WEBINAR: OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES AND MOOCS: WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE?

2 October 2013, 16h00 Paris (France) time

HIGHLIGHTS

The two speakers:

- Speaker and Moderator **Dirk van Damme**, Head of the Innovation and Measuring Progress Division in the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills

- Speaker **Alex Katsomitros**, Senior Research Analyst at the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (OBHE)

The presentations gave an overview of Open Educational Resources (OER) and Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) and looked into details into the benefits and challenges of each.

The potential benefits for education, including at the tertiary level, are huge:

- improving access of underprivileged learners to quality resources

- reducing the cost of developing learning materials

- improvement of quality, diversity and richness of learning resources in formal education

- innovating learning practices in formal education

- raising effectiveness of post-secondary education

- fostering lifelong learning and connecting formal and informal learning

- opportunity for institutional profiling to showcase excellence and to brand the institution's name in the global reputation race

But there are also some risks:

- how to ensure quality of OERs

- language, geographical and cultural bias

- unbalanced streams of OERs between developed and emerging countries

- sustainability of business models in developing and distributing OERs

- interoperability issues: users may find it difficult to locate, download, adapt and use regardless of platforms

- impact on bricks-and-mortar universities regarding pedagogy and the student experience

- evolution of different business models related to the production of knowledge (publishers…).

The following pages present some of the key highlights and participants' responses to the instant polls[1].

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1. For technical reasons, some participants were not able to participate in the polls.

Highlights of the discussion

The presentations clearly stated that e-learning and OER policies in universities are about much more than just technology. They also connect to various other issues, which range from matters of strategic institutional management, such as the overall mission and purpose of the university, approaches to credential granting and funding models, to new opportunities to better address 21st century skills demands and facilitate the creation, dissemination and management of knowledge. However, there can be a gap between the benefits presented and the reality for the universities. For example, are MOOCs really about widening access when the most important developments suggest they are part of the search by universities for new business models and competitive positioning?

Many exchanges were around clarifications of definitions, as well as comparisons with other existing online teaching and learning tools and methods. Several participants mentioned that OER should not be conflated with MOOCs and other types of e-learning that are not "open", but are based on participating in a specific, institution-based, programme. Even the word "open" doesn't always mean the same thing: it may mean free of charge for students to participate or for faculty to use materials in their own teaching, but can also refer to the fact that students can attend courses without having to meet specific entry requirements. Conversely, some courses presented as open may not always be free of charge. There may be costs to obtain certificates or "badges" of completion, and licensing issues may generate costs for the use and re-use of online materials.
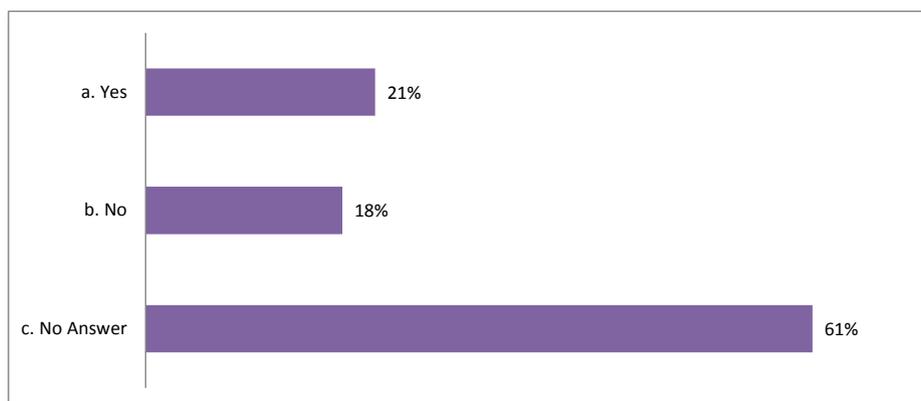
Several participants highlighted the fact that the increase in buzz words around the OER phenomenon is hiding different realities. Others reminded the other participants that the speed of change makes it difficult to follow the trends. The debate around the definition suggested that for many higher education actors the difference between all these concepts is not clear.

