What are MOOCs?

While traditional HEIs seek to charge high tuition fees to a controlled number of students, the ultimate aim of MOOCs is to charge hundreds of thousands of learners a minimum fee. This raises major issues for academic quality and working conditions.

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are free, open access and scalable online higher education courses. The term was coined in 2008 to describe a particular model of open online courses developed by two Canadian academics (Stephen Downes and George Siemens).

Since then MOOCs have developed in new ways. In media terms they have now come to mean bite-sized pieces of learning that last a few weeks, and which are often based around a virtual lecture by a leading academic at a research-led university. The courses are available to anyone with a computer. Enrolment is unlimited and there are no entry requirements or tuition fees.

HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT FROM CONVENTIONAL DISTANCE LEARNING COURSES?

Partly as a result of their scale (eg Coursera claimed three million registered users by March 2013) but also generally by their lack of personalised academic support and guidance for learners.

Moreover, by shifting the costs from learners to institutions, MOOCs represent a major challenge to conventional HE funding models. For example, while traditional higher education institutions (HEIs) seek to charge high tuition fees to a controlled number of students, the ultimate aim of MOOCs is to charge hundreds of thousands of learners a minimum fee (eg a $100 completion certificate or invigilation fees). This raises major issues for academic quality and working conditions.

WHO ARE THE MAJOR PLAYERS IN THE MOOC HIGHER EDUCATION UNIVERSE?

The keys ones are all US-based.

Coursera: platform founded by Stanford University, with private, for-profit funding from venture capital firms (+ equity investment from some university partners). Revenue-sharing arrangements agreed between Coursera and university partners. 69 universities involved, mainly in the USA, but also a number of overseas universities, including Edinburgh.

edX: platform founded by MIT and Harvard, a not for profit enterprise, with support from the Gates Foundation. Smaller scale than Coursera, with 12 universities involved.

Until recently the third main US player was **Udacity**. This was a stand-alone initiative, set up by a Stanford professor and Google, focusing mainly on ICT courses. It was set

The business model is a third party for-profit enterprise owned and funded by the OU. A charge for (optional) certificates and exam invigilation will form the company's primary revenue stream.

up as a for-profit enterprise supported by venture capital firms. However, in November 2013 the founder of Udacity (Sebastian Thrun) announced that it was reorienting the business away from competition with higher education towards 'corporate training'.

In addition, the US MOOCs have partnerships with Pearson VUE assessment centres.[1]

WHY IS THERE SO MUCH MEDIA INTEREST IN MOOCS?

In the words of a UUK report (p6):

'This high profile is linked to their financial backing, the range of courses that they offer, the volume of enrolments they have attracted and the profile of the institutions that they have partnered with them'.[2]

WHAT ARE THE PLANS FOR A BRITISH MOOC PLATFORM?

In December 2012, the Open University announced the creation of a new MOOC platform – FutureLearn. It involves partnerships with 21 UK universities (+ two overseas institutions), the British Library, British Museum and British Council.[3]

The business model is a third party for-profit enterprise owned and funded by the OU. A charge for (optional) certificates and exam invigilation will form the company's primary revenue stream.

The first 20 courses on FutureLearn were unveiled in September 2013 and include options in the sciences, arts, humanities and social sciences. Most of the courses are six to ten weeks long.[4]

At the moment these courses are all free, though the FutureLearn website says:

'We're also going to be piloting features that let you take exams or buy statements of accomplishment as further evidence of your new skills.'[5]

Edinburgh University and Coursera

Probably the only UK university, so far, to have run MOOCs is Edinburgh. Its six courses – run on the Coursera platform – attracted the interest of 308,000 learners. Running over five weeks, there was an average 12% completion rate on the course. The estimated costs involved were comparable with traditional taught, online courses (£30,000 per course from delivery to development). The learners were from all over the world and an overwhelming majority of them already had a degree-level qualification.[6]

WHY ARE SOME UK UNIVERSITIES LOOKING TO GET INVOLVED IN MOOCS?

MOOCs appear to offer opportunities for universities to market themselves in new ways, particularly in an era of reduced core funding, increased tuition fees and greater

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[1]'edX announces option of proctored exam testing through collaboration with Pearson VUE' http://www.pearsonvue.com/about/release/archive/12_09_06_edx.asp

[2]http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2013/MassiveOpenOnlineCourses.pdf

[3]http://futurelearn.com/partners/

[4]https://www.futurelearn.com/courses

[5]https://www.futurelearn.com/about/how-it-works

[6]http://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/1842/6683/1/Edinburgh%20MOOCs%20Report%-202013%20%231.pdf

While MOOCs are likely to remain a new way of sharing and exchanging cutting-edge knowledge with bright, self-motivated learners, large numbers of 'typical' learners, who need guidance, encouragement, and regular feedback, will still rely on the infrastructure, staffing and resources of universities and colleges to succeed.

competition. Universities are also hoping that they will boost recruitment onto fee-paying courses, particularly to distance learning courses.

Politicians also see MOOCS as an opportunity to promote the UK HE 'brand':

'Through online offerings such as Massive Open Online Courses, the UK's world-renowned academic sector can vastly improve its reach and its audience, including growing our education exports.'[7]

WILL MOOCS SPELL THE END OF TRADITIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION?

When MOOCS first burst onto the scene in 2012, a number of bold claims were made about their transformative effect on traditional HE providers. For example, Sebastian Thrun, founder of the Udacity MOOC, predicted that by 2060 there would only be 10 universities left in the world.

In 2014, boosterism has largely given way to more sober assessments about their impact on higher education.[8] While MOOCs are likely to remain a new way of sharing and exchanging cutting-edge knowledge with bright, self-motivated learners, large numbers of 'typical' learners, who need guidance, encouragement, and regular feedback, will still rely on the infrastructure, staffing and resources of universities and colleges to succeed.

For MOOCs the problem is how to generate income via licensing, certificates, awards and other additional services from what are essentially free courses. In the words of a BIS-commissioned literature review:

'The burning issues for MOOCs are the exploration of a viable business model and the accreditation of MOOC learning'.[9]

At the moment it is not yet clear whether additional revenue sources will be sufficient to cover the upfront and development costs of MOOCs (for example, a FutureLearn course costs about £30,000 to put together).

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[7] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/206944/13-901-information-economy-strategy.pdf

[8] History tells us that we should be mindful of the initial hype that is often attached to new technology. For example, in the early 2000s bold predictions were made on behalf of the new online portals, including the HEFCE-funded 'e-University'. All of them, including elite university portals such as Fathom, All-Learn and NYUonline, collapsed due to poor student enrolments and insufficient revenue.

[9] BIS research paper number 130: The Maturing of the MOOCS – literature review of Massive Open Online Courses and other forms of online distance education, September 2013: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/240193/13-1173-maturing-of-the-mooc.pdf