

CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL LEARNING

Online education is well-established in the information studies discipline and continues to mature. In recent years, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have disrupted the steady evolution of online learning design that, to a large extent, mirrors the academic semester. MOOCs were initially free of charge, with high non-completion rates, but have evolved to include fees for dedicated teaching or submission of assessment, resulting in university awards rather than certificates of participation. In the information studies discipline, the open online course, New Librarianship, provided by Syracuse University in the USA is free for participation, yet fees are charged for accredited learning for professional development and academic credit.

The University of Canberra has adapted the MOOC concept, in conjunction with the University's Moodle platform and other learning technologies, to deliver a four-unit Graduate Certificate in Contemporary Information Practices in 2014. The course has been designed to offer a pathway into the Masters of Information Studies (Online) and to offer a flexible, and relatively inexpensive, option to knowledge and information workers seeking a formal qualification in their field.

NO AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY CAN AFFORD TO IGNORE THE POTENTIAL OF THIS PHENOMENON AND THE IMPACT IT MAY HAVE.

Open content is provided to prospective students in the form of opening modules for the four units of study. Each open module contains lecturers' subject material, links to web-based open resources and a set of self-assessment exercises. At the end of the module, learners have the choice of enrolling in the unit and/or enrolling in the complete course (or doing neither). If they enrol in the unit, then they will have access to a dedicated Moodle site for the unit, with further modules, links to other resources,

including library esubscriptions, self-assessment exercises, a communication hub and assessment tasks.

MOOCs challenge traditional models of online learning design. The education sector continues to promote online learning designs that stipulate and facilitate active participation by students and teacher, with interactions designed to maximise social engagement between learners and teachers and between learners and their peers, despite the fact that postgraduate students are time poor and frequently learning in a workplace social context.

In preference to teacher-led interactions, the University of Canberra initiative expects all communications in the online learning environment to be the initiative of students without prompting from the teacher. This is clearly communicated to students at the beginning of the unit of study. All students are postgraduate and can reasonably be expected to recognise and respond to their own learning need and communicate with teachers and/or other learners. Without intensive tuition, this MOOC style of delivery can mean a significant reduction in the cost of undertaking further study, often seen as a barrier to postgraduate education.

Self-directed learning is also amplified and made more authentic when an individual student is not bound to a pre-defined schedule for learning. A different assessment model has been implemented, in which students have a single assessment item, composed of a series of tasks that are undertaken throughout the learning of the unit and submitted on completion. New flexible enrolment periods allow students to enrol in units of study at any time during a five month period and to complete and submit assessment when they are satisfied that they have achieved the learning outcomes of the unit, whether it is after five months or an intensive three-week break from work. In this way, students are liberated from the confines of a finite semester of 12 to 14 weeks and a requirement to learn in step with their teacher and peers.

For some universities, consortia of MOOCs are a viable business enhancement. For others, the commitment to MOOCs may not fit well within the business and educational landscape. No Australian university can afford to ignore the potential of this phenomenon, however, and the impact it may have on the future of the academy.

DR STUART FERGUSON AND
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR SALLY BURFORD
University of Canberra
stuart.ferguson@canberra.edu.au