Policy briefing

MOOCs: changing the HE landscape?

The growth of MOOCs, like that of technology more generally, has been rapid. The first major MOOC, Coursera, was launched out of Stanford University in 2011 and attracted 300,000 students to 3 courses. Two years later the platform now boasts 3.2 million student enrolments and more than 60 international partners.[1]

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.

Background

There are two types of MOOCs:

1. xMOOCs – usually used to refer to elite platforms like Coursera and Udacity in the United States and FutureLearn in the UK. They focus on extending existing academic material to the masses.
2. cMOOCs have been around for longer than xMOOCs. These are more about increasing connectivity and generating new knowledge through interactions with different learners and networks around the world.

Within these types there are also differences. For example, some allow students to start a course at any time while others have set start dates throughout the year, and some have an online teaching model similar to traditional lectures (Coursera) whereas others offer a more interactive experience (Udacity).

As with most things there are positives and negatives associated with MOOCs[2]:

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[1] Neil Witt, MOOC Briefing Paper, May 2013.

[2] MoocGuide, Wikispaces, http://moocguide.wikispaces.com/2.+Benefits+and+challenges+of+a+MOOC and Li Yuan and Stephen Powell (2013), MOOCs and Open Education: Implications for Higher Education, JISC CETIS, http://publications.cetis.ac.uk/2013/667, compiled by N. Witt, May 2013.

Benefits

- MOOCs are accessible: they can be organised in any setting as long as there is WIFI connectivity and they can be easily translated into different languages.
- The tools course leaders use to run a MOOC can be easily adapted for different contexts.
- MOOCs are quick to arrange (using existing academic and teaching material) and easy to add context for different students at different times or in different locations.
- MOOCs offer more informal learning, that can fit around other demands on student time.
- They make it easy to cut across disciplines and business or institutional walls.
- Previous academic qualifications are not a pre-requisite for participants so MOOCs widen access.
- MOOCs make it easy to build additional skills, reflect on personal learning and contribute to lifelong learning.

Challenges

- While no formal qualifications are needed MOOCs do require participants to be digitally literate and be confident using technology for learning
- They still require time and effort from participants
- Participants need to be disciplined and able to motivate themselves to complete the course
- There remain unresolved concerns about the 'territorial' nature of MOOCs with little discussion to date around:
  - who enrols in or completes courses;
  - the implications of courses scaling across country borders, and potential difficulties with relevance and knowledge transfer;
  - the need for territory-specific study of locally relevant issues and needs.
- If a MOOC is used as an institutional shop window the students may expect a similar online learning experience when enrolling onto a non-MOOC institutional programme.

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance of online course content is something that universities are very concerned about. Research shows there has been no one, universally adopted model, with different online provision employing different approaches. For example, some platforms require all courses to be quality reviewed before they are posted online (edX), while others allow some un-reviewed course content to go live but reserve the right to remove it if it does not meet quality standards (Coursera). Though there is still some flexibility. edX, for example, allows some courses to be available under the classification 'Edge courses' until they are certified. UK universities can follow the QAA's code of practice and plan the structure and assessment of any online offer in accordance with QAA indicators.

Impact

The impact of MOOCs is disputed. Even Sebastien Thrun (founder of Udacity) has admitted that a 10% completion rate from a cohort that mostly holds an existing HE degree is not exactly revolutionising HE. And even where traditional universities have recognised MOOC development and tried to bring the learning you can gain through MOOCs into the more formal learning environment, there has been minimal take up. For example, Colorado State University became the first HEI to offer credit to students who passed a MOOC (in computer science through Udacity) –

$89 instead of $10,500 from the university – but after one year there are still no takers (as of July 2013).[3]

MOOCs seem, therefore, to be much more about publicising the effectiveness and profile of existing courses and institutions. There has been a lot of publicity surrounding MOOCs but evidence of their impact on teaching and learning is thin, given academic journal lead times and the fact that MOOC providers with a commercial offer are reluctant to share information as they try to insulate investors from criticism.

Domestic vs. International

The internationalisation of online HE is also increasing rapidly. For example, from February 2012 to March 2013 Coursera registered 2.8 million learners from all over the world.[4] To date there is minimal market intelligence on the demand for, or provision of online for domestic vs. international students but participation in Coursera and Udacity is concentrated in North America, Europe and Asia.

There is some evidence that countries are moving towards wanting to access course content in-country or online, rather than come to the UK to study as a result of uncertainties over visas and government messaging but also cost. China, for example, has said that it will not approve more UK campuses in China. However, there continues to be high demand for UK educational expertise particularly around developing well-rounded graduates with the softer skills that employers are increasingly demanding.

