MASSIVE ONLINE OPEN COURSE (MOOC): A NEW HERO ON THE BLOCK

Sulaiman M Yassin

The Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) has made an impact amongst many universities in the West, particularly in the United States, in that some universities are considering the inclusion of such open online courses in their regular curricular offerings. Although there is still much research to be conducted in evaluating their effectiveness, relevance and utility, the sheer magnitude of the phenomenon compels some immediate response from educational and training organisations. Basically, it is a better packaging of online course offerings, employing renown experts, providing more innovative and insightful communication of learning content worldwide and to a large extent at no negligible charge. Now more than two years old, MOOC is a novel way to use available technology to communicate with and teach large numbers of students and trainees. Although it has caught on well in the West, universities and organisations in the East and other developing countries have yet to follow suit. Whilst many universities still question the philosophy and wisdom of the new mode of "interfacing" with students, others question the status of intellectual properties of the professors and/or the universities they belong to, whilst others worry about sustainability and how the does the online system recover its costs. These are lingering issues that this article shall allude to in sharing this "new kid"or "new hero" in the online communication media.

The New Vista

Anyone who has been paying attention to higher education these last two years will have heard of the MOOC ī courses from prestigious universities offered for free online. There ē been great interest in them from academics, students and employers alike. And the major players are already establishing themselves and their place. This has been made possible by the pervassiveness of the internet as a communication tool that has been made cheaper and more accessible with new advances in high-speed data transfers and gadgets such as the wi-fi, lately more
ubiquitous and more mobile.

It would probably be fair to call "Mooc" the biggest buzzword or the "new hero" in higher education in 2012. Moocs have been embraced by elite US institutions including Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Stanford, which use them to offer courses that may be undertaken for free but do not carry any academic credit. Designed for very large numbers of learners to follow over the internet, Moocs have inspired hope that high-quality elite education can reach the masses even in far-flung corners of the globe. An estimated 3 million people worldwide - many from the US but significant numbers from developing countries as well - have already signed up to study one. With almost daily announcements flowing from universities across the spectrum about how they plan to position themselves in the fast-moving world of Moocs, it seems a good time to take stock of the phenomenon and to examine its trajectory.

Even though there are concerns about plagiarism, increasingly universities are considering giving course credit for completion of these subjects. The evaluation process has already begun in America with a new project by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to assess whether these courses are worthy of credit towards a degree or diploma. Some Australian universities have already begun to embrace this mode of delivery, while others have warned that offering courses for free may devalue other university offerings. Other than in Australia, MOOC has not really caught on in Asia yet, but I think it shall be a consideration of educational and training institutions soon enough.

This article proposes to examine some of the discussion on MOOC and serves to provide some introduction to the current issues and trends that surround MOOC. Although the MOOC mode is found in many ventures started by several universities and organisations, it seems pertinent to limit this article to cite just two significant developments, they being the Salman Academy and Cousera.

The Salman Academy was started by Salman Khan, who was a hedge-fund consultant in California. His online tuition via the internet of his niece in Florida, was found to be useful and engaging by other kids and parents. One of the parent was Bill Gates who made a substantial contribution. This was followed by others and Salman Academy has since flourished. One can register in any one of the courses online and they range from school courses to learning about almost anything and in any subject. That is the amazing wonder that the Salman Academy can offer.
Coursera is an educational technology company offering massive open online courses (MOOCs) founded by computer science professors Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller from Stanford University. Coursera works with universities to make some of their courses available online, and offers courses in engineering, humanities, medicine, biology, social sciences, mathematics, business, computer science, and other areas.

The founders envisioned a future where the top universities are educating not only thousands of students, but millions. Coursera’s technology enables the best professors to teach tens or hundreds of thousands of students.

Through this, they hope to give everyone access to the world-class education that has so far been available only to a select few. They want to empower people with education that will improve their lives, the lives of their families, and the communities they live in. Coursera currently hands out unbranded certificates but plans in future to offer university-branded ones for a small fee, a proportion of which will be passed to institutions, says Andrew Ng, its co-founder and director of the Stanford Artificial Intelligence Lab. The company is also piloting a job placement service and is licensing the courses to other universities that wish to offer them to their own student.

The Good Values and the Challenges to MOOC

MOOC has now made possible for many universities to have some portion of the curricula to be using what is available online, whilst residential teaching makes up for the rest. Students can now be taught by and communicate with the world’s best professors who are available anywhere around the globe. In so doing, courses remain cogent and
current with offering frontier knowledge and skills, not just to a classroom, but to thousands (even hundred thousands) of students online.

