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Do MOOCs announce a new paradigm for higher education?

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Introduction

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

It is a pleasure and an honour for Sir John Daniel and me to give a keynote address at this important conference. Let us begin by congratulating EADTU on great work that it is doing to alert European universities to the importance of online learning. The principal development in higher education this decade will be the increasing use of eLearning, so the particular focus that EADTU has given to quality assurance is vital.

I am particularly pleased to have been part of the launch of the Global Task Force on Quality in eLearning, which brought together partners worldwide in cooperation with UNESCO around the E-xcellence initiative led by George Ubachs.

Our title today is: *Do MOOCs announce a new paradigm for higher education?* Any new paradigm must fit the challenges that higher education faces in the contemporary world.

Earlier this year *The Economist* newspaper devoted its cover article to youth unemployment. This is probably the greatest challenge that higher education now faces.

The Economist article concluded: “*Policymakers know what to do to diminish the problem – ignite growth, break down cartels and build bridges between education and work. New technology gives them powerful tools too.*”

We shall focus on two parts of this advice, building bridges between education and work and exploring a new tool that technology provides: Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

Our presentation will be in three sections and we shall alternate in presenting them.

First, I shall present some global and regional figures on the impact of the crisis on young people. Then I shall recall trends that emerged at the 2009 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education. This conference convened just as the current global economic crisis began, although few realised just how deep and long the crisis would be.

In section two, Sir John will look at MOOCs – a remarkable development that burst into the consciousness of global higher education last year.

Finally, I will ask how we can ensure the quality and relevance of these recent developments in higher education: new curricula, new types of awards and new delivery systems. I shall highlight a new Guide to Quality in Online Learning and a new body, the International Quality Group of the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation, CHEA.

Part 1: Generation jobless

First: some figures. This chart taken from *The Economist* shows the number of young people who are neither employed nor in education or training. The world total is nearly 300 million – or one quarter of the world's youth. The situation is bad enough in Europe but, even in percentage terms, South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa fare much worse. Yet at the same time employers complain that they cannot find graduates with the right skills and competences. There is a serious gap between education and the job market.

What is higher education doing – and what should it be doing – about this huge problem?

The 2009 World Conference on Higher Education

UNESCO organizes world conferences on higher education every ten years. The last one was held in 2009 and I had the privilege of being its Executive Secretary. The conference participants identified the new dynamics impacting on higher education.

The predominant trend is increasing demand, much of it unmet, especially in the developing world. To address the challenge the range of providers is diversifying. They range from so-called 'world-class' universities in an elite tradition focused on research to vibrant new and different providers more focused on developing skills and competencies. The private for-profit sector is playing an increasing role and nearly all providers are making use of ICTs and eLearning, some of them to teach across borders.

We also see the emergence of what we shall call 'post-traditional' higher education. New curricula and shorter qualifications attempt to address the crisis in the relationship between higher education and the labour market.

Not long ago we used to joke about Hamburger University, the McDonald's training centre that has campuses in seven countries. Margaret Thatcher shocked the other UK universities when she gave it her seal of approval with a visit in 1989. But today, in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University, McDonalds is training dozens of staff in a custom-designed foundation degree in managing business operations, building on already recognised courses. This is just one example of many links being developed between business and education.

At last year's conference of the European Association for International Education, Allan

Pall, then president of the European Students Union, talked about the death of long degree courses. The foundation degree is a good example of a shorter qualification. We shall return to this later.

Sir John will now suggest how MOOCs and related developments can be helpful in addressing these challenges.

Part 2: MOOCs: a new paradigm?

Sir John Daniel

We now move to the second part of our talk: MOOCs. Do they announce a new paradigm for higher education? I shall first give our answer and then our arguments.

MOOCs are not a new paradigm for higher education – but they may accelerate other trends that will lead to a new paradigm. We shall be brief on the history. A MOOC is a Massive Open Online Course. OER were the long fuse that detonated the MOOCs explosion. Most MOOCs are basically OER with some computerised assessment questions.

The University of Manitoba, Canada, first used the term MOOC for a course *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge* in 2008. Two thousand members of the public took the course free online. But MOOCs really made news last year when elite American universities like Harvard, Stanford and MIT joined in.

I use the first MIT course, *Circuits and Electronics*, as an example. It was massive, attracting over 150,000 learners. It was open, meaning free and without admission requirements. It was online worldwide and attracted learners in 160 countries. You might question whether it was really a ‘course’ because if you passed the computerised tests you could buy a certificate of completion but you could not receive credit for use to study at MIT. And, of course, we would hang our heads in shame if our distance teaching universities had dropout and failure rates like these.

That was last year. Since then there has been a stampede to join the mooing MOOC herd. This is a copycat phenomenon. Few universities have a clear idea of why they are offering MOOCs. Professor Tony Bates, the respected blogger on educational technology, predicts a shake out in MOOCs next year as evaluation results come in and financial officers start to ask harder questions about cost and benefit.

Already, with so many providers piling in to offer them, the definition of a MOOC has become much more fuzzy. One joker remarked that the meaning of every letter in the acronym MOOC is now negotiable. But in terms of the global economic and youth unemployment crises, this diversification is good. As MOOCs multiply they could reinforce some helpful trends.

Many of those taking the first MOOCs already had university degrees, so they provided informal professional development for well-qualified people.

