

Two consortia have formed – the largest **Coursera**, run by academics from Stanford University, now has some 62 universities on board and some 2.8 million students enrolled and is increasing exponentially. It is run in order to make a profit eventually. It has a rival-edX which is funded by MIT and Harvard which is not-for profit and this has been joined by six other universities. Enrolment procedures are minimal-anybody can join a course with an identifiable personal E-mail address. You can participate as much or as little as you like and you can unenrol at the click of a mouse. At the moment, the successful student who completes the course which usually has some on-line participation criteria, such as posting every week in response to a discussion thread and passing at least one on-line exam which at a basic level consists of say a two hour multiple choice test of knowledge and concepts will receive a certificate which at the moment has no official validation although there a few courses that are going down the line of official accreditation already.

There is a British response and it is this which has hit the news recently, along with David Willetts, the Universities minister and his recent declaration that on-line courses represent an “historic opportunity” for British universities. The Open University, the university I work for, is spearheading a British consortium of universities, now 18 of them, which are going to launch the British challenge to American dominance called Futurelearn. Watch this space in terms of future announcements.

So what is going on? How is that some of the most prestigious universities in America, where degrees can cost upwards of \$50,000 a year (fees and maintenance), effectively the size of another mortgage in terms of debt or in Britain with university fees of £9,000 a year, how is that Russell Group and Ivy League universities are also falling over each other to offer courses for free, given that much of their status derives from the exclusivity of their scholarship and students?

The answer is known as a MOOC which stands for Massive Open On-line Courses which have been in existence for some time but only in the last year or so has it taken off to the extent described. MOOCs may have 50,000 or more students as the technology is able to cope with these numbers. Most students drop out or simply register but only participate slightly in the course. Only relatively small numbers make significant contributions and maybe as few as a few per cent of the overall cohort actually achieve the course certificate, that is pass the course. A pure MOOC is one in which there is a massive number of students led by a tutor or tutors who are much more facilitators who assist students in deciding what they want to learn and how they go about acquiring the resources to develop their learning. What the universities are presenting is a closed version of this which transplants an existing course into an on-line form enabling massive participation so students from around the world can partake of the knowledge of Stanford or Harvard or Warwick, even in developing countries in which students would never afford the normal fees in a lifetime of earning. That sounds very altruistic. It is not as these are potentially huge earners for the universities concerned. How so if they are free?

This is a massive numbers game-the idea is that some students may be enticed into enrolling and paying for other on-line courses or eventually paying for accreditation or that additional services may be offered which attract a fee, such as a bundle of learning resources and readings offered at a discount or help with career placement in which case it may be the recruiter that pays a fee. With these sorts of numbers it is not difficult to see that for example out of 50,000 students, a university only needs say 1,000 of them that are prepared to pay even a modest accreditation fee of say a few hundred dollars or 10,000 students who will pay \$20 for extra resources to appreciate the potential gains for universities, not to mention that 100 of this massive cohort who may actually decide to pay something like the customary fee for another course.

Universities massively increase their student numbers even if only a fraction of on-line students pay some kind of fee at all and given that in the UK, even Russell Group universities have seen shortfalls of 9% in student numbers, it is easy to see how attractive these on-line courses may appear to Vice-Chancellors.

They raise hugely controversial issues about access to education, the dominance of elite universities, the nature of learning itself, the balance between content and skills, the role that students plays in their own learning, assessment, cheating and plagiarism and indeed whether learning is shifting out of the classroom into work and/or social contexts. When ivory towers start walking outside their cloisters, who then becomes the custodian of knowledge and the relentless pursuer of objective truth? Are universities further undermining their fragile authority or enfranchising the masses with knowledge?

John Hutchinson

Background Reading

[Free online university courses: are 'Moocs' a gamble?](#) by Mike Boxall, The Telegraph 18 December 2012

[Students equate cheap courses with poor quality](#) , by Richard Garne, The Independent 18 February 2013

[David Willetts and other leaders discuss the future of higher education](#) , University College London, 28 February 2013