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Open web courses are massively overhyped



By Michael Skapinker

The latest innovation misses an important social point and is in many ways too good to be true

They are calling it higher education's "Napster moment". Harvard Business School's Clayton Christensen, leading chronicler of corporate decline, says universities are going to be upended by "disruptive innovation".

Sir Michael Barber, chief education strategist at [Pearson](#), owner of the Financial Times, says: "An avalanche is coming." And to those who say universities have seen off threats, such as distance learning, before, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology put out a press release that said (really): "This time is different."

They are talking about Moocs: massive open online courses, which put the world's most famous professors on video, online. Why pay huge sums to attend a top university when you can listen to the same lectures on your iPad for free?

Some of the organisations springing up to promote Moocs are non-profit. Others see an opportunity to make money.

Among the latter are Coursera, which has signed up 62 universities and is looking at possible revenue sources such as career placement services; edX, led by Harvard and MIT, aims to be "self-sustaining".

How much of a threat do Moocs pose? Is Prof Christensen right that these low-cost courses will do to universities what Napster did to the music business and mini mills to the steel industry? Here are three reasons why Moocs may be massively overhyped:

- What students learn is less important than where they learnt (or didn't learn) it. What do you remember from your university courses? The odd author who inspired you, the occasional professor's phrase? Good universities open us to new ways of thinking, but most of what we memorise for examinations we forget a week later.

That doesn't matter much, because it is rarely relevant to employment. What are employers after when they take on someone from a university such as Harvard or Oxford? They think they have found someone who was smart enough to win a highly competitive place and had the discipline to make it to the end.

By admitting them, top universities tell employers who the brightest students are. Business schools do the same. No one imagines a newly graduated MBA is ready to run a business. Employers hope top new graduates are literate and numerate. They know they have to teach them everything else.

What of less illustrious universities? In his recent report, Sir Michael notes that many employers are unhappy with graduates' work skills. Some universities, including former UK polytechnics, strive to make students more employable by getting them to work on real company projects early on. But this requires more effort and individual attention: hardly a low-cost, mass-market Napster moment.

- It is difficult to concentrate on a video lecture. Some online lecture sites boast impressive numbers of hits. But how long are people watching before they flip to Facebook? In the news business, we regard three minutes as an impressive amount of time to keep video viewers watching. Five minutes is a triumph.

- The number of people who want to attend lectures in person is growing. Professors who complain about how few students turn up should examine their techniques. Other speakers draw vast crowds. Jewish Book Week, London's largest literary festival, this month sold 10,000 tickets. The Hay Festival, which takes place in the Welsh border town of Hay-on-Wye in May, last year sold 254,000 and has sister festivals from Mexico to Bangladesh.

All 30 debates and talks hosted over the past year by Intelligence Squared, the UK organisation that has licensees in New York, Hong Kong, Sydney, Melbourne, Athens and Singapore, sold out, even though you can watch them online.

Why do people like being there? Because a public event has atmosphere, and because you learn from those around you what is worth listening to. If you snooze, you do so together. When people laugh, or lean forward, you realise something significant has been said. The learning is social.

Harvard and MIT this month hosted a summit on the coming online education disruption. Several university heads and Moocs champions turned up, in person, for three keynote addresses, three panels and a dinner.

I would like to tell you more, but the video of the event is, as I write, unavailable, so I don't know whether anyone present spotted the irony.

michael.skapinker@ft.com

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