Two things are needed to make MOOCs more useful. First, we need MOOCs in employment related topics at all levels. Second, people need credible qualifications for successful study. Both are happening. The range of topics is diversifying fast and various bodies are giving recognition for MOOCs, even where they did not offer the course themselves.

At the beginning of next month I shall have the honour of presiding at the launch of the Open Education Resource university, the OERu. This is a global consortium of institutions, although with only three European members so far. It is dedicated to helping students who want to learn by studying through OER or MOOCs to get tutorial support and proper recognition for their learning. This is an example of the wider trend of the ‘unbundling’ of higher education, with different organisations handling different parts of the process.

Let us note three trends that are being accelerated by MOOCs. Calling them a new paradigm for higher education may be exaggerating, but they will give universities plenty of challenges of adaptation.

The first trend is shorter courses. Online courses seem to work best – that is to say students succeed in them better – if they are between five and six weeks in duration. This favours intense concentration on a particular topic.

We also note a second, related trend. The qualifications that define the output of higher education are being put into new bottles. New types of awards, such as Open Badges, are emerging. These badges, which are placed on the Web, carry more information about what was studied and how it was assessed than the usual university transcript. They allow learners to get recognition for short-cycle studies on economically relevant topics and to aggregate a series of badges into a conventional qualification such as a degree or a diploma.

But the greatest impact of MOOCs is to accelerate the trend to online learning. Until recently online learning, like the rest of distance learning, was thought to be of low quality. You know that is not true and you have been working to improve the image and the reality of distance learning for years, particularly in the distance teaching universities.

Happily, the rush of Harvard, MIT, Stanford and company into online learning has shaken the traditional belief that distance learning is inferior. Online teaching and learning is now part of the future of all universities. MOOCs should be seen as a pilot project for the offering of regular credit programmes online at scale.

eLearning has been spreading steadily for years and its growth has been well documented by Tony Bates in his annual surveys of the scene. He believes that 2013 is a breakthrough year for both the volume and the quality of regular online offerings. We don't have precise figures for the students taking courses online because many universities do not report them separately. However, it is likely that 80% of US students will take some of their courses online next year. So in the world as a whole the number of students taking regular courses online is probably already larger than those taking MOOCs, although the MOOC numbers attract most of the attention.

So let me end by asking what must happen for MOOCs to stimulate rapid developments in the teaching of regular programmes online? The simple answer is that universities must develop policies for doing that, execute them determinedly and pay close attention to quality.

I hand over to Stamenka, who is at the centre of some recent developments in quality assurance.

Part 3: Quality development in eLearning

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

Let me now look now at some responses to the challenges of quality in online learning. I shall talk about the work of two organisations with which I am associated: Academic Partnerships and the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

Various organisations partner with universities to help them offer courses online. We are both advisors to one of these, Academic Partnerships or AP. We took on this role because AP's mission to increase access to quality higher education at low cost matches our own values. AP's aim is to lead students into online award-bearing programmes and have them graduate at rates at least as good as those of the students on campus. The foci of AP's contribution are quality and viability. This means the quality of the transformation of courses into online formats, the effectiveness of the organisation of student support, and the viability of a model with lower tuition fees and larger enrolments.

In this spirit AP commissioned *A Guide to Quality in Online Learning*. Two distinguished South African experts, Neil Butcher and Merridy Wilson-Strydom wrote the Guide, which Sir John and I edited. It was published in June in English and Chinese. The Guide references some of the important work that EADTU has done on this topic that I mentioned at the very beginning. We are very pleased that it carries a Creative Commons CC-BY-SA licence. It is an OER that you can translate, adapt, distribute and use as you like. Copies are available to you at this conference.

In the light of the success of this Guide to formal online learning the same team is now embarking on preparing a guide to the more informal types of learning, such

as OERs and MOOCs, which Sir John just mentioned. For want of a better term we are calling this ‘post-traditional’ higher education. What about the quality assurance of informal online offerings such as MOOCs, OERs, experiential learning and other innovations that are emerging worldwide? We believe it that both new course formats and new qualifications require fresh approaches to quality assurance.

In this context I mention my work as Senior Advisor on International Affairs to CHEA, the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation. In this capacity I helped CHEA to launch an International Quality Group last year. Although organised from the US, it has a global outreach and is open to membership from a wide range of higher education stakeholders worldwide. Its mission is the quality implications of the new developments in higher education that I just mentioned. Our provisional term to designate them is ‘post-traditional’ higher education.

The US Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is looking at developing a “quality platform” to review the quality of post-traditional provision. Such reviews would begin by judging the provision against its primary purposes: what is it offering to the student?

They could use standards to judge the provider’s success with regard to student learning and might benchmark the capacity of provider and its performance in relation to comparable providers. Peers with expertise in this non-traditional sector would conduct the reviews. A provider that successfully completes the review would be identified as a “Quality Platform Provider.” Colleges and universities could use the Quality Platform designation as an indicator of quality when considering the award of credit or recognition. Quality assurance agencies could refer the Quality Platform in reviews of these providers that they might conduct.

Conclusion

We shall leave it there. We have avoided excited talk about a revolution. Evolution rather than revolution is the historic pattern for universities. Even talk about a new paradigm is probably an exaggeration. Nevertheless, as higher education reaches a larger proportion of a growing world population it is effervescing with new approaches. Although technology is not the primary driver of these approaches, it is certainly giving them greater momentum. In the process it may help higher education to address the scourge of unemployment among young people.