

Panel 5: Risks and Benefits of Online Learning and MOOCs

Panel Summary

Given the ongoing debates surrounding online learning and Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs), it seemed appropriate that an entire panel of the Global Summit be devoted to exploring the risks and benefits of these modalities. Panel 5 focused specifically on questions concerning the administration, assessment, and outcomes of online learning platforms. Speakers from Canada, Hungary, Malaysia, and the United States considered topics and questions that apply to online education in general as well as to MOOCs, specifically:

- *Assessment and Credentialization in Online Education:* What challenges characterize the assessment of online graduate programs? What issues do graduate leaders need to take into account throughout this process, i.e. verification of student participation, credentialization, and the assessment of student learning?
- *The MOOC Model and Graduate Education: Will it Work?* Is there evidence to promote the MOOC as a promising model for graduate education? What aspects of the MOOC model are most suitable to graduate-level curricula? How would the MOOC model need to be adapted to better advance the distinctive features of graduate education?
- *The Uneven Impacts of MOOCs:* What does the MOOC movement mean for smaller institutions, or institutions with fewer resources to implement and sustain them? How do we hold MOOCs accountable for achieving student learning outcomes? How might widespread free access to graduate curricula affect graduate programs more broadly?

The panels that focused specifically on MOOCs enabled summit participants to delve more deeply into questions concerning their impacts, real and potential, on graduate institutions and programs.

Offering the perspective of both a graduate dean and a faculty member who has trained other faculty in online learning methods, **Zaidatun Tasir** (Universiti Teknologi Malaysia) shared some of the practical issues that Malaysian universities face in administering online programs to graduate students. Currently, the Malaysian body that accredits graduate programs does not accredit any wholly online programs, but does support the integration of online learning into graduate programs. Responsibility for quality assessment thus rests solely on administrators and faculty members. These groups must find ways to assess learning in the absence of behaviors and body language that, Dr. Tasir points out, are traditional signs of student engagement.

The next set of presentations by **Marie Audette** (Laval University) and **Ernő Keszei** (Eötvös Loránd University) addressed the question of whether MOOCs are adequate to meet the demands of graduate education. Providing some recent examples of ambitious models of mass-delivered online graduate degree programs, Dr. Audette argued that more information is needed about the outcomes of these programs before the value of the MOOC model can be adequately assessed. One promising change in the MOOC model outlined in Dr. Audette's paper is the emergence of new "MOOC typologies" that encourage the construction rather than the

transmission of knowledge. Dr. Keszei also offered a cautious perspective on the integration of MOOCs in graduate education, positing that MOOCs best serve the purposes of graduate education when used as “auxiliary material” for more traditional models of delivery that provide face-to-face instruction. This supportive role for MOOCs, Dr. Keszei suggests, is appropriate because the diversity of students’ educational needs at the graduate level demands personalized attention from skilled faculty that the MOOC model cannot alone deliver.

The final presentation for the session, by **Julia Kent** (Council of Graduate Schools), addressed the potential tension between the “democratization” of higher education promised by some MOOC providers and the fact that MOOCs are delivered in environments of unequal resources. MOOCs have been associated with institutional elitism due to the fact that they were initially developed by prestigious institutions, as well with Western models of higher education. The Council of Graduate Schools has used annual meetings and the summit itself as opportunities to understand the varying impacts of MOOCs on its U.S. and global membership.

Discussion Themes

The discussion raised a number of critical questions about how the graduate education communities defines and conceptualizes MOOCs. **Zlatko Skrbis** (Monash University) and **Nicky Solomon** (University of Technology, Sydney) pointed out that the term is often used in multiple and sometimes conflicting ways. For example, the “MOOC” is sometimes used to refer to private, fee-based courses that do not truly meet the criterion of “openness” that is a defining feature of the traditional MOOC model. The instable and evolving nature of the MOOC term was also illustrated by the range of possible MOOC types and definitions referenced in the discussion: the Small Private Online Course (SPOC); “citizen MOOCs” designed for general education; introductory MOOCs that require no prerequisite courses, and “advanced MOOCs” in specialized topics were notable examples. In this changing environment, Dr. Solomon noted, it is important for the graduate community to be active in articulating, and creating, the meanings of terms and concepts associated with the MOOC modality.

A second strand in the discussion concerned the proper role of MOOCs in graduate education. Consistent with ideas and examples in the presentations by Drs. Audette and Kent, a number of participants suggested that the MOOC, and online education more generally, was a promising medium for professional development or transferable skills courses for students during and following graduate study. In many ways this purpose for MOOCs resembles the use of online education to provide general education or introductory classes to undergraduates. In the context of graduate education, it has the potential to relieve the burden on programs and departments of providing training in broader skills.

Funding models for MOOCs—along with the impact of MOOCs on current funding models for graduate education— also received significant attention. **Barbara Knuth** (Cornell University) said that in addition to private investors in MOOCs such as Coursera, government entities might also fund up-front costs, as evidenced by a recent model for graduate student professional development courses offered through the NSF-funded Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CIRTL).

Dr. Knuth and others also addressed how these models, once funded, would impact the larger enterprise (and funding models) for graduate education itself. A world in which degree credentials were gradually replaced by “bundles” of MOOC certificates would not only raise questions about the quality and assessment of these credentials, but could also undermine the funding models of graduate institutions, which often partially rely on undergraduate tuition to

fund both graduate programs and foundational research. These potential impacts challenge the view that MOOCs are simply “free” courses that efficiently and effectively distribute the benefits of higher education. The graduate community will need to continue to closely monitor their impacts—pedagogical, financial, and institutional—on graduate institutions and their future students.