

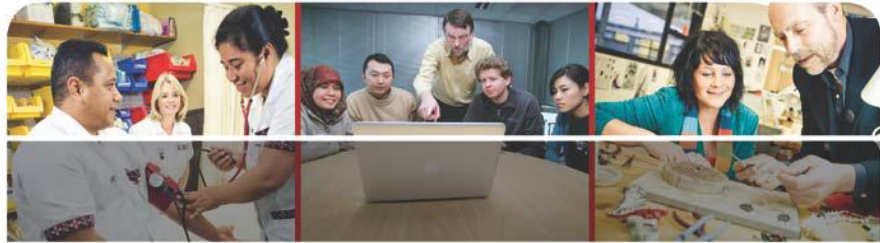


The Development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in New Zealand

(Key summary of findings)

Dr Liz Gordon, Pūkeko Research Ltd
Prof Michael A Peters, University of Waikato
Prof Tina Besley, Centre for Global Studies in Education

June 2014



The Development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in New Zealand

(Key summary of findings)

Liz Gordon
Michael A Peters
Tina Besley

Centre for Global Studies in Education
University of Waikato, Hamilton, NZ

June 2014

The Development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in New Zealand

Key summary of findings

This is a preliminary study of the development of massive open online courses (MOOCs) in the New Zealand tertiary education sector. It is a research study, involving a series of original interviews with those involved in MOOCs as staff, senior leaders and developers in universities and polytechnics, union and student leaders and several officials from government agencies who had an interest in the field. The study also includes a brief literature search and a large collection of newspaper articles and reviews.

KEY THEMES

Five key themes were identified out of the literature and interviews for further investigation:

- The potential disruption to existing models of tertiary education
- The concept of openness and open learning
- The ability of the Internet to deliver a technological revolution in learning
- The political economy of higher education, and
- Questions around teaching and learning.

MOOCS IN PERSPECTIVE

An introductory section locates the MOOCs debate in its international perspective. Over the past two years, a series of MOOC 'platforms' have been developed that group learning organisations together to organise courses. Courses tend to be entry level. There has been an explosion of course numbers, especially during 2013.

The source of the MOOC model is traced to an open learning course in 2008, which celebrated connectivism. That course, and others, is clearly identified as a cMOOC (connectivist), representing one strand of MOOCs. Practitioners in New Zealand have significant engagement with various cMOOC models.

Two New Zealand universities are engaged in international xMOOC (platform-led investment) organisations, and have begun to offer courses through those platforms.

The potential for collaboration between tertiary organisations was considered. The participants believe in the potential of MOOCs to help meet social and practical goals in tertiary education, but the way forward is not clear.

DISRUPTION

Are MOOCs disruptive of existing educational provision? The focus on MOOCs as a disruptive influence in tertiary education first examines the concept of disruption.

It is important because disruption reveals important elements about systems: both the original system and its successors. The literature posits traditional place-based learning and MOOCs as opposites, that cannot survive together, but the participants in this study do not necessarily agree with that analysis. They do, however, note significant disruptions.

Some of the literature on MOOCs has identified them as the beginning of the end of higher education. In particular, a number of reports have tended to over-claim on the transformative effects of MOOCs. The general view of participants is that the MOOC debates have stimulated discussions within tertiary organisations about what challenges the digital world brings, and what should be done. There is evidence that tertiary organisations tend to be moving quite cautiously, and especially those that have joined xMOOCs.

Challenges come, if at all, from the exploration of new, non-traditional modes of learning. MOOCs at best are not just about putting lectures onto the internet, but about exploring new forms of teaching, learning and assessment.

Two others areas of disruption were identified. The first was the possibility of MOOC-type courses replacing weaker parts of the system, such as regional polytechnics. The second was the potential of MOOCs to resolve problems to do with access to and the price of tertiary education.

Some saw MOOCs as augmenting the current system, for example by replacing adult and community education courses which have foundered in recent years because their funding was removed. Another person was interested in setting up repositories of shared learning that might be freely available within the sector through a digital portal.