Definitions of OER

"Digital learning resources offered online (although sometimes in print) freely and openly to teachers, educators, students and independent learners in order to be used, shared, combined, adapted, and expanded in teaching, learning and research. They include learning content, software tools to develop, use and distribute, as well as implementation resources such as open licences." (UNESCO[2])

"OER are teaching, learning, and research materials in any medium that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others. An open license is one that allows anyone to access, reuse, modify and share the OER." (Hewlett Foundation[3])

Do you have a clear vision of the challenges and benefits of e learning for your organisation?

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2.   http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/access-to-knowledge/open-educational-resources/
3.   http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education-program/open-educational-resources

Questions for discussion: What do you see as the benefits of using OER?

- Is it creating new opportunities for your institution (business, branding, portfolio…)?

- Is it creating positive changes within your organisation (attitude, time…)?

- Is it widening access (for disadvantaged students, lifelong learners...)?

- Are you experiencing an efficiency gain and cost savings?

- Is it improving the quality of teaching and learning? If yes, could you share examples?

- What do the students and/or the academic staff of your institution think about online courses?

- Are there any particular skill gaps that OERs and MOOCs are helping to address in your country?

- How do you manage feedback on the experience from the various stakeholders involved?

- Have you noticed any unexpected benefits?

Several participants questioned the success of MOOCS and the reasons behind the exponential media coverage over the past five years. However, despite challenges, MOOCs enable students from all over the world, regardless of their background, to get access to quality material, either for free or a for a minimum fee of around USD 50-100 if they want a certificate. At the moment, technological advances are among the major factors behind the success of MOOCs, in particular due to the increased development and use of Web 2.0 tools, which are user-centred. A combination of other factors further contributes to large-scale enrolments in MOOCs, including a) soaring amounts of student debt in the Anglo-Saxon world, most notably in the U.S. and b) demand for education in the developing world, including key source countries where the economy is booming and there is a growing middle class. If these are some reasons why MOOCs have become increasingly popular, they don't necessarily determine what the outcomes will be. At the end, as stated by one of the presenters, these will be increasingly determined by political and economic interests, not just technology.

Concerning the new practices linked with MOOCS, most of the platforms have incorporated peer-to-peer learning and assessment into their courses. For example:

- student communities on social networks such as Facebook

- social spaces integrated into MOOC platforms, e.g. discussion forums or even virtual town halls

- face-to-face meet-ups around the world

- peer grading.

With regard to assessment, some participants mentioned that, "if MOOCs are starting to get assessed and students get certificates and want to get a grade after completing a number of MOOCs (necessary for a BA), then it is more or less like an ordinary course/programme offered by a virtual university". One of the presenters reminded the participants that one major difference is the massiveness of these platforms: Coursera, for example, has around 5 million students. An individual university, no matter how good it is, could not reach that many students within one or two years.
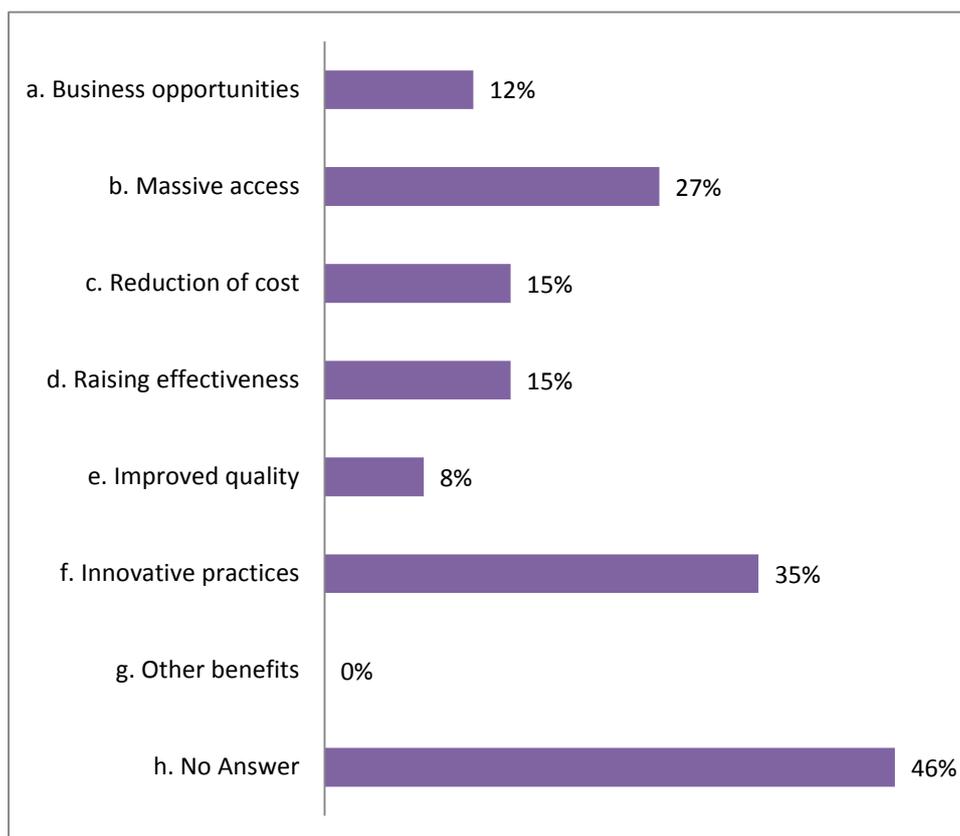
Another important issue is the so-called "undbundling"[4] – or "decoupling" as Bill Gates called it – of provision from qualifications.

