

## So why did MOOCs fail to live up to the hype?

William Leonard 08 February 2019

The 21st century's second decade gave us the massive open online courses or MOOCs. They were hyped to the tertiary education community as a breakthrough technology that would transform teaching and learning. A few elite institutions would offer the best of their courses, taught by top instructors at little or no charge. Worldwide, tertiary education would be immeasurably improved. Both students and institutions would surely benefit.

MOOCs would employ a low-cost business plan, allowing broad student access to free or low-cost high-quality education, countering the impact of ever-increasing tuition fees.

On-demand delivery would accommodate conflicting family and work responsibilities. Traditional student age and returning adult students would have equal access. Student travel and related on-the-ground expenses would be significantly reduced, if not eliminated.

Institutions would benefit from online offerings requiring little, if any, new brick and mortar projects to accommodate the flood of additional students. The technology would promote more efficient use of existing faculty resources.

### Flawed business model

What has transpired? MOOCs have grown in number but have yet to fulfil their promises. The original high-profile sponsors have attracted both peers and lesser-known institutions, mainly among developed nations.

I believe that the original format and business plan were flawed. The early elite providers merely presented videos of lecture hall courses taught by their superstars. Production standards varied widely. Harvard University's course, 'Justice', was well produced. Many others were little more than recordings of talking heads.

Current providers have abandoned the sage-on-the-stage videos. They require more offline individual work and small group interaction. The business plan that allows free auditing with a modest charge for successful completion verification has yet to yield surpluses.

Two online publications, *ICEF Monitor* and *Inside Higher Ed*, presented assessments of the MOOCs' impact on tertiary education in January. *ICEF Monitor* offers a guardedly upbeat assessment, noting that in total MOOC enrolments have exceeded 100 million in 2018. Tertiary education institutions across the globe are offering online bachelor, masters and doctoral degree programmes.

“Continuing a pattern we first observed in 2017, most major providers are now putting a great emphasis on revenue,” it states. This change in the business plan appears to be a response to a dismal course completion and retention experience across the technology’s global reach.

The *Inside Higher Ed* piece makes three complementary points. One, since their birth, MOOC completion rates have consistently remained distressingly low. Only 6% of MOOC students completed their course(s) in 2014-15. By 2017-18 the course completion rate dropped to 3.13%.

Two, the percentage of first-time MOOC users who subsequently enrolled on a MOOC the following year has fallen every year since 2012-13, from a high of 38% that year to 7% in 2016-17.

Three, the vast majority of students initially enrolling on their first MOOC reside in developed countries. The promise that MOOCs’ high quality and low-cost delivery would rapidly enhance tertiary education opportunities in developing countries has yet to be realised.

### **Retention issues**

There are three substrata factors that may partially explain the MOOCs’ disappointing performance to date.

One, while students may have the requisite intellectual skills, many do not have the learning style or disposition to complete the course once registered. As many as half do not enter the course post-registration.

Another factor is discipline. As an online instructor, I encountered many students who appeared to require the external discipline to be in Hall X, Room Z between 8.30 and 10.00am on Mondays and Wednesdays. The screening practices that have been employed – brief surveys at best – have clearly been ineffective.

Completion and retention data clearly undermine the hype that MOOCs are for all students. Constantly having to replace the vast majority of matriculants is not financially sustainable.

### **Online teaching and face to face are not the same thing**

Two, while instructors may have a flair for classroom planning, presentation and assessment, the online environment is markedly different. The long-standing assumption that successful doctoral research studies certify one for classroom teaching readiness has a comparable online assumption. If you can teach in the classroom, surely you can organise, present and assess an online course. Wrong!

The syllabi and subsequent activities must conform to the platform constraints. The spatial,

temporal and visual stimuli are vastly different for both instructor and students.

Three, even within a single country, time zone differences make synchronous discussions and team presentations difficult at best. It does not take much of a spread of zones to disrupt individual work and personal schedules. Proficiency in the language of instruction and cultural nuances also enter the mix of challenges facing both the instructor and students as the time zones spread.

The MOOC's reality closely aligns with major 20th-century instructional innovations such as computer-assisted instruction, programmed instruction and educational television. Their silver bullet promises fell short with experience. The MOOC's future will depend on improved instructor preparation and pre-registration screening, coupled with a business plan designed to at least break even.

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