The biggest threat to the tertiary system from MOOCs lies in the relative expense and inflexibility of the place based learning model. With a marginal cost of virtually nil (after development), MOOCs are a far more responsive and efficient way to offer courses.

The second potential disruption relates to the differences between MOOCs and other forms of learning. It was identified that the cMOOC model was significantly different from xMOOCs, especially in terms of the economic models and the focus on open learning. xMOOCs were particularly seen as simply the extension of institutional models into a digital environment, and were especially critiqued for their model of delivery. The open learning advocates believe that the cMOOC model, while more disruptive of existing forms, has more to offer in the long term.

The third disruption relates to compatibility between MOOCs and existing higher education systems. Compatibilities relating to cost, the learning model, what MOOCs have to offer and access were considered. The tendency of venture fund investors and the media has been to highlight individual cases as the future of

MOOCs, when they are likely to be the exception. There is also a disturbing cultural imperialism in some of the assumptions being made. The role of 'place' in MOOCs is also examined, and it is noted that in the absence of a physical location, MOOCs find themselves creating places and communities that do not exist outside cyberspace.

OPEN LEARNING

The section begins with Illich's powerful statement about the role of learning in society when it is not limited by geography or resource. Sir John Daniel believes that the hype around xMOOCs has distracted attention from the real gain of MOOCs: that universities are embracing openness despite their market focus.

The philosophical and pedagogical basis of open learning is briefly explored. New Zealand is a leader in the international open learning movement, especially in terms of the development of WikiEducator and the OERu. The OERu was launched in November 2013 and is a cMOOC platform which looks similar to the xMOOC platforms: it offers and schedules courses and has a range of partners. But the focus is strongly on open learning with no attempts to monetarise functions. The core goal of the OERu is to offer for free, online, all content currently provided through fee-paying tertiary education.

One issue explored in the interviews was the possibility of developing a New Zealand MOOC that might include tertiary organisations, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, the National Library of New Zealand, and perhaps other organisations. It was felt that the Kiwi Advanced Research and Education Network (KAREN) network provided an adequate hardware basis for the venture, for networking and cloud storage systems. However, participants found it hard to visualise the sector moving beyond the current competitive model to collaborate on a venture such as this. Most thought it was a good idea, with one dissenter.

TECHNOLOGY

The role of MOOC platforms in providing, in some instances, the technological resources needed to produce MOOCs was discussed. One university is beginning to develop desktop technology by which all staff can make their own online content at their desk. One of the xMOOC universities developed and produced its own courses, and acknowledges some additional cost in staff and advertising. The other xMOOC organisation is producing its MOOCs in Australia, at a dedicated production studio.

Participants believed that the costs of MOOCs tended to be under-stated because they are generally made by enthusiastic staff on a one-off basis. One participant noted that when the costs began to be calculated properly as part of a business plan, they were much greater than expected, due to both technological and pedagogical issues.

The OERu model being developed by a number of participants is said to have few additional costs at present. Other participants note that assistance from keen IT departments helps keep costs down. However, the good technological elements need to be balanced with good teaching and assessment strategies. One participant envisages a future where education can be produced, licensed, shared and uploaded just like live music, and expresses confidence that the MOOC model can be as effective as traditional learning.

POLITICAL ECONOMY

A first question is why have so many prestigious universities developed MOOCs, when their status is reliant on their market scarcity? Partly it is about using their position to empower people and communities through education, but the involvement of venture capitalists seems to indicate that these organisations seek to make money out of the model.

Potential benefits include brand enhancement, the ability to experiment with new forms of teaching and learning, the use of MOOCs as a recruiting tool and the exploration of models of business innovation.

A participant, and Daniel, both note that a MOOC from a high prestige university cannot offer the same experience as studying at such a place, and the market should look for quality, not prestige, in MOOCs.

