Outside in: the fast-changing development of borderless models of higher education
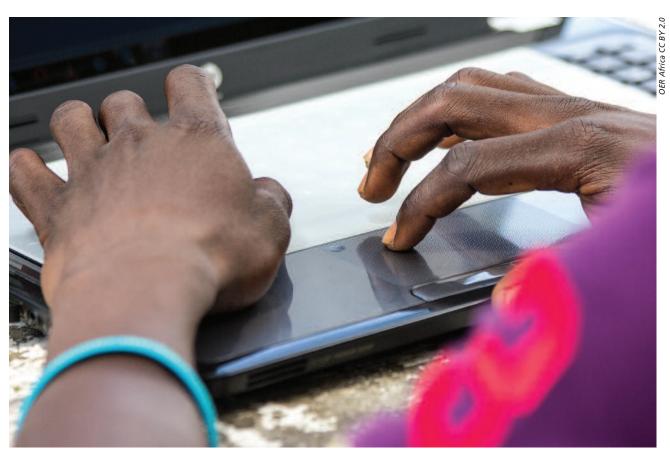
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Introduction

Higher education has been with us almost as long as the written word, with ancient institutions such as Nalanda in India giving way to Al-Karaouine and Al-Azhar in the Islamic world before the medieval European universities such as Bologna and Oxford took root. From the 19th century, new liberal ideas started to shape the role and nature of universities, bringing the dual research and teaching culture into higher education. This model of university spread to the USA and out again via a world going through momentous social change as war and population rises fuelled social mobility and the growth of much wider educated classes and a corresponding massification of higher education in one country after another.

These waves of massification are still rippling through the world as higher education and skills are increasingly perceived as the fuel of knowledge-based economies and national wealth development. Most current forecasts see an increase in participation in higher education of an order of around two million a year for the coming decade, with the majority in India and other fast-developing economies. A thousand new universities a year might be able to keep up with demand but it is unlikely that capacity will grow at this rate, despite an explosive growth of new teaching institutions of higher education mostly in the private sector.

In 1996, four years after the first widely used web search engine came into being, Manuel Castells published his prophetic and enormously influential *The Rise of the Network Society*. In it, he observed the beginnings of a very different basis for the development of society as it moves into an information age. This information age is characterised by the primacy of knowledge as well as by a very different politics of knowledge. Gone are the old knowledgocracies of libraries, teachers and savants rationing and

Most learners accessing MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) already have one or more degrees – but this is changing

controlling access to knowledge. The current generation has grown up with relatively free and open access to knowledge; with greatly expanded social networks and new conceptions of learning based on connectivism coupled with an increasing reliance on peer support and a 'just-in-time' rather than 'just-in-case' attitude to knowledge. The technological changes, nascent at the time of Castell's writing, now fully support this new model of autonomous and peer-oriented learning. The financial stresses and strains the global economy has been through over the last few years have reinforced a trend that was already surfacing for other reasons – a questioning of the value of formal education and rising expectations on the quality of higher education generally.

A new education revolution

Against this background it is not hard to understand the headline 'The End of the University as We Know It' in January's *American Interest*. A few years after Castell's work, Clayton Christensen published *The Innovator's Dilemma*, picturing waves of disruptive innovation moving through such industries as publishing and music. Many see the rise of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as evidence that such a period of disruption has arrived in higher education. MOOCs are new. The most prominent MOOC, Coursera, was founded last year by Daphne Koller and Andrew Ng out of Stanford University, USA. Within 12 months it has garnered over four million adherents and played a part in the new education revolution.

