

MOOCs are not the answer to our education challenges

Small Private Online Courses (SPOCs) provide much better learning outcomes



ASHWIN DAMERA

When MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) were launched a few years ago, many observers felt that they would change the face of education. When some of the world's leading business schools joined the MOOC revolution, people finally took notice of the potential. Finally, world-class education would be available to the masses, and that too for free! Over the last few years, MOOCs have shown impressive growth numbers. Class Central—the MOOC aggregator from top universities—notes that there were 35 million students enrolled in MOOCs in 2015, up from 18 million in 2014. Impressive.

It's easy for observers sitting in India—the country faces a huge demand-and-supply mismatch when it comes to higher education—to feel that MOOCs are the answer to our higher education challenges. After all, India's gross enrolment ratio in higher education is 22%, one of the lowest in the world. Our country is young, with almost 300 mil-



If you were a professional, would you opt for a course that was free—a MOOC—but where only 5% of its students pass? Or would you prefer to attend a school that charged a small fee for globally-accepted quality education, but boasted of a 90% success rate?

State students and 73% out-of-state students had failed the courses. San Jose

from your peers as you can from faculty. Peer-to-peer learning assumes greater

HBX CORE—has an entrance exam, group discussions, grading and feedback, and a proctored final exam. Class sizes are about 300, larger than the typical HBS MBA class, but much smaller than a MOOC classroom. These sound great, but the primary difference is the key success indicator—a 90% completion rate. HBX CORE costs \$1,800 and has enrolled over 10,000 students so far.

In the Indian context, professionals

rolment ratio in higher education is 22%, one of the lowest in the world. Our country is young, with almost 300 million people in the 19-35 age group, and education is key to inclusive growth.

Asenticing as MOOCs might be, they may not be the solution to India's education challenges. Let me elucidate.

► **MOOCs have very low completion rates:** Only 5% of enrolled students complete a free MOOC. This is not surprising. It's boring to be learning by staring into a computer screen. It's also lonely, since you are learning by yourself. And you rarely get any feedback or encouragement.

► **Learning outcomes aren't assessed:** Even for those 5% that complete a MOOC, very few studies have been done on progression learning outcomes. Questions to gauge such learning outcomes include: Can the students apply the concepts in a workplace setting? Can they solve complex problems synthesising the learning?

In January 2013, San Jose State University formed a partnership with Udacity to provide three MOOC classes for college credit, thereby saving college tuition cost. However, by the end of the semester, nearly 57% of San Jose

State students and 73% out-of-state students had failed the courses. San Jose State has since ended the experiment.

Similar has been the experience of University of California; it launched the Online Instruction Pilot Project. Three years and \$7 million later, it shut the project due to poor learning outcomes.

► **MOOCs provide few assessments and little feedback:** How do you know how well (or not) you are learning key concepts? If completion is tied to watching a few videos and answering a few quizzes, how do you assess knowledge for higher cognitive skills like interpersonal skills, ability to abstract information and make decisions, creativity, etc? A key element missing in MOOCs is structured assessments and personalised one-to-one feedback.

If you recall your school years, there was perhaps a moment where a teacher gave you some feedback that you still remember. Also, exams fulfilled the role of structured assessments. Imagine going through school, with no feedback or assessments at all!

► **Humans learn best socially:** Quality education is based on the assumption that you can learn as much

from your peers as you can from faculty. Peer-to-peer learning assumes greater significance when it comes to workplace skills. An education that prepares students for career skills must embrace peer-to-peer interaction. Unfortunately, MOOCs are predominantly a one-way street, and a lonely one at that.

Does this mean that online learning is ineffective and that we should rely only on the classroom model? Not so.

Small Private Online Courses are a better option

An emerging trend in higher education is SPOCs—Small Private Online Courses. They too deliver faculty lectures on video, leverage technology for their learning platforms, and provide insights from the world's best faculty and Ivy League schools. But they also provide the many missing elements that MOOCs don't.

A great example would be Harvard Business School's HBX CORE offering. An MBA from Harvard might set one back by \$150,000 or more. Not everyone can get in or afford to. But instead of offering its content on MOOCs, Harvard decided to create a SPOC. This SPOC—

tion rate. HBX CORE costs \$1,800 and has enrolled over 10,000 students so far.

In the Indian context, professionals can now access SPOCs like ours at a fraction of the cost of an IIM or ISB education. Like HBX, there is an entrance exam, students work in small learning groups, most classes have project work or simulations and live tutoring to make the learning stick, and a mobile app to foster social learning. Importantly, the grading system is not limited to multiple choice questions, but based on project work, proctored exams and manual grading of assignments.

If you were a professional, would you opt for a course that was free, but where only 5% of its students pass? Or would you prefer to attend a school that charged a small fee for globally-accepted quality education, but boasted of a 90% success rate?

Let's not make India's students and professionals settle for less.

The author is executive director, Emeritus Institute of Management—a collaboration between MIT Sloan School of Management, Columbia Business School and the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth