

For Immediate Release



AUB tests the waters of open online learning and digital degrees with pilot courses

Beirut, Lebanon - 09/10/2014 - Always striving to be at the forefront of innovation in education and progress, AUB has launched its own Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) starting with the 2014 fall semester.

MOOCs, with unlimited participation and open access via the web, offer the optimal solution to education seekers living in regions plagued by war, political and security instability or with socio-economic hardships.

“Our aim is to propose courses that are relevant to the region and that can benefit from AUB faculty members’ unique expertise,” said AUB Provost Ahmad Dallal. “We chose ‘Citizenship in the Arab World’ and ‘Business Communication’ to attract a wide audience, and these topics are not offered by other American-run MOOCs.”

Already, a pilot MOOC course was offered in the summer and with the upcoming fall course AUB will be able to gauge and assess the experience and decide whether to expand the program and include courses from other faculties.

“We believe there is a great desire for learning across the Arab world particularly by those excluded from routes into higher education due to their particular circumstances,” said Dina Kiwan, AUB associate professor of sociology and an expert on citizenship studies. “Personal and family conditions, political turmoil, wars, social and economic factors all constitute major hurdles barring such potential learners from gaining the knowledge they desire.”

The typical system of higher education, with its formula of lecturing and examining, hasn’t changed much for the past century but now seems in a predicament that is forcing educators to rethink the whole system. One aspect is the ever rising costs of institutions, following hefty investments in technology and increasing teacher salaries and administrative budgets.

Concurrently, the technological revolution that has already challenged numerous business models is now testing higher education. The sharp spike in online learning, with much of it being free, has put knowledge, previously limited to a privileged few, within the easy grasp of anyone with a laptop or smartphone. In addition, workers in all fields now require constant retraining to keep up with the times, a far cry from keeping education accessible to a limited elite.

According to Kiwan, her Citizenship in the Arab World course was released in the first batch of MOOCs, starting on June 9, 2014 and ran for eight weeks. With no prerequisites for the course, anyone in the Arab World or the world interested in learning more about this subject could do so in an interdisciplinary and international perspective.

The move was the result of an agreement between The Queen Rania Foundation of Jordan, represented by Edraak, and AUB to launch online courses using Edraak's MOOCs platform. The agreement allowed AUB to provide the instructors and design the course, with Edraak providing the suitable MOOC platform, enabling the "revolution" of higher education in the Arab World.

"To date there are around 6,000 learners registered for the course following a large scale marketing campaign launched by Edraak all over the Arab World," said Kiwan. "Currently the MOOCs are considered standalone courses and participants will only receive a certificate upon their completion."

You can imagine that the number of students registering for one MOOC course (6000) almost matches the entire AUB undergraduate student body (around 6500 students)

"The fall semester MOOC course will be on Business Communication, developing workplace related communication skills with special focus on global and local contexts," said Zane Sinno, coordinator for the communications skills program at the AUB English Department. "The course sets the foundations for business communication by concentrating on the basic components of workplace communication, business style and tone, business etiquette and netiquette, audiences and formats of business messages, different types of business messages and reports."

Sinno decided to give a MOOC course because she believes it is an opportunity to contribute to the regional community, cultivate skills invaluable to understanding and keeping up with the educational trends, become more familiar with the different types of students in the Arab world and contribute to putting AUB on the MOOC radar.

"I appreciate AUB's support in this endeavor, as well as my department and program," said Sinno who is expecting anywhere between 2,000 to 3,000 registered students when the course starts on October 8, 2014. "It has been a major gratifying, frustrating, and challenging learning experience since the infrastructure for the platform is a work in progress. The amount of work required for setting up the course has been daunting at times but I am sure it will all prove worthwhile."

The very first MOOC was an online computing course launched in Canada in 2008 but it took another four years for the excitement to really kick off and the concept generalized, prompting 2012 to be dubbed the "year of the MOOC." Prestigious universities like Harvard, MIT and Stanford got on the bandwagon and launched their own MOOCs which have provided courses to 12 million individuals up to date.

Despite all their hype and potential, MOOCs have yet to unleash the proverbial storm. According to a recent *Economist* article on the subject, most universities and employers still consider MOOCs as a form of "supplement," and not a replacement, to traditional education and degrees. Many high caliber universities, like Oxford and Cambridge, have snubbed the new platforms.

Digital and web-based courses that conduct tests online or via tablet apps have some major advantages over the current traditional models. The low startup costs, in addition to powerful economies of scale, will see online courses effectively and radically not only lower the high tuition fees but offer the leisure of learning at one's own pace and convenience, a major plus in a world gripped with hectic schedules. With a relatively low creation cost of around \$70,000, a course can be offered cheaply or even be offered for free.

“There is an urgent need for our region to develop its capacities for learners’ needs and open the routes to higher education and vocational training by developing an accessible flexible system and approach for lifelong learning,” concluded Kiwan. “I believe that AUB is uniquely placed to be highly competitive in the MOOC context given its academic standing and reputation, not only in the region but in the world as well.”

So far, the current MOOC providers have done their best to pull in new students by using various marketing techniques, such as displaying graduates’ testimonials and especially highlighting the fact that it was the MOOCs that were the edge that got them a job. The fact that there are no guarantees that any online work will be accepted in the form of credits for any given degree, keep many potential students on the fence, waiting to see how things will unfold before committing their time and money.

ENDS

For more information please contact:

Maha Al-Azar, Director of News and Information, ma110@aub.edu.lb,
01-75 96 85

**Note to Editors
About AUB**

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 700 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420 bed hospital.

Stay up to date on AUB news and events. Follow us on:

Website: www.aub.edu.lb
Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/aub.edu.lb>
Twitter: http://twitter.com/AUB_Lebanon