MOOC has now raised many implications to teaching and research. Other than reexamining the pedagogical foundations, the teaching-learning debate and the style of learning that MOOC inspires, research can also examine the macro or generic and philosophical issues that it conjures. This include the old debate of credibility and inclusiveness of attributes and employability skills and at the same time reexamining and clarifying MOOC’s threat to hagemony, its sustainability and tangible impact as a learning and communication approach. Some universities have begun to credit students for completing MOOCs run by different institutions. The University of Helsinki, for example, is offering credit for a Coursera class on human-computer interaction as a substitute for its own local course on the same topic (although students must pass an exam administered by Helsinki to claim the credit). One of the inherent problems is the high drop-out rate of the courses. Another is the apparent lack of motivation and perhaps incentive to be engaged in discussion groups after each online session. These are but some of the features of MOOCs that are being researched into.

MOOCs also offers excellent opportunities for professionals and workers to upgrade their knowledge, skills and expertise. Proof of completion of online courses have been well received by employers as they consider it a boon for their human resource development when workers are duly recognised and even compensated for their additional qualifications and enhanced capabilities.

Some Emergent Issues

In many ways, MOOCs are reincarnations of venerable forms of teaching such as the school of the air and the Open University. But one significant difference is the hype and the rhetoric around MOOCs. There is nothing new in universities offering teaching resources free online, either. From video and audio recordings of lectures to reading lists, many academics already archive educational material on the web where it can be accessed for free as an open educational resource.

MOOCs, however, are different in that they are structured courses that run over set periods with cohorts of students who are taught by instructors and. A MOOC package is not like a tape of a lecture. However, it is an original course packaged for online to attract hundreds of thousands of students - a volume play that has not been seen before. Unlike others, MOOCs cannot be reused under open licence by anyone who wants to do so. And, despite the aura of innovation around MOOCs,
critics do not see much that is novel in teaching methods on many courses - there is little that is pedagogically adventurous about the instructional model commonly used in a MOOC, in which a student views a lecture on a computer. Advocates portray MOOC as an all new but it is actually old pedagogy.

**MOOCs ISSUES AND CONCERNS**

The Current Value Proposition:
- Education Access
- Experimentation
- Brand extension

What Remains To Be Seen:
- Business Model
- Pedagogy

Issues to Consider:
- Intellectual Property
- Identity and Credit
- Open Courses, Credits and Degrees

Questions that Leaders Should Ask:
- Why jump onto the MOOCs bandwagon?
- What is our institutional capacity to offer MOOCs?
- Where do MOOCs fit into our institution’s e-learning strategy?

A new world of wonder is promised, but the skeptics claim that the destruction of learning is threatened. The innovation is said to be opening access to the world, but might make the profession more precarious and less studious. Enthusiasts argue that it is transforming elite schools, but critics say it devalues the metaphysics of presence and the direct face-to-face value in teaching-learning. In short, the current value proposition is exciting as it multiplies educational access, allows for experimentation and enhances a university’s brand extension. That is a good communication and outreach proposition. However, is it really new and more effective in the long run?

As alluded to earlier, several issues remain cogent especially those that relate to the intellectual property, credit rating and the actual credence of massively open and online courses.

Some institutions view MOOCs as potential recruitment and marketing tools to reach new students, particularly those overseas, who may be interested in undertaking traditional degree programmes, perhaps at branch campuses. University of London International Programmes,
which offer degrees via distance learning, made a strategic decision to offer MOOCs as part of a bid to catch the attention of individuals in developing countries whom it might not usually reach. The university hopes that its MOOC move will translate into greater uptake of its international programmes.

Much has been made of the potential for Moocs to disrupt traditional forms and models of higher education. By expanding high-quality tertiary education to huge numbers of learners for free, MOOC could, it has been claimed, challenge some universities' business models and potentially push down the cost of higher education. Under this scenario, the elite universities that will always have a surfeit of students willing to pay for a campus experience are the least likely to be threatened. But other institutions could find themselves squeezed, say experts.

In the East and less developed countries, the current stance is perhaps more of a "just wait and see," whilst others raise questions and ponder as to whether it is timely or prudent for them to indulge and partake in the MOOC tsunami elsewhere. Should they or can they and when? These are questions that they need to find answers to, the sooner the better.

Prof Emeritus Dato’ Sulaiman Yassin is a Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of Social Science Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). He has a wide experience in higher education, international work and actively involved in non-governmental organizations such as the Poverty Eradication and Malaysian Peace Foundations. Currently, his research concerns are in quality of life and well-being, happiness index development and in youth sustainable livelihood and pathways. His last post was as the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Malaysia Terengganu.