

Introduction

Massive open online courses, or MOOCs as they are now commonly known, have become media buzzwords in recent years, attracting both positive and critical coverage in the mainstream press across the world, as well as many thousands of online articles, discussions, and tweets. With the arrival of MOOCs, educational technology, and its role in the future of higher education, has crossed over from the purview of academics, parents, and students to be topics that engage the public. Everyone seems to have an opinion about MOOCs and whether they hold fantastic promise for the future of higher education and are likely to open up higher education qualifications to many millions of people at low or marginal cost, or whether they are simply the latest overhyped news story and an opportunity for elite institutions to get even more press coverage than usual.

There are elements of truth in both views, but what has become increasingly clear in recent times is that the future of MOOCs is much less predictable than we might conclude from some of the press coverage. No one can say at this point whether MOOCs will fulfill the promised change to the higher education system or whether they are an educational bubble that will burst this year, next year, or the year after. It is still too early to tell if they will succeed in the goal of some of the leading MOOC platforms, to disrupt the global higher education system. With MOOCs, the future of higher education has become as difficult to predict—and vulnerable to fast-growing, disruptive newcomers—as any other industry. Higher education has for the first time become an Internet commodity and open to the same pressures that we have seen affect the music and publishing industries—and with outcomes that are just as unpredictable.

What is equally notable about this trend in technological and educational innovation is the speed at which MOOCs have been accepted by the general public as part of the educational landscape. Many universities have barely had time to understand the main MOOC systems and their early business models, and to begin to plan their own response, before other new providers are emerging and a whole range of different MOOC and business models are being discussed. One of the biggest challenges for all involved in MOOCs, including the big MOOC platforms, is to move forward at an appropriate rate of change—to keep moving fast enough to maintain momentum, but not so fast that many possible participants are left behind.

The momentum has not slowed down and whatever the commentators may believe, for the millions of MOOC students who are voting with their keyboards, MOOCs are just another part of the Internet phenomenon. Increasingly, Internet services are free, as is much of the content; online users are familiar with casually signing up to the wealth of new services, using them for a time, and then embracing the next new trend as it

appears. For this type of consumer, who increasingly represents the mainstream and not just the technical expert or early adopter of technology, why should education be any different to free services such as YouTube or the BBC Web site? The “freemium” model, where most content is provided for free and other services are offered for a charge, is prevalent for online media sites such as newspapers. Consumers increasingly expect rapid change in online services, with new products and services appearing regularly, and new features and added value to those services that they already use. And they expect to be able to sample many of these services for free, at least initially, with the option to purchase ‘added value’ at a cost.

The more disruptive challenge to the majority of higher education institutions, which at times are like rabbits caught in the headlights of MOOCs is feeling that they need to respond to the challenge of online education, and not be “left behind” their peers, but not knowing how to react or what approach to adopt if they do decide to invest in MOOCs.

This book examines MOOC developments to date, and focuses in particular upon how a range of different universities have responded in practical terms to this phenomenon. It draws out some of the main issues that need to be considered when a university or college decides whether to engage with MOOCs or not, and gives guidance on how to respond to MOOCs now and in the future. The information in the book is based upon interviews with over 20 universities across the globe, and looks at the full range of related issues including governance and decision-making, quality assurance, costing and business models, as well as the options of working with an external MOOC platform or choosing to take an independent approach.

It is recognized that MOOCs are just part of a long-term trend toward using technology in higher education, and the recommendations are rooted in the context of the ongoing disruption that we are seeing in higher education globally, and the need for universities and colleges to plan a coherent strategy for how they map their way through it. Online technologies are only one part of this context, but a part that has the potential to support positive, planned change as well as to undermine and disrupt current models.

Why do MOOCs matter?

The higher education industry has had “an anomalously long run of disruption-free growth ... (where) fundamental change has been unnecessary” (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Even when faced with the truly disruptive potential of online technology, the university sector has failed to change. As George Siemens says: “To date, higher education has largely failed to learn the lessons of participatory culture, distributed and fragmented value systems and networked learning. MOOCs have forced a serious assessment of the idea of a university and how education should be related to and supportive of the society in which it exists” (Siemens, 2014).

Part of the problem is that despite its current trials and tribulations, demand for higher education has continued to exceed supply, the elite have been able to continue with only a little cost-cutting, and many institutions have been able to weather the storm of reduced public investment and higher levels of scrutiny.

Things are now beginning to change as costs have increased and competition from new entrants is also increasing. Online learning is a disruptive technology that is allowing for-profit and not-for-profit institutions—and other suppliers, such as publishers, software companies, training providers—to apply fresh thinking the higher education model, considering options such as “unbundling” (Rizvi, Donnelly, & Barber, 2013) where the higher education lifecycle might be segmented and delivered in new ways. At the same time, consumers of higher education are being much more circumspect about the “product” of a university, constantly increasing their demand to understand exactly what they are choosing and, ultimately, paying for.

MOOCs are the latest step in the development of the disruptive online learning technology continuum. Although the systems that are used in MOOCs may not be particularly new or advanced from a technical perspective—at least at this stage in their development—the scale at which they are being used, with class sizes typically in the thousands, and the large numbers of institutions that are investing significant resources and reputation in them, mean that they are having a marked impact on how we think about higher education.

