

Chapter 94

Realising the Potential of MOOCs in Developing Capacity for Tertiary Education Managers

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ABSTRACT

MOOCs are a recent development, with little informed consensus on the extent of their future impact on tertiary education. In this paper the authors consider one application of open online courseware, as a platform for professional development within the tertiary sector, with an agreed pathway into award programs in tertiary education management. The case presented is a recently launched ‘emerging leaders and managers program (eLAMP)’ for the Australian tertiary education sector. The pedagogical, resourcing and practical issues of designing and supporting this program are examined as a means of exploring the conceptual underpinnings of online technologies and pedagogies.

INTRODUCTION

Massive open online courses or MOOCs are a very recent development, with no clear consensus in the literature on their impact on tertiary education generally, or on the business models, staff profiles or pedagogies of universities in particular.

In Australia (and elsewhere) the tertiary sector faces several external pressures for change, including funding model changes, increasing competition and commercialisation, larger and more diverse student cohorts with increasing expectations for value and quality, growing government scrutiny and (last but not least) rapid changes in technology. In short, the current environment in which tertiary education managers’ work is so complex, fluid and ambiguous that the combination of skills, knowledge and judgment required to lead and manage effectively demands quite substantial professional development and

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training. The new legitimacy of online study, prompted by moves from world leading universities to offer MOOCs, has helped pave the way for emerging online programs, backed by scholarship and resources sourced from trusted institutions.

Much of the public debate about MOOCs focuses on their ‘disruptive’ potential in the core business of tertiary education institutions, namely formal study to attain degrees. Is low cost, mass production of elite higher learning now feasible? If so, where would this leave mainstream campus-based study, with its high fixed costs and high revenue requirements? As Lawton et al. (2013) argue, “the MOOCs debate is already polarised between boosters and sceptics but the impacts will be as real as the hype” (p. 23). Sharrock (2013) argues that for most universities MOOCs are seen as both a threat capable of reshaping the sector and an opportunity:

...Terrific for the traditional academic mission but terrifying for the traditional business model...sceptics still dismiss the “disruptive” MOOC. They say MOOCs have no sustainable business model, costing lots but earning little. They cite massive attrition rates: vast numbers enrol, but up to 95% drop out. They note that universities don’t offer degrees to students for completing a set of MOOCs; and that MOOC certificates aren’t recognised by employers the way degrees are...(2013, n.p.)

In parallel with this wider debate, over the last two years, we have been exploring the promise of large scale online professional development programs. Our interest in this is our desire to build the very management and leadership capacities necessary for the tertiary education sector to work with potentially disruptive change, such as those represented by the MOOCs phenomenon. When we began planning this project in early 2011 MOOCs were not mainstream and we were unaware of their impending impact. Yet we seem to have come to similar conclusions about possibilities for open and large scale development opportunities based on (partially) open online courseware as the key delivery mechanism. It is the telling of this story in parallel with the emergence of MOOCs more generally that is the heart of this paper, thereby providing a case to track innovative methodologies and applications in the ‘open, online’ tertiary sector conversation.

Whilst MOOCs are a recent addition to the teaching and learning discourse, Lawton et al. (2013) remind us that “online learning has been around for 20 years (distance education for 160 years at least)... MOOCs are not a radical departure in that sense” (p. 23). It is however their promise of high quality, mass scale, low cost informal learning that has set them apart from earlier forms of online or distance education and at the same time inflamed passionate debate about access, credentialing, informal versus formal learning and how to assure quality.

Meanwhile on the ground, institutional responses to the MOOC threat include enriching the campus experience, giving more systematic attention to teaching quality, and experimenting with MOOC-type courseware to enhance face to face modes of learning with ‘blended’ pedagogies using approaches such as the ‘flipped classroom’. Oremus (2013) reports on one example, so-called SPOCs, as follows:

One of those [EdX] experiments is what UC–Berkeley professor Armando Fox calls SPOCs—“small private online classes,” as opposed to massive open ones. The approach is also known...as “hybrid” or “blended learning.” The basic idea is to use MOOC-style video lectures and other online features as course materials in actual, normal-size college classes. By assigning the lectures as homework, the instructors are free to spend the actual class period answering students’ questions, gauging what they

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