

INSIGHT

Rise of online learning is a trend universities can't ignore

Naubahar Sharif says convenience and top lecturers are the big draws

Massive open online courses have generated much excitement, scepticism and consternation in tertiary education. Mostly university-level courses, they represent an important, potentially revolutionary development because they are offered free and open to anyone anywhere who has an internet connection and video-viewing capabilities. Those offering courses are mainly elite university consortia or are affiliated with elite universities.

Online education is not new. So what makes these courses unique? First is the potentially limitless scale of a free online education. To date, more than 5 million students globally have registered and that number is growing rapidly. Second, they connect students with the world's leading universities.

Recently, I was selected to offer what *The Chronicle of Higher Education* called "Asia's first massive open online course". Some 17,000 students have enrolled.

Massive open online courses provide distinct benefits. My own survey highlighted high-quality lectures. They provide students with the flexibility to control the speed at which they learn without having to travel, and a first-rate lecturer – even through an internet connection – communicates more effectively than a textbook. Students can also learn greatly from their peers in online discussion forums.

Still, such courses have their drawbacks. The most glaring is the absence of meaningful face-

to-face engagement with instructors. Many wonder whether content-related knowledge alone constitutes a "higher" education without other social skills one would acquire in a typical on-campus university setting. Even if education can be effectively absorbed in isolation, can it be effectively applied in isolation? Dropout rates are extremely high, and cheating and plagiarism can be rife.

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nevertheless a great equaliser for students. Given how easy it is for students to access lectures by distinguished professors, Hong Kong must consider whether teaching roles will remain for its non-elite universities and, if so, what these might be. Why should students not seek instruction from engaging and committed professors from top-tier universities when it is readily and freely available?

There is, therefore, a danger that universities jumping on the bandwagon will be the only ones that count in offering a world-class education. This can create elitism. What then happens to

the non-elite institutions? Can they claim leadership in research? If so, will that lead to a "hollowing out"? Or will they find themselves excelling in neither education nor research?

Of course, massive open online courses may turn out to be a fad. But what if they are here to stay? What if course providers create a viable business model? And what if it becomes possible to earn "real" degrees from elite institutions through such courses?

Such a scenario would probably narrow the higher education field, both locally and globally. There will be a few clear-cut winners, and many unfortunate losers. Such shifts may lead to the consolidation of higher education into a less diverse academic ecosystem.

Finally, while these courses may be a huge equaliser for students, they may end up creating a breed of celebrity professors of disproportional fame. These professors would enjoy unprecedented influence over the direction of their respective academic fields by virtue of the enormous student enrolment in the courses. Whether such a change is healthy is an open question.

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