The University of London's MOOCs programme

In late 2012, the University of London International Programmes launched four courses on the Coursera platform and started them with over 200,000 registrations in June this year. The courses last six weeks and are free with no entry requirements. Why did London decide to do this? The International Programmes are not new and have existed under their former designation as the University of London External System since 1858, when they were as pioneering as MOOCs are today. The International Programmes currently have 54,000 students studying in over 180 countries and are a low-cost way of acquiring a prestigious degree wherever you are in the world. The International Programmes has found MOOCs interesting for a number of reasons:

- Firstly, the Coursera platform gives us access to a large number of people interested in furthering their education in innovative ways

- Secondly, MOOCs are interesting because they offer ways to experiment with providing an enhanced but affordable learning support for distance learners

- Thirdly, the strong level of interest from countries such as India and Brazil. India is one of the top users of MOOCs and this may be an indication of changing attitudes to distance and flexible education in a country with one of the biggest open learning universities in the world but a great degree of ambiguity about this form of learning. India is often cited as the country with the greatest likely increase in students entering higher education over the coming years as well as the country where the supply-demand equation is likely to be under greatest strain

As an access-oriented set of programmes, we are always interested in how to provide more pedagogic support in such areas as

formative assessment at low cost, thus enabling us to keep students' fees as low as possible.

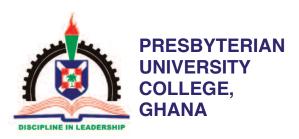## MOOCs: arguments for and against

Are MOOCs going to sweep away traditional universities? I personally doubt this very much, and despite some momentous headlines in the press along these lines, the majority of media coverage and critical analysis sees no immediate major threat to traditional universities, particularly at undergraduate level where the vast majority of students look for a traditional campus experience with close support and a strong social component. It's worth noting that the majority of MOOC participants already have a first degree, and many have a second or even third. However, it is also clear that this picture is changing. Young, gifted students at school are taking extra degree-level studies to supplement a curriculum that doesn't sufficiently challenge them, and an increasing number of entry-level courses are appearing in MOOC format. One of the potentially most significant changes that MOOCs has brought to higher education is a change in expectations. When you can tune in for free to a world-leading academic walking you through the essentials of micro-economics, why would you want to spend time in a lecture hall listening to the same subject?

A large number of universities are taking this on board and are experimenting with pedagogic approaches that include MOOCs, preferring to use the class time to analyse and discuss – the so-called 'flipped classroom' model.

Many critics see MOOCs as a 'flash in the pan' and point to the lack of clear purpose, business model and pedagogy. It is true that, despite considerable experimentation in business models that match free aspects of learning to paid-for access to certification and credits, no winning model has yet emerged. Other business models involve potential employers as paying users of MOOC databases, and there are a variety of other experiments going on. This is likely to be a fast-moving environment. Critics also stress that the pedagogic approach of most MOOCs is based on cognitive-behaviourist principles that have been the mainstay of pedagogy for decades and so represent nothing new or revolutionary at all. This may well be true, but may not remain so as MOOCs are rapidly evolving with features such as peer assessment on a large scale playing an increasing role.

We also see some work on connectivist MOOCs harnessing social media to play out learning through diverse and fluid networks. The work going on in MOOCs represents an enormous educational laboratory that is producing massive datasets. These datasets are starting to feed back into the pedagogical models producing innovative designs, with the holy grail being a learning experience that is tailored around each individual's needs and adapting itself as the learner moves forward.

Personally, I see two very clear advantages to MOOCs. One is the 'just-in-time' nature of learning, making it easy to learn a skill or area of knowledge at a time when it will most benefit the learner. And the other advantage is that the MOOC movement seems to be encouraging multi-disciplinism where it has become easier to take a course in philosophy alongside one in computer programming. In a world where the majority of innovation is at the boundaries of disciplines, this could help bring significant change to society.

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The University of London International Programmes has now concluded its first series of MOOCs and we will be evaluating what we have learned as we ponder our next move, but it is clear that MOOCs are now a part of all our lives in higher education.

Acknowledgement

TIM GORE (tim.gore@london.ac.uk) is director of Global Networks and Communities for the University of London International Programmes. Tim's main role is the development of the networks and communities of stakeholders that are crucial to the reputation and brand of the International Programmes. He is a regular speaker on: university international strategy; reputation and risk; transnational education; online delivery; and MOOCs and student experience. Tim has previously held senior leadership positions with the University of Greenwich, London, and the British Council.