

Policy briefing



October 2013, Ref: DG101¹

The rise of online learning is shaking up the sector

The pace of technological change has been, and continues to be, rapid. This is already having a profound impact on teaching and learning. For example, to what extent do students need to remember hard evidence when so much of it is available at the touch of a button? And does this matter? Evidence suggests that despite being digitally native, younger students are no more literate in online academia than they were in the past, when they attended lectures in person. So how do universities engage with digital technologies in a way that harnesses growing student enthusiasm for Googling?

Online learning vs MOOCs

There has been a lot of hype around MOOCs in recent years and as a result they are increasingly being used to describe all large-scale online learning. However, there are important differences between MOOCs and more traditional online learning. MOOCs have so far been operating from a separate platform with 'star' lecturers used to entice participants (David Attenborough is a voice on one of the FutureLearn MOOCs, for example). Most MOOC courses are unaccredited and each platform has its own quality assurance procedures. They have gained prominence through their ability to reach thousands of students at very low cost (from £0-£100 depending on the course and whether it includes accreditation). Other types of online learning continue to develop alongside them.² These courses, in contrast, have been managed by individual institutions perhaps working in partnership with other institutions or employers, offer accredited learning in line with more traditional campus-based courses and comply with strict quality codes based on QAA guidance.

Discover more

Our [university vision](#) project looked at the impact technology could have on the higher education sector by 2025. We looked at how students who are globally networked online can access expertise and resources from institutions and individuals all over the world to enrich their learning experience.

- ❖ In 2012 there were approximately 2.4 billion internet users in the world, 566% more in 2012 than in 2000
- ❖ Every month YouTube gets 800 million unique visitors: In 2011 YouTube reached 1 trillion video views – equivalent to 140 views per person on earth
- ❖ And more people now have access to a mobile phone than have access to a working toilet: of the world's estimated 7 billion people, 6 billion have access to mobile phones when only 4.5 billion have access to toilets.
- ❖ By 2030 it is estimated that 75% of the global workforce will be Digital Natives.*

¹ Special thanks to Neil Witt, Professor of Technology Enhanced Learning and Andy Phippen, Professor of Social Responsibility in IT at Plymouth University for their valuable insight.

² Neil Witt, MOOC Briefing Paper, May 2013.

* Jeanne Meister, 'Three reasons you need to adopt a millennial mindset regardless of your age', Forbes, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeannemeister/2012/10/05/millennialmindse/>, May 2012.

Given that the explosion of MOOCs is a recent phenomenon, completion rates are difficult to verify but research suggests that their record has so far been poor – the average is less than 10%.³ This is compared to more traditional online learning which the Open University (OU) estimates results in 40% completion rates. There have also been high profile MOOC failures. For example, the Coursera course which offered to teach academics how to teach online but which fell apart when the course leader attempted to break 41,000 students down into discussion groups using a Google spreadsheet which could only handle 50 students viewing the spreadsheet at any one time.

MOOCs are certainly shaking up the traditional learning experience but it is not clear that MOOCs will replace it. The sector is still undecided about whether MOOCs are the ‘Napster moment’ for HE and the end of the university as a physical institution, a solution to skills shortages and widening participation, or simply a marketing tool for universities to reach out to more students in an increasingly competitive global HE market place.

So far there has been little research on the relationship between social media and student engagement but there is some evidence that technology use can drive engagement.⁴ One thing is certain though, digital literacy will be essential in the jobs of the future, with 90% of new jobs requiring strong digital skills.⁵



The response of universities

Different HEIs have approached digital technologies in learning and teaching with varying degrees of engagement. Many have been cautious, focusing on improving the digital literacy of staff and students while watching to see what others in the sector are doing. Others are being more bold, implementing institution-wide online policy, making every course and staff member sign up to a minimum standard of online offering.

Alliance universities have approached the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning with a focus on sustainability of resources and strategic mission, anxious to expand access without

³ ‘The most thorough summary (to date) of MOOC completion rates’, e-Literate, <http://mfeldstein.com/the-most-thorough-summary-to-date-of-mooc-completion-rates/>, Feb 2013, and Chris Parr, ‘Mooc completion rates below 7%’, THE, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/mooc-completion-rates-below-7/2003710.article>, May 2013.

⁴ See King S.O. & Robinson C.L. (2009) ‘Pretty lights’ and Maths! Increasing student engagement and enhancing learning through the use of electronic voting systems, *Computers & Education*, 53, 189–199 and Annetta L.A., Minogue J., Holmes S.Y. & Cheng M.T. (2009) Investigating the impact of video games on high school students’ engagement and learning about genetics, *Computers & Education*, 53, 74–85.

⁵ JISC, Developing students’ digital literacy, <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/developing-students-digital-literacy>, May 2013.

compromising quality:

- The vast majority of Alliance universities have committed to minimum online standards for all courses including at least some elements of enriched engagement through the university's virtual learning environment. This has so far been focused on those students on placements, offering them the opportunity to seek help or advice and to give them a space to feed back about their experiences while they are off-campus.
- Most Alliance universities consider their strengths on campus to be their most valuable asset and so are working to harness the online environment to enrich and support on-campus teaching and learning rather than replace it.
- This means Alliance universities are focusing on flipped learning (to a greater or lesser extent), in line with research on digital pedagogy.⁶
- Across Alliance universities, flipped learning is being explored across a wide range of disciplines from design to science-based subjects.
- Alliance universities are using flipped learning to enhance the student experience, particularly to develop resilience and those skills that employers value.
- They are using technology to enhance the student experience and to make learning interactive and engaging to the broadest range of people possible (following the strong widening participation agenda of our institutions), by ensuring their academics can be effective facilitators for education based on active learning, self-organisation, problem solving and discussion.

Conclusion

Technology is disrupting the way we communicate and learn but it also offers opportunities, to students and to universities. It offers the opportunity for greater engagement with students outside of the institution and across borders which can help to spark new ideas and provide a wider and more enriching learning experience. However, there is still very much a role for high quality face-to-face teaching. The knowledge economy still requires us to interpret, analyse and problem solve, not just be highly connected – and technology provides the platform through which to better engage students. The key thing to remember is the importance of design and infrastructure. Content should be challenging but engaging and accessible across different digital platforms if it is to effectively engage people to learn new skills and attributes.

Photo courtesy of [Mikkel Rønne](#)

For more information contact Daisy Hooper, Policy and Projects Manager at
Daisy@unialliance.ac.uk | 0207 839 2757.

⁶ See for example, 'Innovating Pedagogy 2013', The Open University.