Neither Victoria nor Otago universities are participating at an institutional level in MOOCs at the present time. Victoria's strategic plan for technology focuses on its use to enhance the current teaching and learning experience, and Otago has adopted a strong place-based discourse around its organisation. The University of Waikato runs its own MOOC courses, and Lincoln and Canterbury Universities are involved in the OERu consortium.

Most participants agreed that place-based learning and MOOCs could co-exist, and had the potential to bring down the cost of higher education.

We sought to understand the drivers of decisions to adopt xMOOC or cMOOC model. Much of the decision depended on the people within organisations influencing decisions. Auckland and Massey were both approached by MOOC platforms to join. Several participants posited that the further up the organisation you climb, the more likely that xMOOC models will be chosen, for status and competitive reasons.

Issues of cost, market share and the nature of the competitive advantage were discussed. This underlined the reality that no-one is yet sure what will happen to MOOCs over the next couple of years. There are many aspirations for them – to

deliver open learning, to fill in learning gaps, to provide free or low-cost education to the underserved and various other opportunities.

The situation of academic staff was examined. Many have an interest in making MOOC courses for a variety of reasons, including innovation, showcasing their work or improving the impact of their teaching. Most are prepared to make such courses, but there is an opportunity cost which, to date, has rarely been factored in. One university has done the costings in a business plan and notes that MOOCs are potentially very expensive to produce and maintain.

There is also the issue of staff workloads. What may begin as a volunteer exercise may end up as a large burden, so staff need to be aware of how much work is involved before they take on MOOCs. However, one view is that staff should see MOOC development as part of their public good role.

The issue of ownership of courses and potential alienation of teaching staff from their completed MOOCs was briefly discussed, and is becoming an issue in various countries, but not yet in New Zealand.

LEARNERS AND LEARNING

This section begins with a discussion of the international pattern of MOOC participation: high enrolments, lower take-up, and low levels of completion, and outlines Hill's (2013) schema of four kinds of learners: lurkers, drop-ins, passive and active participants. It is pointed out that the student voice is missing from this kind of categorization: to date, there has not been significant research on learner intentions.

One question often asked in the literature is whether these low completion rates matter. From the cMOOC perspective, in particular, the observed patterns are viewed as a consequence of changes in the learning model toward 'universal' forms, and new methods of measurement are sought. Only one person thought that the low completion rates were the result of only the 'cream' competing.

The potential to offer free courses is not seen as a major factor among participants, although many noted the potential of MOOCs to lower the cost and improve the quality of tertiary courses, and relieve the fiscal pressures on the sector. Some participants noted the value in offering free tertiary courses to underserved groups such as older persons, those wanting adult and community education opportunities, those in provincial areas and perhaps those wanting vocational education options.

Free courses are not seen as a threat to existing fee-paying courses. The core business of tertiary organisations is to educate those who have recently left school, and that group is not seen as having the self-management skills to organise their own programmes.

Participants believe that place-based learning will remain important, because of the 'tacit' learning that takes place on campus. Issues include problems of accreditation and security, and the need for a social experience of a learning environment.

The potential for models of brokerage to help guide learners through the MOOC maze was discussed. This is an interesting idea for participants but has a number of problems.

A further issue is the relevance of MOOC courses to New Zealand learners. Most courses, with the exception of mathematics and science subjects are taught in social and cultural context, and international MOOCs will tend to reflect other countries' cultural, linguistic and socio-economic contexts. Subjects that are taught specifically within a New Zealand regulatory framework, such as law, accountancy, commerce, social work, teaching, nursing and engineering are not amenable in total to a MOOC model.

Participants considered whether MOOCs could be used as a tool to open up tertiary education to the underserved. While MOOCs can reduce prices, their biggest contribution to improving access may lie at the margins. Suggestions include preparation for university courses or MOOC tasters for subject choice.

CONCLUSION

A broad conclusion examines the 'rise and fall' of MOOCs and considers options for sustainable development.

A number of local and international references are provided and the interview schedule used for this project is appended.