

MOOCs offer greater options as our quest for knowledge evolves

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*Perception of online education is shifting, writes **Andrew Norton***

This time last year, few people had heard of MOOCs – massive online open courses. Now they are the big new thing in higher education, offering free university subjects to students around the world.

Coursera, the biggest MOOC, is rapidly heading towards 1.5 million students.

To go from no students in early 2011 to more than the entire Australian higher education system in 2012 is remarkable.

But are the MOOCs really significant for higher education? As sceptics point out, lots of people start the subjects but not many finish. It is education for dilettantes and dabblers.

The same kind of people who read two chapters of a book before giving up take the first few weeks of subjects before moving on to the next attraction. It is harmless, but no substitute for “traditional” degrees and universities.

At this point, MOOCs only offer a subset of the services offered by full higher education providers. Most MOOC options are introductory or survey subjects, rather than the more advanced or specialised subjects that make up a course “major”. MOOCs offer lots of entrees, but not many main courses.

Some MOOC subjects have optional assessment, and are setting up exams to be run by Pearson Education, a company with examination centres around the world. But these are not degrees, and it remains to be seen whether these exams offer much beyond personal satisfaction to students.

A few universities are announcing plans to accept MOOC subjects for credit, but it’s too early to say whether employers will take these exams as adequate authentication of student knowledge.

It is no surprise that MOOCs are not designed to radically challenge existing higher education business models.

Two of the best-known MOOCs, Coursera and edX are consortiums of universities, including some of the world’s best known institutions: Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford. They are not going to give away anything essential to their exclusivity or their income. So it is easy to argue that there is a lot of hype around MOOCs — and, as with Facebook’s share price, a more realistic assessment of value will eventually emerge.

MOOCs should change perceptions of online education. Though universities in the online market stress the educational equivalence of online and on-campus modes of study (and this is not just spin, the research backs them up), student and employer perceptions are probably that on-campus is better.

American employer research has found this perception, and it would be surprising if it was not similar in Australia.

MOOCs challenge this perception. To date, the online education market has been dominated by the less prestigious universities, influencing perceptions of off-campus study. Now the world’s best educational brands are lending their names, though not their degrees, to online ventures. When the

University of Melbourne recently signed up to Coursera, the first line of its media release stressed that Coursera was a “prestigious online course provider”.

With its combination of student selectivity and research strength, the University of Melbourne is probably the leading higher education institution in Australia. That it thinks its image can be enhanced by association with an online provider tells us how much perceptions of online education have shifted.

MOOCs are also important for the potential to bring down the cost of higher education. The free course content model may not survive forever, but MOOCs demonstrate the potential for major economies of scale in higher education. They have enrolled huge numbers of students on less capital investment than required capital investment than required for a small university campus.

The MOOC need to generate cash flow is likely to spur innovation in online academic advice and assessment of student work, for which they can separately charge students.

Campus-based higher education is not going to disappear. There is still much practical training and laboratory work that cannot be moved online, and the campus based lifestyle experience will remain attractive for school-leaver undergraduates, even for subjects that could be studied online.

University is a social and personal development experience, a life education in the broad sense, not just about learning specific academic knowledge and skills.

But MOOCs highlight how higher education is a bundle of different services and student outcomes. Current pricing reflects the cost of the full package. In industries from airlines to telecommunications, companies have been unbundling and rebundling their services into different combinations to meet the varying needs and price sensitivities of their customers. Higher education is set to do the same.

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