



MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

France in the News

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France is developing its MOOCs

With its strong university tradition, France has begun developing Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which make the excellence of French higher education freely available to all.

Mohammed is raring to go! With nothing more than an Internet connection, he now has access to the best lectures from French universities. A digital native, i.e. born after the introduction of digital technologies, this young Moroccan (25) uses his smartphone or an Internet café to work on his France-based online courses. This year, he has chosen the "sustainable development" MOOC. Like all major universities around the world, the leading French figures in higher education are developing more and more educational tools linked to digital education. It is a quiet revolution for France, where the earliest universities date back to the Middle Ages.



Last January, the French Minister of National Education, Higher Education and Research launched the *France université numérique* (FUN) (France Digital University) platform to group together and structure the various initiatives which have already been put in place and to allow French MOOCs to be accessed more easily and efficiently. They are known as 'Massive' because they can accommodate an unlimited number of participants. They are open to anyone with an Internet connection, regardless of age, nationality, or level of education.

All classes, homework, documents and tests are available online. Finally, it is not just a catalogue of information, but properly structured courses with an educational progression developed and supervised by lecturers.

From the start of this initiative, one thing has been clear: new technologies have made a huge impact on social behaviours and learning methods. For members of the famous "Generation Y", born after the digital revolution, the network is more than a working tool - it is a way of life and thus naturally a channel for intellectual development. Exchanging opinions across borders and comparing points of view is no longer a dream but a daily occurrence which is just a few clicks away. Despite their illustrious history (debates were already taking place in the Sorbonne back when Christopher Columbus discovered America), French higher education institutions were quick to realize the importance of this new arena for knowledge sharing.



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FUN, the French network

MOOCs, which were launched in 2011, include videos, texts, online interaction with lecturers, tutoring, and exchanges with other students via discussion forums, self-assessments and certifications. Some have up to 160,000 students from around the world, who otherwise could in no way have had access to French higher education. The FUN platform now groups together major domains such as a virtual university with several departments: environment, management, digital and technology, legal, international relations, health, science, human and social sciences. There are currently over 30 different MOOCs available on the French platform. Social networks are also channels for education via Twitter and Facebook. Relations and exchanges thus take place equally via the class platform and social networks.

A fresh approach to education

While universities throughout the world have chosen to charge for their courses, French MOOCs are completely free of charge, faithful to the principle of education for all. Dozens of prestigious institutions like the *Conservatoire national des Arts et métiers* [National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts] (CNAM), *Sciences Po* [Paris Institute of Political Studies], *l'Ecole centrale* (graduate school of engineering), *l'Ecole polytechnique* (polytechnic school of engineering) and other institutions of excellence are easily accessible (<https://www.france-universite-numerique-mooc.fr/> (in French)). Each MOOC begins on a set date but it is possible to register late and catch up on the classes missed.

Most of the courses are in French, although some are available in German or English. Many people register for courses, but after a few weeks there is a high dropout rate and only 20 to 30% of people finish their chosen course. But the designers believe that this rate is quite normal, as the free tuition attracts more people than it deters and the only rules and obligations are ultimately those which the users set themselves. There is no doubt that much motivation is required to work on the lessons week after week.

The users come from a wide array of backgrounds: secondary school students, retired people, employees, jobseekers, etc. Some sign up out of pure curiosity, others to gain new professional skills. Naturally, special attention has been paid to the educational approach and students must also review their objectives. Each completed MOOC is recognized not by a qualification but through certification. Professional or social recognition is not the only goal - it is in fact an innovative way to learn, not like in the past, which was a hierarchical and linear process, but more like a process of collective intelligence, where knowledge, through the Internet, is accessible to anyone, anywhere in the world. While today's students undeniably have an infinite amount of information at their fingertips, the MOOC structures and organizes the learning process by comparing it to the thoughts and opinions of others. In this global theatre, there are many enriching and original discussions enabling each user to embark on a journey of knowledge.

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NB: The claims and opinions contained in this article, which aims to provide information on contemporary France, have no official value.