

*MOOCs and Graduate Education:
Uneven Benefits?*

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Massively Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, have primarily served as a model for delivering undergraduate coursework, yet their potential impacts on graduate education have captured the attention of many graduate institutions. One of the first forums to explore the MOOC model in the context of graduate education was a session at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), “Online Learning in a Global Context and the Role of MOOCs.” Among the session participants was Anant Agrawal, President of edX, a MOOC provider co-founded by Harvard and MIT. Dr. Agrawal’s stated aspirations for edX courses are common among MOOC providers: to provide free, high-quality courses to students around the world. Broadening access to higher education is also the mission of Coursera, another highly successful MOOC provider based at Stanford University. Coursera’s vision is clearly articulated on its website:

We envision a future where everyone has access to a world-class education that has so far been available to a select few. We aim to empower people with education that will improve their lives, the lives of their families, and the communities they live in (“Our Mission,” n.d.)

Despite the democratic language used to support the MOOC model, the trend has raised questions about the nature and the distribution of its benefits. Many in the CGS community have noted that students are not necessarily the winners when serious questions remain about the quality of student experiences in these courses, and the adaptability of the MOOC model, which has been used in large part for introductory courses, to graduate education.

The CGS graduate community voiced a number of other reservations about MOOCs at a 2013 CGS Summer Workshop in a session titled “The Role of MOOCs in Graduate Education.” Some concerns not already mentioned above included: the challenges of verifying student identity if MOOCs are credit-bearing; pressure on institutions from state legislatures who might see MOOCs as a more efficient and less expensive delivery model for graduate education, but which might overlook critical issues related to quality; new challenges for assessment of courses and student learning; policies for accepting transfer credit from students who have participated in MOOCs; and investments in the training of faculty to deliver high-quality courses in a MOOC platform. A question repeatedly raised in this forum was whether graduate schools could better achieve their educational missions with traditional online courses that are not “massive” and “open.”

Uneven Benefits for Institutions and International Students?

In the two CGS meeting sessions held on the topic of MOOCs, many members of the CGS community observed that the MOOC model has the potential to affect institutions in unequal ways. The fact that MOOCs were initially an experiment by a select number of elite institutions has led many to wonder whether smaller or less highly-resourced institutions could survive in a

world where prestigious universities are offering coursework for free or at minimal cost. This worry goes beyond concerns about graduate education business models. As one dean expressed it at the 2013 CGS summer workshop, MOOCs may introduce the “danger of elitism” if the proliferation of course credits at high-ranking universities were to devalue credits earned in face-to-face courses at less prestigious ones. The dean added that students who begin their education in MOOCs could require additional mentoring and counseling as they adjust to other forms of coursework.

Experts in international education have also pointed to the potentially uneven impacts of MOOCs on students and institutions in different countries and regions. A recent article in *Inside Higher Ed*, “The world is not flat,” explored three issues that may limit the portability of Western MOOCs to other countries and cultures: language barriers; varying cultural expectations about pedagogies and learning environments; and limited access to the internet (Rivard, 2013). To be fair, some MOOC providers have already begun to address these concerns. Both Coursera and edX have added international institutions to their network of MOOC providers, a move that may possibly diversify the content and pedagogical styles offered in their course lists. Coursera has also launched a “Global Translation Partners Program” that has leveraged a network of alliances to translate courses into Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Kazakh, Portuguese, Russian, Turkish, and Ukrainian, with additional languages to be added in the future.

Of course, one of the difficulties of assessing the impacts of MOOCs is that they are so quickly evolving and adapting as new institutions join the large provider networks and student demand increases.

Looking to the Future

CGS will continue to organize discussions of the MOOCs given our membership’s strong interest in understanding and responding to this delivery model for undergraduate education, and—looking ahead—to graduate education. According to a 2013 “Pressing Issues” survey of CGS member institutions, MOOCs were the 6th most frequently cited issue of concern to graduate deans.

Yet CGS member views of graduate-level MOOCs are not wholly skeptical. One idea that generated excitement at the CGS Summer Workshop session was the possibility of creating MOOCs for the delivery of broad professional development courses focused on transferable skills for graduate students. Would MOOCs of this kind address the growing demand for centralized training that graduate-level faculty often don’t have the time, or the training, to provide? Future CGS discussions of online education and MOOCs will assess these and other ideas as MOOC platforms continue to evolve.

References:

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