

Shaping the future of higher education

If MOOCs fulfil their promise of being a catalyst for innovation, they can become complementing partners to uni-



**K VAIDYA
NATHAN**

This summer with Coursera, I am teaching my first massive open online course (MOOC): *Introduction to Financial Markets*. In the last five weeks since the course has been launched, I have been glued to the discussion board where some 5,000-plus visitors to the course wrote their thoughts, first impressions and reasons for joining the course, and some shared concerns or complaints about the platform and course elements.

Currently, the 10-week course is under way, and I periodically check the ratings page to see feedback on the quality of the course. With a rating of 4.7/5, I am told it is one of the highest ratings in the platform. I observe the analytics page to see how many students are learning and engaging with the videos. As a re-

searcher and data enthusiast, I am beginning to see a valuable side to the MOOC experience—immediate and quantifiable feedback on my teaching. At the same time, this immediate feedback is almost overwhelming, considering that the only instant feedback I am used to is by gauging expressions and body language cues of students during lectures. All of this live feedback while the course is progressing has kept me suspended somewhere between anxiety and excitement.

It all began with a cognitive storm and a Coursera workshop in Hong Kong to reach the point of teaching a MOOC. I had been both intrigued and apprehensive about the rise of online education. Like many educators, I believe it is important to implement curricula, programmes and teaching technology based on research supporting their efficacy. Yet academic research to support online learning has not kept pace with the growth in this domain. Despite my reservations, I reasoned that online learning, much like Amazon and Uber in other online verticals, will at least occupy a small pie in the future of higher ed-

ucation. Further, the ISB was the first B-school in India to be chosen by Coursera for a partnership, guided by a mission to educate students for lifelong learning, which compels clinical faculty like me to be familiar with this new medium.

I was and still am fascinated by the growth in online avenues of MOOCs and beyond. New courses, new forms of degrees and hybrid programmes that blend traditional with online learning, where learners end up with the same credential as those who are campus-bound, continue to thrive. The heady headlines have not so much as faded, as become just a normal part of the news-cycle, both within the higher education media as well as in newspapers globally. Even institutions that had initially taken a cautious view about the evolving nature of higher education are starting to adapt. Har-

vard Business School dean declared recently that he had gone from being sceptical of online education to becoming a “super fan.” Given the rapid pace of converts among the educators, let me hazard some guess about how online learning may shape the future of higher education.

I see five trends that stand out to possibly exert a genuinely transformative impact on higher education in the times to come.

MOOCs disaggregate course content, making teaching assets available to any faculty. Rather than displacing faculty members, a resource repository of multimedia material can give them valuable tools to make teaching more effective

First, online learning platforms will democratise higher education. Until now, only a select few students had the opportunity to learn from world-class faculty limited by geographical reach of universities. Now students have access to courses from the best faculty globally.

A related transformation is that the benchmarks for classroom teaching are be-

coming higher because of this democratisation of higher education. Recently, I was at my *alma mater*, IIT Kanpur, for a talk and I choose to attend an electrical engineering lecture for fun and nostalgia. I was pleasantly surprised to find that some of the class demos from online platforms had reached the prehistoric lecture theatres of my *alma mater*.

Third, industry and academia could come closer with industry folks getting to learn as and when they choose to, on topics relevant to their workplace. The *Wall Street Journal* recently reported that Coursera has begun to partner with major financial institutions, such as the UBS, to develop cutting-edge courses on banking and finance for their employees. So, online education can facilitate a more symbiotic relationship, where the academia can reach out to the learning needs of the industry through this medium.

Fourth, platforms like Coursera can disaggregate course content and make teaching assets available to any faculty to use. Rather than threatening to displace faculty, a resource repository of multimedia material could give faculty

iversities

members valuable tools to make teaching more effective. A good parallel is to think of it as akin to what JSTOR did for journal content.

Finally, with vast amounts of rich data that online platforms are accumulating about student engagement and learning, collectively this can help enhance our understanding of student motivation, instructional design and the personalisation of learning pathways.

As e-tailers like Amazon have changed shopping experience vis-a-vis that of department stores or an online transportation network such as Uber is beginning to change our public transport experience, online learning can transform higher education. If online learning platforms fulfil their promise of being a catalyst for innovation and learning, they will become complementing partners to universities in shaping the future of higher education.

The author is a finance faculty at the Indian School of Business, Mohali, and visiting faculty at the School of Business, University of Connecticut