

Tips for large online courses

Lessons learnt at Bristol and elsewhere

Developing an idea

Start with the learners. Who are they? What is their motivation (intrinsic and/or extrinsic)? How does the course fit into their lives? What is their journey through the course?

Make sure your team has a shared understanding of what you and others involved are trying to achieve by providing the course. What would success look like? Would it look different to different people?

Look at what other people have done. It can be tempting to fall into familiar patterns of course design. Enrol on some MOOCs to look around. Engage if you can. We've selected some examples to get you started (see "Ideas for large online courses").

Planning your course

Keep thinking from the learner's' point-of-view. What is their journey through the course? What are they doing at each stage?

Learners often feel a personal connection with the lead educators. Who will be the face of your course? Will it be one member of staff or a team? Do you need to plan for people leaving the university?

Don't assume you have to use video for everything. Use video where it really does add something. Learners might well prefer text over a very straight-forward lecture-style presentation (even a short one).

Video doesn't necessarily need high production values. Low-cost DIY approaches to creating video, such as filming on a phone, can be very effective, so long as you have good audio quality.

Learners need support and encouragement to engage. How will students who are less confident (socially, academically, technologically) be supported? Prompt the kinds of activity you want to see, rather than assuming they will happen. Provide clear aims and instructions. Incorporate orienting activities naturalistically within the course. So you might make sure they are encouraged to post, reply, and follow during the first week.

Set clear expectations from the start. As a student, how will I know if my engagement with the course has been a success? What should I hope to achieve? Don't over-promise - it's ok if the course isn't life-changing for everyone.



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Ideas for large online courses

Pedagogies that scale, alternative approaches, opportunities

Crowdsourcing

Large courses can provide a fantastic opportunity to hear from a wide range of learners, not just the course team. Allow students to contribute their ideas, and make mistakes safely. You could create videos where the course team reflect on this week's comments, and augment your course materials based on learner feedback.

Finishing with presentations or a competition

An event, such as presenting projects to fellow students or even competing for a prize can be very motivating.

🔗 [Law Without Walls](#) gets students to propose solutions to real-world problems, which are then presented to a panel of judges including venture capitalists.

Assess for learning

Assessment can be a good way to encourage active engaged learning. You might: ask students to reflect at the start of an activity, provide comparison statistics so students can see how their understanding fits within the wider cohort, allow peer review and feedback, or set quizzes for self-assessment.

Face-to-face study groups

Meeting with fellow students can be a great motivator.

🔗 [Learning Circles](#) helps people set up regular public meetings to work through MOOCs with a small group of peers. Other people have used sites like [Meetup](#).

Fast-track vs group working

Some students prefer to fast-track through the material, working as individuals. Others appreciate a longer more collaborative route. And some may want to "lurk", reading but not engaging in more collaborative activities.

Contributing to something real

Students might contribute to a citizen science project or to a collaborative online space such as Wikipedia. If you plan to do this, make sure you look for advice for educators for the site first, such as [Wikipedia for Educators](#)

Digital and physical artefacts

Capturing data and making complex things on a small scale is becoming cheaper and easier. From image/video/audio capture on mobile phones to cheap sensors like [PocketLab](#) to [Arduino](#) and [Raspberry Pi](#) to clubs like [Bristol Hackspace](#) and events like [Bristol Mini Maker Faire](#).

Short intense courses

Making a course very short is one way to manage commitment and keep momentum.

🔗 [How to change the world](#) is a two-week challenge for UCL engineers. 700 students from different engineering disciplines are given global challenges to work on.

Students as teachers

Teaching online and coordinating distributed teams are useful skills.

🔗 Harvard Law School's [CopyrightX](#) hires current students as teaching fellows, each working with a group of 25 students.

Bring in outside expertise

Students can gain a lot from connections with professionals outside of academia.

[#phonar](#) is an internationally successful photography class (initially made available free online without the knowledge of its host university). One of its strengths is the active involvement of professional photographers.

Try before you buy

Some courses allow students to engage on a lighter level before committing.

🔗 [Innovating in Healthcare](#) from Harvard ran as a MOOC but a couple of weeks in, students had the opportunity to form project teams and apply to be on a more intensive track.

Eyes on the prize

Could you offer something for exceptional contributions to the course?

🔗 Students from Harvard's [Innovating in Healthcare](#) created video pitches for their business ideas. These were voted on by fellow students, with the winners receiving video consultations on their ideas with the lead academic.