

ECA-NVAO Seminar on MOOCs and External Quality Assurance

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MOOCs: a paradigm shift in learning and quality assurance?

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Introduction and Plan

It is a great pleasure for Sir John and me to make this presentation at the ECA-NVAO Seminar on MOOCs and Quality Assurance, even more so as we have both interacted with Mark Frederiks in our previous careers, Sir John as Vice-Chancellor of the OU UK, and I as head of Higher Education at UNESCO.

Your seminar theme is very topical. Many question how to assess the quality of MOOCs, especially those on the receiving end, particularly in the developing world. At the same time, quality assurance and accreditation agencies are not usually much interested in higher education offerings that are outside the traditional higher education qualification structures, as a survey of accreditation agencies in the US recently demonstrated.

To explore this paradox, we have entitled our presentation “*MOOCs: a paradigm shift in learning and quality assurance?*” and we shall alternate in presenting it.

I will begin in part one; putting MOOCs into context by exploring the challenges facing higher education in a time of change that requires new notions of quality. First, I shall present some global trends: employability affecting youth population around the world, the diversification of higher education as a response to the growing demand, and different forms of “post-traditional” higher education offerings such as MOOCs.

In section two, Sir John will ask whether MOOCs represent a paradigm shift in learning by tracing their evolution from 2008 to the present.

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. In this context 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. I shall also note the further work we have commissioned for a Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Online Learning.

Challenges for Higher Education

So let’s look now at some of the challenges that should make us rethink traditional notions of quality in higher education. 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 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).

First: some figures. This chart, taken from *The Economist*, shows the number 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 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 now 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 are calling ‘post-traditional’ higher education. New curricula and shorter qualifications attempt to address the crisis in the relationship between higher education and the labour market. MOOCs are one manifestation of this trend.

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 one example of a shorter qualification. Open Badges are an increasingly popular form of recognition. Do we consider them to be qualifications? I shall come back to this.

Sir John will now ask whether MOOCs are a paradigm shift in learning.

Sir John Daniel

Learning

Let me now address the first part of our title. Are MOOCs a paradigm shift in learning? Stamenka will return later to MOOCs and quality assurance.

I shall first give our answer and then our arguments. MOOCs are not a paradigm shift in learning – but they may accelerate other trends that could represent a paradigm shift.

A MOOC is a Massive Open Online Course. We shall be brief on the history.

MOOCs: the brief history

Open Educational Resources, an activity in which the Netherlands has a distinguished record, were the long fuse that detonated the MOOCs explosion. The fuse was lit when MIT started putting its professors' lecture notes on the Web in the late 1990s.

The University of Manitoba, Canada, first used the term MOOC for a course called *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge* in 2008. Two thousand members of the public took the course free online. The title of the course gives you the flavour of the educational philosophy behind it.

But MOOCs really made news last year when elite American universities like Harvard, Stanford and MIT offered MOOCs based on a very different and more behaviourist educational philosophy and pedagogy.

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, I would have hung my head in shame if any of the distance teaching universities that I have been associated with had dropout and failure rates like these.

That was last year. Since then there has been a stampede to join the MOOCs craze.

This is a copycat phenomenon. Few universities have a clear idea of why they are offering MOOCs. The honest ones admit that they are doing it to follow the flock of other institutions. Although, since they are called MOOCs, a herd of cattle may be a better analogy!

All this has led to feverish talk about a revolution in higher education. But this is not a revolution for two reasons. First, higher education does not do revolutions. It evolves at a stately pace.

Second, MOOCs are not really higher education. Higher education is not just about teaching and learning. Its essential feature is the assessment of students and the awarding of credits or credentials. MOOCs do not have this feature, as I just noted in the example of the MIT course.

A shake out in 2014?

So we can predict a shake out in MOOCs next year as evaluation results come in and university financial officers start to ask harder questions about cost and benefit. Why are their institutions paying out money to offer free learning opportunities that do not bring in revenue?

That shake out has already started. With so many providers now piling in to offer what they call MOOCs, 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. This is an example of the wider trend of the ‘unbundling’ of higher education, with different organisations handling different parts of the process.

Trends that MOOCs are promoting

Let us note four trends that are being accelerated by the focus on MOOCs. Calling them a new paradigm for learning may be exaggerating, but they will give universities plenty of challenges of adaptation. These trends are the steady move online, shorter courses, new types of awards and partnerships for teaching. Stamenka will talk about last three in a moment.