Soon, stated a presenter, we should see a MOOCs ranking based on what students think about MOOCs.

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4. **Definition**: "Unbundling means the rise of alternative provision pathways which may have relevance for a greater diversity of students in more parts of the world." Lawton, W. et al. (2013), *Horizon Scanning: What will Higher Education Look Like in 2020?,* The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (OBHE), U.K, p. 8.

On this subject, different recent OBHE reports say that education will be more and more informed by data over the next seven years. This trend will result in extremely different "formative" assessment models, allowing educators and students to know almost up to the minute how a student is progressing, where they are struggling, and how to accelerate their learning. Such a highly personalised environment will result in the opportunity for schools to provide learning that is optimal for the learner in terms of time, place, context, situation, etc. In addition, student success will be much more easily measurable and, therefore, easier to promote. Machine learning will begin to replace some assessment.

What, for you, are the main benefits of e-learning for your institution?

Category	Percentage
a. Business opportunities	12%
b. Massive access	27%
c. Reduction of cost	15%
d. Raising effectiveness	15%
e. Improved quality	8%
f. Innovative practices	35%
g. Other benefits	0%
h. No Answer	46%

Questions for discussion: What challenges are you experiencing?

- What, for you, are the main business challenges (high costs, uncertainty of the market, speed of innovation…)?
- What do you think will be the pedagogical impact of MOOCs?
- Are you able to articulate online and face-to-face teaching?
- Do you have a good knowledge of your students' use of e-learning?
- Is your academic staff ready to move to new approaches based on e-learning?
- How do you monitor the feedback from the practitioners and users of e-learning?
- Do you get strong support from the leadership of your organisation?
- What information would you still need to help you make the best decision on e-learning for your organisation?

One of the main challenges raised is the issue of quality assurance: who should look after the quality of OER and MOOCs? MOOC platforms, HEIs, public authorities, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, none/all of them?

Several participants stated that the irony is that those recent developments that have been labelled as "disruptive" and innovative are in fact highly restricted and conservative in their notion of what "learning" really is. There is a dominance of the one-directional transmission of information and crude assessment forms.

Others mentioned that "massive" should not be the route used to move all the recognition and validation issues, which are not easy to handle, to the university. At this time, the main MOOCs platforms rely on the universities for these functions. A presenter mentioned that some new initiatives are appearing in the area of quality assurance and credit recognition and validation: for example, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the U.K. is about to conduct research on the quality assurance of MOOCs, while the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in the U.S. is also very concerned about all these developments and is seeking the views of its members on this.

In general, he suggested that this issue is more easily manageable in a U.K. or E.U. context and would be more difficult in the U.S. because the sector there is more diverse and likely less regulated.

Regarding the more hidden agendas, it is clear that MOOCs can be used as a testing ground. For example, it can be used to test e-learning. As one participant asked, "Are many of the recent MOOCs really just examples of prestigious institutions who previously did not engage in distance learning beginning to dip their toes into the water and repeating many of the mistakes some of us made decades ago?"

