

Korea National Open University  
KNOU MOOC Workshop  
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**Why should KNOU get involved in MOOCs?**  
(Script for video recording)

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It is a pleasure to join you by video at this workshop. Exactly two years ago, in 2012, I spent the month of September as a visiting fellow at KNOU and enjoyed a wonderful month in Seoul. KNOU asks its visiting fellows to write a research paper and I wrote mine on MOOCs. MOOCs burst into the news in the middle of 2012 so my research paper was perfectly timed.

It was titled *Making Sense of MOOCs: Musings in a Maze of Myth, Paradox and Possibility* and because of the intense interest in MOOCs, it circulated widely on the Internet. I have received many invitations to speak about MOOCs ever since and I am most grateful to KNOU for giving me a new life as a scholar!

Today I ask the question: why should KNOU get involved in MOOCs?

One answer is that MOOCs are a revolution in higher education and KNOU should join the revolution. I disagree. MOOCs are important but they are not a revolution – for three reasons.

First, if you look at the history of universities you will find that higher education doesn't do revolutions. With hindsight we can see developments that looked revolutionary at the time, such as the Humboldtian university in Germany, the Land Grant universities in the US and the Open University in the UK were merely milestones in the evolution of higher education. Each was gradually absorbed into university life.

Second, MOOCs are not really higher education. The most important power that countries give to their universities is the authority to award degrees and credentials. But most MOOCs do not lead to credentials – at least not yet – so they are not mainstream higher education. Another reason that MOOCs are marginal is that they do not fit into a secure economic framework. Universities offer MOOCs free but find it difficult to cover their costs. I shall come back to that.

MOOCs are not a revolution – but they are very important for the future evolution of higher education. That is why open universities like KNOU should engage with them.

As you know very well, most of higher education used to look down on open and distance learning as an inferior, low quality form of education. KNOU, like all open universities has had to work hard to convince students of its quality and credibility.

MOOCs have changed that perception because elite universities like Harvard, MIT and Stanford were the first to offer them in the US. That really made all other universities sit up! If Harvard was going online it must be OK. So a flock of universities decided to create MOOCs. According to a recent count there are over 3,000 MOOCs being offered around the world.

But the challenges have not changed. Most MOOCs do not lead to credits or credentials and most universities cannot recover the costs of creating and offering them.

That's why it is so important for open universities to engage with MOOCs. I give you three reasons.

First, open universities like KNOU know how to operate at scale. They have already solved the challenge of assessing thousands of students in a course and awarding credits as appropriate. Conventional universities find that difficult. Harvard is not interested in awarding credits for its MOOCs because it does not want to lessen the scarcity and exclusiveness of a Harvard degree. Other universities might like to offer credits for MOOCs but they do not have the systems to operate at scale.

KNOU can operate at scale and exists to be inclusive, not exclusive.

What about the economics? The conventional universities that offer MOOCs have tried various ways to generate income from their MOOCs. The most common is to sell certificates of completion. Universities are pretty secretive about the money this generates, but I don't know of any cases where the revenue covers the costs of producing and offering the MOOCs.

However, one unconventional university is not secretive about the economy of its MOOCs and is getting a return on its investment. That case should interest you because it is the UK Open University. The UKOU uses MOOCs – and its other free media – to attract students into its regular programmes where they pay fees.

The Royal Charter of the UK Open University (UKOU) tells it to promote the educational wellbeing of the community in general, which it does through MOOCs as well as BBC broadcasts and a large pool of open educational resources. The UKOU has carefully tracked those students whose only contact with it before they enrolled as fee-paying students in its regular programmes was with its free media. They amount to some 1,500 students annually, which gives the OU a return of about 8% on its investment in free media.

I leave you to reflect on whether KNOU can use MOOCs and open educational resources to attract students to its regular credit programmes.

The second reason that KNOU should engage with MOOCs is that they give you an opportunity to lead Korea's other universities into the online world. MOOCs have made online learning respectable, so now is the time for you to help the other universities do

open and distance learning well. In both the UK and Japan the open universities have taken the lead in creating a consortium of traditional universities to offer MOOCs. I myself have taken two MOOCs from the UK consortium, which is called FutureLearn and have enrolled in a third.

The third reason that KNOU get involved in MOOCs is to help prepare your own online future.

Now that open and distance learning is suddenly fashionable and respectable, other institutions are jumping in. KNOU must not be complacent about its present teaching model or it may get left behind. As I have said, you have important assets that other universities don't. You are able to operate at scale and you are skilled at using technology.

Moreover, all the evidence shows that the people who take MOOCs are KNOUs' natural clientele of working adults. Worldwide, 80% of the people who complete MOOCs already have university degrees. You have a terrific opportunity to offer MOOCs for professional development to these people and then to attract some of them into your regular graduate and continuing education courses.

I'll leave it there. I hope I have convinced you that MOOCs are not a revolution but a very important milestone in the evolution of higher education. Engaging with MOOCs will help KNOU to find the evolutionary niche in which it can prosper as the future unfolds.