Chapter 18
Massive Open Online Courses: Imposter or Saviour?

Winthrop Gary J. Stockport
The University of Western Australia, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the state-of-play as at early May 2013 regarding Free Massive Open Online Courseware (MOOC). It considers whether the initial findings indicate whether MOOCs will prove a “game changer” in higher education. A number of theoretical models such as disruptive innovation theory, technology life cycles, and strategy business models are used to enable a better understanding of the likely potential impact of MOOCs. Data was gathered through investigating the Coursera, Udacity, and edX Websites as well through undertaking a content analysis of the 32 Business and Management courses available on Coursera. It also presents the responses about MOOCs from a small group of potential “customers,” a class of Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) students from a European Business School. Different scenarios are then presented about their potential disruptive impact upon universities. Possible strategies for each scenario are also put forward. Based upon the evidence provided within this chapter, it can be tentatively concluded that MOOCs will not be a “game changer” in the higher education sector.

INTRODUCTION

Marginson (2012) has pointed out that although Free Massive Open Online Courseware (MOOC) is just around 1 year old, it is clearly a ‘game-changer’ in higher education. This book chapter considers whether MOOCs are likely to be a game-changer? Will MOOCs prove disruptive to a Country’s Universities Sector as well Universities across the globe? As the history of strategy tells us, it is extremely difficult trying to forecast what will happen when potential ‘game-changers’ enter a
Massive Open Online Courses

The success of two courses offered through Stanford University as MOOCs (a *Machine Learning* course which attracted around 104,000 registrations and an *Artificial Intelligence* course which had some 160,000 registrations) led to the spawning of two start-up companies, Coursera and Udacity. Currently, as at May 2013, Coursera was the fastest and by far the largest aggregator of courses and participating Universities have to pay to participate. Udacity’s current offerings reflect its roots in Computer Science and Mathematics. As at early May 2013, it offered 25 courses in total including just one business course called - *How to build a start-up*. The other notable aggregator of courses as MOOCs is edX which is a not-for-profit organisation of its founding partners Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. EdX features learning designed specifically for interactive study on the Web and it has aggregated courses from HarvardX, MITx, University of California Berkeley (BerkeleyX), University of Technology Austin (UTAustinx), McGill University (McGillX) and the Australian National University (ANUx).

**THEORIES OF DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION AND BUSINESS MODELS**

This book chapter uses a number of theoretical models such as disruptive innovation theory, technology life cycle theory and strategy business models to enable a better understanding of the likely potential impact of MOOCs.

**Disruptive Innovation Theory**

Disruptive innovation, a term which was coined by Clayton Christensen (1997), describes a process by which a product or service takes root initially in simple applications at the bottom end of a market. Overtime, it then relentlessly moves up market and...