There is also very little research in terms of the impact open education has to drive enrolments for paid-for study. Which will impact on the sustainability of MOOCs. MOOC providers are commercial offerings and so are keeping their statistics close but the OU cites a conversion rate of up to 10% and consider their OpenLearn initiative as the most effective way to convert enquiries into registrations. It is not surprising, therefore, that many institutions have chosen to share a MOOC platform, enabling them to achieve economies of scale since MOOCs require significant investment. The cost of a MOOC is difficult to estimate but suggestions are that it could be around $50K (US) per MOOC plus development and running costs.[5]

Conclusion

It is not entirely clear how many of the different platforms are to achieve their aims of 'a future where everyone has access to a world-class education' (Coursera), presenting 'the best of higher education online… to anyone who wants to achieve, thrive and grow' (edX) and 'to bring accessible, affordable, engaging and highly effective higher education to the world' (Udacity). In the UK, FutureLearn talks about providing 'high quality online courses' but so far has only launched 20 pilot courses.

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[3] 'A University's Offer of Credit for a MOOC Gets No Takers', http://chronicle.com/article/A-Universitys-Offer-of-Credit/140131/, July 2013.
[4] 'Massive Open Online Courses, aka MOOCs, Transform Higher Education and Science', Scientific American, http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=massive-open-online-courses-transform-higher-education-and-science, March 2013.
[5] Neil Witt, MOOC Briefing Paper, May 2013.

In the UK's HE sector there have been varying responses to MOOCs. Oxford and Cambridge have chosen to stay out of them for the time being, preferring to focus on their tutorial model. Some institutions are ploughing ahead, like the consortium involved in FutureLearn, though what the fuller offering will look like and deliver is still unclear; currently courses target undergraduate levels and are unaccredited.

It will be interesting to see how institutions' campus-based offer translates to students learning in the online space. The economy of the future requires not just knowledge but the ability to interpret, problem solve and communicate new knowledge to diverse audiences. This means universities will have to continue to work hard to strengthen the added value they give to graduates, but there is still deep scepticism as to whether this can be achieved through online education alone.

Overseas Models

Everyone is aware of the US models – Coursera, Udacity and edX – and the current UK government is very keen on the FutureLearn model from the OU. But there are also other MOOC models around the world. Here we highlight Australia and Germany, countries doing interesting things in this space.

Australia

Australia has a similar model to the UK's FutureLearn in that the main platform, Open2Study, has its origins in a long history of distance learning. This MOOC is offered by Open Universities Australia (OUA), an organisation established in 1993 owned by 7 Australian Universities and representing a consortium of Australian universities and colleges. The organisation also has partnerships with several Australian public and private companies including the National Australia Bank and AFL Players Association.

Most students are based in Australia but courses are available to the rest of the world. Undergraduate courses offered have no first year entry requirements, and there are no quotas for most courses, hence the 'open' aspect.

Open2Study has been praised for recording a completion rate of more than 25%, much better than the rate recorded by big US MOOCs (at around 10%). Its success has been attributed to the fact it is based on OpenLearning: an online learning platform developed in Australia which provides features for group work, automated marking, collaboration and gamification.[1] It offers basic introduction courses to ease students into courses, it has no weekly deadlines meaning it can be truly flexible to different student needs and its online features are considered to be user friendly. Open2Study currently has 32 free subjects available online and hopes to add new courses every month. It expects to have at least 40 to 50 free subjects available by the end of 2013.

Separately to OUA, some Australian universities have begun to offer assessment of their online courses for a fee. For example, Deakin University has begun charging $495 (AUS) for coursework to be assessed and credited towards PG qualification and La Trobe university has offered students the option to have their first year course work assessed for $816 (AUS).

[1] 'An Element of Fun: A First Look at the Open2Study MOOC Platform', Mooc News and Reviews, http://moocnewsandreviews.com/an-element-of-fun-a-first-look-at-gamification-elements-on-open2study/, 12 June 2013.

Germany

Germany has several smaller cMOOCs with limited courses generally in IT and science-based subjects with most available in German and English:

- The largest is **OpenHPI** which has offered free MOOCs since September 2012 in English and German. OpenHPI has a focus on information technology (since HPI is a computer science institute) and has links to Potsdam University.

- **OpenCourseWorld** is another platform that works with a number of German universities. It currently only offers three courses in German.

- **Leuphana** public university has launched the Leuphana Digital School which currently only has one course in English. It charges a €20 fee to issue a certificate of completion.

- A new company (established in 2011) is **Iversity** which has partnered with 81 colleges and universities and aims to become Europe's leading provider of MOOCs. Iversity launched its first courses in October 2013 with over 100,000 students initially registered. They cover a variety of disciplines from Design and Storytelling to Entrepreneurship, Law and Finance.

European Union

In competition with Iversity, the **EU** launched the first pan-European MOOC in April 2013 with the support of the European Commission and 11 partner countries. The initiative is led by the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities with partners based in 11 countries (France, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, UK, Russia, Turkey and Israel). 40 courses will be offered for free and covering a wide variety of subjects in 12 different languages (11 partner languages plus Arabic).

Courses will involve anywhere from 20 to 200 hours of study and all courses will offer the opportunity for accreditation either through a completion certificate, badge or credit certificate that could count towards a degree. In this last case students pay anything from €25 to €400 for the certificate, depending on the course size (the hours of study involved) and institution.

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