MOOCs can also be used for marketing purposes, as some universities are indeed using MOOCs as free trials for their programmes in order to attract fee-paying students. But this is just one aspect of the MOOCs phenomenon, as there are already examples of MOOCs integrated into degrees (Udacity is about to launch a Master's degree in partnership with AT&T and Georgia Tech) and curricula.

Do you see OER and MOOCs as a threat or as an opportunity for your institution?
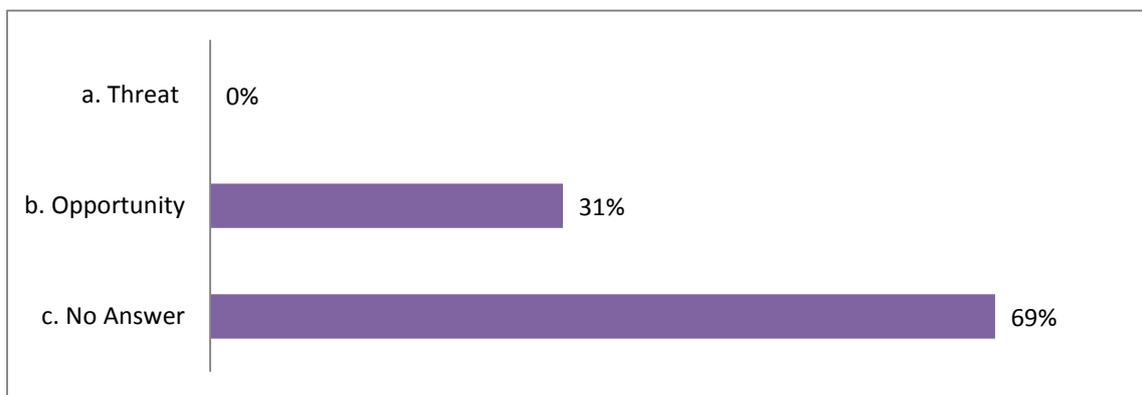
Access to academic material and copyright issues are also crucial. For the moment, as one participant stated, "In many MOOCs, they are only releasing the content for which they own copyright. Therefore, the experience is very different from on-campus or full fee-paying students who get access to publisher content." This issue is closely related to the disruption in the publishing sector, the open access movement and new business models. MOOC platforms are working on this issue and some interesting movements are emerging. For example, Coursera has established partnerships with five academic publishers, as well as Chegg, an online platform for textbook rental and sales. This model may be an opportunity for academic publishers, which are pressured by universities and governments to reduce the cost of journals.

Finally, several participants highlighted the culture-centric aspect of OERs, given that Anglo-Saxon platforms dominate this market. On the other hand, it seems that most developing countries see OERs as an opportunity to answer the need to access high quality learning material in a fast way and at minimal cost. It allows them to access knowledge that is not available in any other way. For example, Coursera has a partnership with a university in Tanzania to address skill gaps in ICT. Brazil is also an example of an ambitious project of OER development and the provision of courses in Spanish and Portuguese should develop quickly in the coming years.

In the end, MOOCs might gradually legitimise the use of online education in countries where it is not well-developed or viewed as inferior to face-to-face education.

Conclusion

The future of OERs was also a key issue in the discussion, as it is difficult to predict the evolution of the technology and how disruptive MOOCs can be to the higher education market. Opinions on this point diverged to some extent: some participants suggested that "there won't be an 'avalanche' - change will be incremental, an evolutionary shift rather than an avalanche of change". For others it is less subtle, but open access and MOOCs can be seen as complementary trends that will create some new business models.

Finally, the potential role of OER to foster lifelong learning and address the need to update skills to enhance individuals' employability concluded the debate.

Behind all those proclaimed benefits and challenges, rigorous evaluation studies of OERs practices and policies are rare and, more generally, the evidence base on these proclaimed benefits is not yet well developed. For example, many recent results have shown that students who already have experience (and confidence) in learning constitute a large portion of MOOC users. MOOCs are not necessarily able to meet the widening access challenges for those who have not been able ever to participate in higher education.

The OECD is continuing its work on OERs and starting new research on the evidence based on OER mainly with regards to the economic, social, educational and innovation benefits of OER.

Thank you for your interest. We hope to have the opportunity of meeting you at a forthcoming conference!

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