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Every day, most newspapers, online news digests and education newsletters include articles about Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

By Dr Shelley Kinash

In today's Higher Education environment, when educators are talking about *disruptive innovation*, they are usually talking about MOOCs. The term MOOC was first used in 2008. MOOCs are a web-based form of distance education. One of the recent news articles is about an American university now offering a Master's Degree in Computer Science through a series of MOOCs for just over AUS$7,000. This article Mulls-Over Out-there Curriculum (MOOCing about MOOCs). The article presents distinctive features of MOOCs, reasons why MOOCs have created such a fuss, problems with MOOCs, and the implications for teachers and teaching.

There is wide variance in the defining features and the quality of currently running MOOCs. However, there are 10 features that commonly differentiate MOOCs from other forms of distance education.

1. MOOCs are often untethered, or at least on a long lead, from universities. When universities offer subjects through distance education, they are offered only to students enrolled in that institution. MOOCs are usually stand-alone subjects in which anyone from anywhere can enrol.

2. A social network is an important component of MOOCs. The design of many MOOCs resembles Facebook in that students can friend, like and post to one another.

3. MOOCs often balance real-time (synchronous) and anytime (asynchronous) learning activities. For example, there will be times where the professor and students are online at the same time chatting through voice or text. Other activities are designed to allow the student to go online anytime it suits their personal schedule.

4. There are often enough materials and exercises made available to the students from the time they enter the MOOC that they are able to self-pace their learning. They are usually not tied to the traditional university

semesters. Enrolment and completion is often staggered or completely unscheduled. Taking as much or as little time as they need, students earn their certificates/credit when they have completed enough modules or *earn enough badges* to qualify for completion.

5. While sufficient materials are provided for self-pacing, MOOCs often also use a timed release design. Educators avoid overwhelming students with excessive content by pre-setting release dates so that the curriculum is revealed over time.

6. Many MOOCs apply the concept of adaptive learning. The difficulty and challenge of content and exercises adjusts to the student's level. For example, if a pattern is emerging in that a student is repeatedly erring on certain content areas or fundamental skills, the system will automatically provide remedial instruction and test building block concepts.

7. Adaptive learning is a technology-enabled design feature. Many MOOCs take advantage of the latest technologies that enable or enhance learning.

8. Rather than requesting that students mail-in assignments, most MOOCs are designed to use eAssessment. Students complete their assessment activities online and/or submit online, and some are computer-scored.

9. Much of the content of MOOCs is multimedia. MOOCs are often rich in video and some use game-based learning.

10. Content is usually segmented into short units. For example, there are series of five- to 10-minute instructional videos interspersed with learning activities and assessment.

There are three reasons why some universities are offering or are in the stage of developing MOOCs. The first reason is about marketing. Many MOOCs are designed as a try-before-you-buy marketing strategy. Some universities are developing a small number of MOOCs featuring their rock-star professors and disciplines in which they have achieved

international standing. Through high-quality MOOCs, prospective students have a one-subject experience of what they can expect through a whole degree at the university. Whereas some MOOCs are free, offered purely as an extended advertisement, the business model of other MOOCs is such that students who pay will earn university credit and those who take it for free, do not.

The second reason why some universities are offering MOOCs is explained by the sand-box concept. Many of the features of MOOCs described above, such as adaptive learning, multimedia and timed release, make them compelling pedagogical platforms. Innovative educators use MOOCs to experiment with emerging approaches, new pedagogies, and technology enhanced and enabled learning.

The third reason why universities are going ahead with MOOCs is because open access to education is a modern day value. Many educators believe that it is unethical to restrict learning. There is a widespread belief in open sharing of knowledge and learning. For many, this includes no-cost quality education.

While many universities are developing, offering and crediting MOOCs put online by their own and other institutions, others are resisting. Some learners are excited about MOOCs and complete them for credit or for an uncredited contribution to lifelong learning. Other learners state that they have no intention of ever participating in a MOOC.

There are at least 10 main problems that have yet to be resolved in the MOOC terrain:

1. There is a high drop-out rate. Estimates vary, with some news articles listing drop-out rates of 40-85 per cent. It seems that some people want to get on the MOOC bandwagon, but then do not follow through. Surveys from people who have failed to complete MOOCs state that it was not what they expected and/or that the quality of the MOOC they tried was poor.

