MOOCs and ‘Soft Skills’
There is growing evidence to suggest that MOOCs will have an important role to play in the continuing development of the ‘soft skills’ of employees throughout their careers. According to the UK’s National Careers Service website, ‘We often read news stories about how employers feel that applicants who’ve left school, college or university lack the ‘soft skills’ they want […] These skills are transferable skills, so they can be used in many different types of jobs. They are personal qualities and attitudes that can help you to work well with others and make a positive contribution to organisations you work for.’

Currently, with upward of 70% of MOOC students already educated to degree level, the motivations and aspirations of the MOOC ‘unknown learner’ are broadly defined within the context of lifelong learning. Here, often highly-skilled and well educated individuals continue to feed their passion for learning through MOOCs, and in so doing, nurture their ‘soft skills’.

‘Soft Skills’ over Subject-Specific Skills
While MOOCs seem to offer the opportunity to gain subject-specific knowledge and understanding, the lack of systematic accreditation, detailed attention to questions of learning outcomes and ‘levelness’, as well as programme planning, mean that the majority of MOOCs are not designed to create subject-specialists who will go on to obtain a degree. Although the topic of a MOOC may initially attract learners who simply want to know more about a specific subject, the underlying impact of the learning experience is more readily quantified through an appreciation of the ‘soft skills’ that MOOCs can nurture. Through their connectivist pedagogies and self-directed learning, many MOOCs cultivate communication and problem-solving skills, flexibility and creativity, as the primary features of the formative learning journey. It is here that MOOCs can make a significant intervention into enhancing these often nebulous and personal characteristics of ‘soft skills’ that are highly valued by employers.

Turning ‘Soft Skills’ Hard
Data from my MOOC on Vampire Fictions suggests that subject-specific skills are ultimately less of a motivating factor for MOOC students than the acquisition of transferable ‘soft skills’. The primary motivation of the majority of students (65%) for engaging in the MOOC was non-subject-specific. The table below (figure 1) categorises the learners on Vampire Fictions into distinct types with definable motivations and the associated development of identifiable ‘soft skills’.

1 ‘What are the “soft skills” employers want?’ National Careers Service website https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/aboutus/newsarticles/Pages/Spotlight-SoftSkills.aspx
In this context, MOOCs in the Arts and Humanities more broadly – although underrepresented as a MOOC subject area (see figure 2) – can make a significant contribution to the Creative Economy by developing and solidifying ‘soft skills’. If MOOCs can be utilised in a more strategic way to enhance the ‘soft skills’ of employees, then the benefits will extend beyond the individual to their organisations and places of work. This may not be the MOOC revolution anticipated 2012-13, but it demonstrates that MOOCs – particularly within the Arts and Humanities – that look beyond subject-specific skills and develop communication and problem-solving skills while promoting creativity, will stimulate the wider application of ‘soft skills’ in the workplace with its associated economic benefits for all parties involved. At the same time, from an employer’s perspective, MOOCs that promote these skills could provide a means to quantify more effectively the intangible elements of ‘soft skills’.

Figure 2

DISTRIBUTION OF MOOCs BY SUBJECT

‘European MOOCs Scoreboard’, Open Education Europa, European Commission
http://www.openeducationeuropa.eu/en/european_scoreboard_moocs

About the Author
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