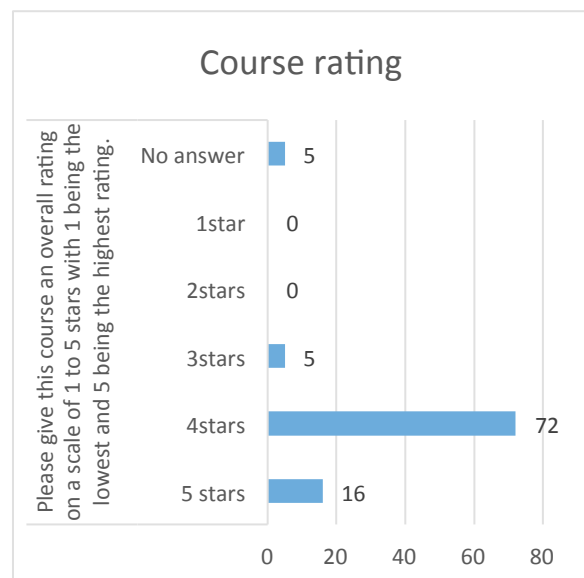


Figure 8

Students were also happy with the instructor involvement (Figure 9) and the content (Figure 10). They also are willing to take a follow-on course from the same professors (Figure 11) and seemed to have not too many problems with the course length (Figure 12)



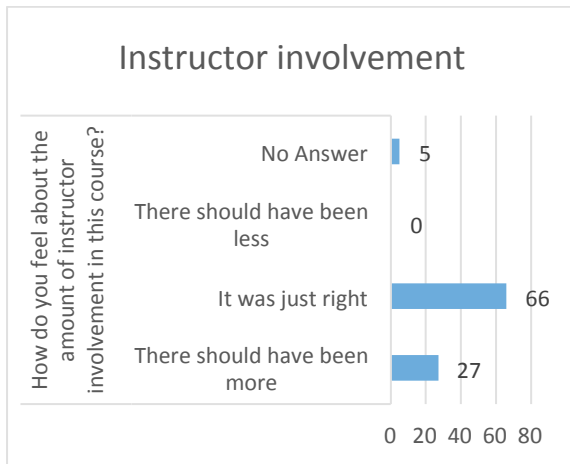


Figure 9

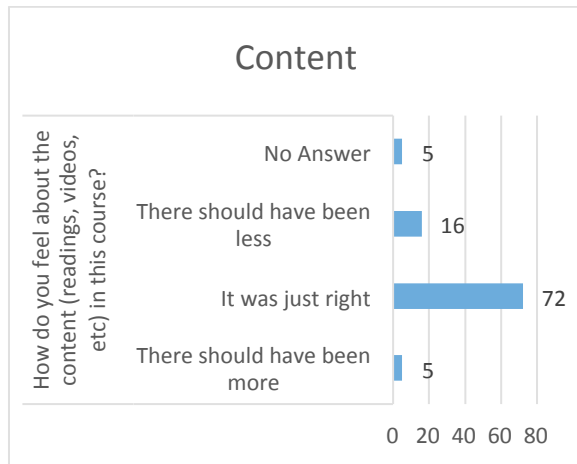


Figure 10

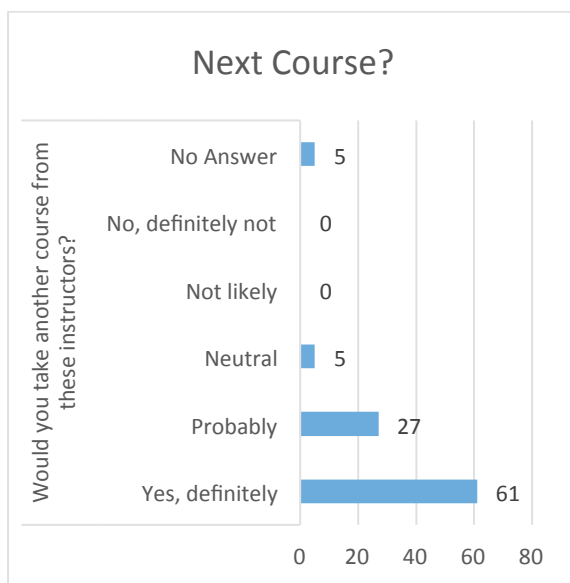


Figure 11

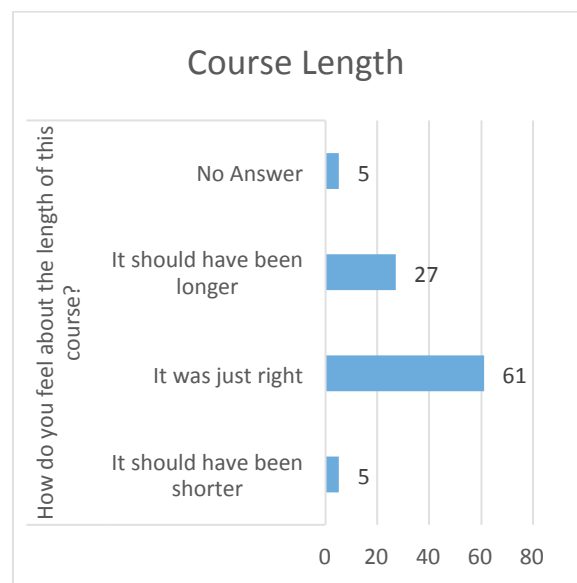


Figure 12

## 9 CONCLUSION

Even though the total number of students in this MOOC was small (416 enrolled students by the end of the course), it allowed us to attract considerably more students than we had during the years we ran the course as a closed online Moodle course with students from the 7 participating universities. Moreover, the MOOC students had the right profile, certainly in regards to their education level. Participation in the discussion forums, an important activity from a pedagogical point of view, was of a demonstrably higher quality than in the non-MOOC iterations of the course. It also appeared that we found student communities that were sufficiently acquainted with the highly specialized literature we are teaching.

Fears that the MOOC format would force a recalibration of the materials to a broader level were unsubstantiated, and also the dropout issue was not decisive since we still ended up with a higher number of qualified students than we had in our network before.

We also made contacts with PhD candidates from regions such as Latin America and Central Europe where we want to further expand our research and teaching network.

All in all, we evaluate this experience as very positive, and the LACE consortium has decided to enter an Erasmus+ bid to build 4 follow-on MOOCs.

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