2. By definition, MOOCs are online. The debate over the virtues of online versus face-to-face learning has had a much longer history than that of MOOCs themselves. Many educators believe that higher level learning requires hands-on experiences. Advocates for a blended approach believe that some learning content and activities are best suited for online (e.g. multimedia lectures) whereas others must be facilitated face-to-face with educators present (e.g. labs).

3. Some people, including many employers, believe that MOOCs and online programs in general produce sub-standard or lower tier graduates. A high proportion of surveyed employers have indicated that they would not consider graduates from university programs offered via MOOC or that they would provide a higher rank to applicants with on-campus degrees. A contributor to this issue of status and stigma is that there is less control over the student cohort. MOOCs often have no criteria and poorly developed pre-requisites for student enrolment, meaning that there is less chance of having a community of scholars with whom to study.

4. MOOCs have proliferated before a rigorous and robust business model has been developed. There is no standardisation of fees. Will the university charge for the MOOC? More than or less than other subjects? How many MOOCs is a student allowed to take from beyond the institution and still receive the parchment from the university in which the student originally enrolled? Is there cost-recovery for the original university?

5. An overlapping gap is in the development of a crediting system. Who decides which MOOCs are credited for which programs in which universities? Will there be a global master-list of transfer credits? Will there be an accreditation process and quality audits? What is the order of operations? For example, does a student need to apply for approval from an institution prior to enrolling in a MOOC in order to obtain credit? What if a learner independently completes the equivalent of a degree by enrolling in MOOCs from many different universities from around the world? Is there a university who will grant a degree based on the transcripts from each institution? Will there be an assembling cost? What if the subjects are offered through corporations rather than universities?

6. Will MOOCs become the enactment of an Ivory Tower Imperialism? Many universities fear that large, well-funded universities will become dominant and eventually subordinate other universities to extinction. Educators fear that creative, out-of-the-box thinking and culturally situated ways of understanding will disappear. There is a fear that a few powerful universities will situate themselves to offer, credit and advertise MOOCs, and that the current context of diversity and multiculturalism through numerous universities in each nation will be replaced by online global learning through a few dominant institutions.

7. Quality MOOCs are resource demanding in the design, student administration and teaching phases. Educational design for MOOCs requires a team who understands the discipline and curriculum, pedagogy, contemporary students, and technology-enabled and technology-enhanced learning. They require multimedia designers and production teams to develop high-quality multimedia digital content. MOOCs require people with expertise in adaptive learning and timed release. Registering and communicating with students becomes more complicated when there is ongoing enrolment and completion outside traditional semesters. With MOOCs balancing real-time and anytime learning activities, educators are required to moderate and facilitate. Some universities provide live tutors and trouble-shooters dedicated to MOOCs.

8. MOOCs are new and young in their development. An additional problem will come into play when the original MOOCs have been offered for a number of years. Universities must invest time and money into keeping the content, pedagogies and technologies current, up-to-date and cutting edge.

9. MOOCs heighten intellectual property issues. Who has the copyright on online materials? If a professor who has recorded lectures for MOOCs moves to another university, do the lectures go with him/her? Can free open-access MOOCs be referenced? Who is credited with the production of new knowledge? How does this change the operational definition of plagiarism? Does plagiarism become more difficult to detect and control?

10. The final reason why many universities are hesitant to enter the MOOC arena is that they worry about sharing trade secrets. If a university's students are successful in winning international skill competitions, or if a program's graduates have an exceptional employment rate, the university may not want to share the ways in which they support these successes. The curriculum and teaching approaches may provide a market advantage to the university. Putting those strategies online for their competitors to see may be counter-productive.

There are a number of implications and possibilities for teachers. MOOCs provide new possibilities for Continuing Education. Teachers may enrol in MOOCs in order to develop a new area of disciplinary expertise or expand and update knowledge of learning, teaching and educational technology. MOOCs also provide new professional opportunities for qualified teachers. MOOCs require teachers, tutors and markers, thus increasing employment prospects. Teachers and school leaders must consider the crediting potential for their students. Will your school encourage students to begin their university education while still in senior high through MOOCs? Will students receive school credit for MOOC completion? It is also predicted that MOOCs will expand beyond university and that schools (particularly private) will begin to develop and offer MOOCs.

There are varied opinions about the future of MOOCs. Some people believe that MOOCs will change and replace university as we currently know it. Others believe that MOOCs will die-off completely and be an interesting page in education history books. Still, others take a moderate view, believing that there will be a controlled number of MOOCs that will add options and variety to one's mostly single-university-based degree. In any case, the emergence of MOOCs has stimulated compelling conversations about learning, teaching and technology. **ETS**

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