The greatest impact of MOOCs *per se* is to accelerate the trend to online learning. Until recently online learning, like the rest of distance learning, was thought by much of the higher education community to be of low quality.

That is not true and open universities have been working to improve the image and the reality of distance learning for years. Take the example of the UK Open University. With over a quarter of a million students it is a large institution. Yet it awards credits and degrees for its courses. It also has an enviable reputation for quality. After ten years of annual assessments of teaching quality in all disciplines in English universities, it placed 5th out of 100 institutions for the quality of its teaching – that’s one place above Oxford. Even more remarkable is that it came

top in UK national survey of students' satisfaction with their universities last year and has never come lower than third in this annual survey.

One very positive impact of MOOCs is that by rushing into online learning, Harvard, MIT, Stanford and company have 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 was a breakthrough year for both the volume and the quality of regular online offerings. We don't have precise figures for the numbers of 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. 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 stop focusing on MOOCs and develop policies for teaching more and more of their regular programmes online. In doing this they must pay close attention to quality, which means not just – indeed not mainly – the quality of the course materials, but the effectiveness of student support and the relevance, rigour and security of the student assessment systems.

Universities can still offer MOOCs as part of their community service function, but they must see them as a way of staking out a place in the growing domain of post-traditional higher education and being open to the needs of their societies in new ways.

I now turn you back to Stamenka to look at this through the lens of quality assurance. Do we have new paradigms here?

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

Quality assurance

So let me now look at how MOOCs – and online learning generally – challenge traditional practices of internal and external quality assurance and accreditation. There is bad news and good news.

The bad news is that since most MOOCs are shorter than normal courses and do not carry credit, most universities have only skimpy academic procedures for giving a department

or an individual approval to offer them. Since they essentially by-pass internal QA processes, external QA systems have taken little interest in them either – at least so far.

The good news, of course, is these relaxed approval processes give institutions a chance to test innovations without having to run the gauntlet of conservative academic governance bodies and engage in the standard intra-institutional horse-trading needed to get new initiatives going.

What is new is that MOOCs are not the only innovations enjoying this flexibility. Post-traditional higher education includes other trends besides the move online.

One 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. Most MOOCs fall within this category but credit-bearing online courses are also increasingly adopting short formats.

A second and related trend is new awards. The awards that recognise 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.

A third trend is that institutions offering MOOCs – and sometimes also those offering traditional online learning – often partner with external enterprises (both for-profit and not-for-profit) to help them. MOOCs require IT systems that can cope with very large number of learners and those offering traditional programmes online may need help with setting up distance learning systems.

We are both advisors to one of these commercial partners, Academic Partnerships or AP. It works mainly in the area of traditional online programmes, assisting institutions with the transformation of their courses into online formats, the organisation of student support, and the management of a model with lower tuition fees and larger enrolments.

To help its partners 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. We are pleased that it carries a Creative Commons CC-BY-SA licence. So it is an OER that you can translate, adapt, distribute and use as you like.

In the light of the success of this Guide to formal online learning, and given the steady growth in post-traditional forms of higher education, the same team is now

engaged in preparing a guide for quality in online learning of this type, covering topics such as OERs and MOOCs.

There are other innovations, such as Open Badges and the assessment of experiential and prior learning that are emerging around the world. All these require fresh approaches to quality assurance.

In this context I should 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. Brochures of CIQG are available at this seminar.

Its mission is the quality implications of the post-traditional developments in higher education that I just mentioned. It 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

The title that you gave us was *MOOCs: A paradigm shift in learning and quality assurance*.

You will have gathered from our remarks that we do not believe MOOCs represent a paradigm shift either in learning or in quality assurance. So far the most common MOOCs simply display information and give readers the opportunity to self-administer some computerised tests. The processes of student support and the making of awards that would normally be looked at in a quality assurance system are not part of them.

Having said that, however, we do observe that the craze for MOOCs has shaken the complacency of higher education more than any phenomenon in decades. MOOCs are not the paradigm shift but rather a symbol of the paradigm shifts that are taking place as a range of innovations in post-traditional higher education take hold. We have mentioned some of the initiatives under way to address the issues of quality assurance raised by these innovations.