That said, online learning technologies have been around for a long time and so far, many institutions have been able to resist anything more than selective dabbling with them. Some technologies, such as virtual learning environments or learning management systems, have become prevalent in the sector, but it has been a long and slow journey to reach the current point of usage, and in most institutions, the deployment is simple and fails to challenge face-to-face teaching, other than in small pockets of innovative teaching. The higher education market has proven to be remarkably resistant to the disruptive potential of online learning.

This can be partly explained by the unique position that the whole higher education sector holds when compared to other markets, as described by Clayton Christensen, the creator of the theory of disruptive innovation:

... universities are an anomaly that my original framing of disruption could not explain. ... the demise of incumbents that characterizes most industries in the late stages of disruption has rarely occurred among colleges and universities. We have had entry, but not exit

Christensen & Eyring (2011)

According to Christensen and Eyring, three characteristics of higher education have led to this situation:

- Teaching—this has been difficult to disrupt because “its human qualities could not be replicated”—but this will change in a technological environment where there is a shift from the individual teacher or institution to what the learner will learn (and how).
- Two kinds of students, some of whom want the traditional campus experience, so are difficult to disrupt—though those for whom the traditional campus-based model does not work because of the context in which they operate, may be classic disruptors.
- Alumni and funders—their strong affiliation to an institution is often based on a personal relationship and this gives “staying power unique to higher education” (Christensen & Eyring, 2011).

Some institutions may be able to continue to ride out the storm, drawing upon the strengths of their reputation and their relationships with alumni and funders. For many others, though, there are opportunities afforded by learning technologies that are now too significant to be ignored. Not only can online learning open up the institution to a global market on a previously unprecedented scale, potentially both the quantity and quality of potential students at all levels of study, but the new approaches that are afforded mean that universities can position themselves at the cutting edge of the right type of teaching and, more importantly, the learning experience. Universities can demonstrate that they are true innovators in practice and not just in theory.

This is not to say that MOOCs in their current form are perfect examples of innovative technology, nor that all MOOC ventures are successful. The short history of MOOCs to date has shown that we should not rush to make assumptions about who MOOC students are likely to be, what they most want from MOOCs, or their motivation for learning online. All the more reason, we would argue, that now is the right time for universities to commit to informed experimentation with MOOCs and other online learning approaches, in order to equip themselves for the journey of adaptation and disruption that lies ahead. Institutions should make their own decisions about how they engage with online learning, and these decisions need to be informed by their own context, strategy, and experience. Universities will best equip themselves for their future strategies by experimenting with MOOCs and other online educational tools, and learning from this about what is possible and what best suits their needs and priorities.

[Ernst and Young \(2012\)](#) provide a helpful categorization of the reasons why a university might want to engage with MOOCs:

- Defensive—to be ready if/when MOOCs (online learning) take off.
- Offensive—to become a leader in online learning.
- Marketing—to market the university, for example, to translate free access MOOC students into paying students, or to reach international students.
- Enhance existing provision—to provide blended learning for existing students, for example, to develop online components for existing courses.
- Change existing provision—to focus more teaching time on two-way learning conversations with students rather than one-way lecturing: the so-called “flipped classroom.”
- Financial—to reduce teaching costs and hence the price to students.
- Research—to explore MOOCs/online learning in practice and in greater depth and become a leader in MOOC research.

All of these possible motivations are explored through this book, which examines new research to look at why universities and colleges are engaging with MOOCs, or are not. The research undertaken reveals that in many cases, an institution will be driven by more than one of the motivating factors, and is often interested in exploring many of them at the same time. This is understandable, but can lead to a situation where there are multiple strategic drivers that are being explored at the same time, and it can be difficult for the university to identify how successful the experiment has been in achieving its objectives. For this reason, this book focuses upon institutional strategy and the need to focus clearly upon it when planning the strategy for online learning and MOOCs.

Finally, although this work focuses on MOOCs and online learning in particular, the intention is that it should be read within a context of understanding the priorities and motivation of each unique institution. The more nuanced theory of higher education that is proposed by Christensen is that online learning may be a “sustaining innovation” that will work alongside traditional campuses and face-to-face teaching to strengthen universities and colleges. Those institutions that are able to adapt to, and embrace, the new technologies will be best placed to continue with what is excellent and special about what they do already, while taking best advantage of what is new.

References

- Christensen, C., & Eyring, H. J. (2011). *The innovative university*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ernst and Young. (2012). *University of the future*. Ernst and Young, Online at [http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/University_of_the_future/\\$FILE/University_of_the_Future_2012.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/University_of_the_future/$FILE/University_of_the_Future_2012.pdf).
- Rizvi, S., Donnelly, K., & Barber, M. (2013). *An avalanche is coming. Higher education and the revolution ahead*. Institute for Public Policy Research, Online at <http://www.ippr.org/publications/an-avalanche-is-coming-higher-education-and-the-revolution-ahead>.
- Siemens, G. (2014). *The attack on our higher education system – and why we should welcome it*, Online at <http://blog.ted.com/2014/01/31/the-attack-on-our-higher-education-system-and-why-we-should-welcome-it/>.