Online learning for all

Last year, Simon Doherty, president of the North of Ireland Veterinary Association and the BVA’s NI Branch, completed a number of MOOCs (massive open online courses) having read about them in Vet Record Careers; here, he describes his experiences.

Becoming a veterinary surgeon was a lifelong ambition for me, despite the fact that a lot of my family are teachers. However, I must have inherited some of the genes coding for an interest in education! On reading a short article on MOOCs in Vet Record Careers (VR, March 15, 2014, vol 174, p i), I was keen to experience what they might offer veterinary surgeons seeking alternative delivery of CPD in line with RCVS requirements.

Over the past year, I have completed a number of courses through the two main portals currently available in the UK – Coursera and FutureLearn. None of these courses was designed specifically for veterinary surgeons – in fact, MOOCs are often purposely open in nature, to be of interest to a wide public audience. With a professional interest in progressive, integrated livestock production, the courses I undertook were generally in this genre; from supply chain integrity (Queen’s University Belfast) to livestock health management (University of Illinois) and animal behaviour and welfare (University of Edinburgh). However, MOOCs are available in subjects as diverse as fundamentals of music theory to data visualisation.

The attraction of these online short courses – usually around six weeks in duration – is that you can view the interactive, mainly video-based, course material and take the end of module quizzes at any time of the day or night. Some of the courses had additional coursework, which was submitted through the portal and marked by other course participants. Another aspect of active participation in the MOOC courses is the provision of a discussion forum for each module, where delegates share experience, knowledge and links.

Most of the courses could be completed with two to three hours activity each week, although several were more involved, with six to eight hours activity each week. That said, the course introductions on the portal gave good indications of the commitment and how the course would be assessed. The courses are free of charge; however, in order to gain a ‘verified certificate’ (probably the best route if you are considering using the course as recognised CPD), there is an administration fee of around £30-35, but I would argue that for the courses I undertook, this was still very good value for money.

I would suggest that most of the material is pitched at undergraduate or masters level, but there are a few courses primarily targeted at school-leavers considering particular career paths; one such course that would be of interest to vets involved in mentoring veterinary school applicants is the ‘EDIVET: Do you have what it takes to be a veterinarian?’ course offered by the University of Edinburgh. As the president of one of BVA’s regional branches and a territorial division, I would not suggest that MOOCs could or should replace the face-to-face CPD offered by our veterinary associations or other commercial providers. But I would go as far as to suggest that most if not all veterinarians could and perhaps should embark on a MOOC to broaden their outlook on their CPD activities and careers.

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