ABSTRACT

This article discusses whether universities should create some MOOCs themselves or use the existing ones constructively in their teaching – thus meeting the potential challenges head-on and turning these into opportunities. After presenting various definitions the writer goes on to discuss whether MOOCs are a challenge or an opportunity for universities. The answer to this question depends on the strategies adopted by the individual university. Therefore, a strategy for embedding MOOCs in current courses is presented. It seems that we are moving towards teaching and learning in networks rather than following the centuries-old linear thinking. Lecturers will agree with their students what their individual learning goals are – so there will be much more focus on goals or aims (learning outcomes), and a system will then be set up in which the individual student is motivated to seek and identify his or her own personal learning path towards that goal – also called adaptive learning. And MOOCs can be an integral part of this.

INTRODUCTION

Courses offered online through e-learning have been available for quite some time now. In most countries around the world they have had a slow start. The growth curve has been relatively flat. This may be due to various factors, one of which is scepticism among students, who may think that e-learning is just a low-cost and low-quality alternative to the real thing: Teaching in a class room on location. Lecturers have also been reluctant to adopt e-learning, often because of fears of losing their jobs. However, it seems that e-learning and online provision of courses is here to stay. Students are doing just as well as in traditional programmes, in some cases even better.
There are many varieties of e-learning. Some courses are focusing on students learning on their own with texts, videos, learning objects and formative assessment systems that have been more or less automatic, for instance in the form of multiple-choice exercises. Other courses have been tutor-managed with lecturers trying to control the learning process in close dialogue with the individual student. There is no doubt that the former relies on relatively high initial costs followed by relatively low running costs, and with the latter it is just the opposite. The former is meant for large numbers of learners and therefore often considered a cost-effective way of teaching and learning. The latter is much more cost-intensive, and has tended to appeal to much lower numbers of students. However, the writer would claim that this dialogue-based e-learning technique has also been more effective in terms of creating better results for students and having lower drop-out rates.

Many courses are now a combination of the two versions, and there seems to be more focus on creating value for learners rather than cost-savings and economies of scale for universities. This development has made it more acceptable and appealing for learners to take e-learning courses given the fact that they also offer flexibility and independence of time and place for students, advantages that traditional courses cannot offer.

Many universities have been looking for ways to combine the cost-effectiveness of the former types of e-learning courses with the higher retention rates of the latter. And this may be where the MOOCs fit in.

The first MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) saw the light of day in 2008, and ever since they have been the subject of much controversy. Some scholars see them as a kind of revolution that will transform education – both traditional teaching and e-learning - fundamentally, and others see them as an interesting development – an evolution rather than a revolution - that can be used to improve and enhance existing education. The writer tends to support the latter view, and as will appear from this article I propose using MOOCs as “consumers” – ie using MOOCs created by others - rather than as “producers”. The latter is expensive. The process of creating own MOOCs has often proved a significant drain on resources, both time- and money-wise for institutions. The workload for course organizers developing MOOCs will often exceed 300 work hours or more per person. So, at least in the beginning, using MOOCs as consumers is recommended.

In this article the writer will present personal ideas and offer some suggestions and reflections on the subject. Furthermore, the reader should be aware that this chapter reflects a Scandinavian perspective. The main objective is to discuss and suggest ways in which MOOCs can be used constructively in educational institutions to attract and retain students as well as enhance the learning experience in general and thus meet the challenges or threats that the MOOCs may otherwise present.

The article is based on personal observations through many years of teaching both traditional face-to-face classes and online programmes. Empirical and primary evidence to support the views is found in evaluations made by a large number of students on under-graduate and post-graduate programmes over the years, and from the writer having the responsibility for administering e-learning programmes for 15 years. In addition, current external evidence has been assessed to support and put the above observations into perspective. A number of secondary sources have been included in the discussion. Since there are very few academic books on this subject and the latest evidence is sought, observations and discussions are supported on relevant newsletters and blog-entries as well as reports on the development and delivery of MOOCs. Especially two reports have contributed to this article: “MOOCs – Expectations and Reality” by Fiona Hollands and Devayani Tirthali from Columbia University about a MOOC project at the University and “Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) Report” by Barney Grainger from University of