

***Innovations in Online Program Delivery:
Who are the Drivers?***

**Nicky Solomon
Dean, Graduate Research School
University of Technology, Sydney (Australia)**

Good practices in online curricular innovations for doctoral programs are more likely to occur when the innovation is not solely driven by the emergence of new technologies. Indeed, curricular innovations, whether on or offline, are a consequence of a number of factors including the changing profile of students, the internationalization of research and doctoral programs, and accompanying shifts in understandings and practices to do with doctoral education. It is also useful to locate any discussion of good practices of online program delivery on the fact that online programs have been developing over decades, and that shifts and changes have been incremental ones, until, arguably, the emergence of MOOCs. Importantly though, the curriculum implications and the cost challenges of MOOCs have yet to be understood, let alone resolved.

Online program delivery can refer to various aspects of doctoral education – from the delivery of disciplinary content, to supervisor practices, to online student communities through social networking technologies, to online researcher development resources, etc. Some key inter-related challenges that curriculum innovations need to take account of include:

- quality of supervision practices;
- the high cost of doctoral education to the university;
- the high percentage of students who work in full-time jobs and study part-time as well as full-time student who work to top up the relatively small stipends that are attached to scholarships; and
- the frequently experienced isolation of doctoral students.

At the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) a recent curriculum innovation has been the design of a Framework for Doctoral Education. A key ongoing question, and arguably a challenge, is how this Framework works with the emergence of innovative online delivery platforms. The UTS Framework is underpinned by a number of principles, including, importantly, the idea that doctoral education has a dual purpose: advancing knowledge plus development of a researcher. The Framework has, therefore, been designed to provide more structure and support for the growing doctoral student population where the profile is changing substantially. International student numbers are growing, and both international and domestic students are entering with more diverse cultural, professional, and educational backgrounds. Key features of the Framework are:

- the integration of formal and informal coursework covering discipline content, research methodologies and professional skills;
- increased formal assessments – one to confirm candidature, the second to confirm advanced progress, and the third to assess readiness to submit a thesis;
- each student has a doctoral study plan, which is individually designed and negotiated through ongoing consultation between supervisors and students:

- the doctoral study plan has a number of elements that are intended to describe the attributes of a high quality researcher, such as: to be a responsible and ethical researcher
- research independently and in teams
- plan and organize project/s
- develop research skills and knowledge
- communicate research to various audiences.

A feature of the Framework is that students' study plans can draw on a number of existing online resources. One key resource in terms of learning Research Methods and Professional/Transferable skills is the e-Grad School. The e-Grad School was developed by the Australian Technology Network, an alignment of universities to which UTS belongs. The key users are doctoral students and no fees are required for the two non-award courses: Learning Employment Aptitudes Program (8 modules) and Modules Online for Research Education (6 modules). Two fee-paying award courses are also available: Graduate Certificate in Research Commercialisation (4 units) and the Master of Research Management and Commercialisation (12 units). In addition, UTS is a member of a consortium of Australian and New Zealand universities that established FIRST, an online website that provides online doctoral supervisor development resources.

In terms of coursework, at UTS there is an increased amount of activity, mainly face-to-face, but also online that comprises discipline area and research method modules at the local level and professional/transferable skills centrally. It is a combination of department, research center/strength, and central activities. The local is still a powerful source of knowledge and training opportunities.

While UTS has made a decision not to ignore the MOOCs opportunities, at the same time, at this stage the university has decided not to fully embrace MOOC courses. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, UTS has made a major financial investment in new campus buildings. It is an inner city campus and while moving away from large lectures, it is constructing the campus as a campus "to be in." Also, in terms of doctoral education, the university is making particular choices about where to allocate doctoral resources and the current focus is on supporting student travel to conferences, equity grants, topping up stipend scholarships, etc.

Nevertheless, MOOCs are potentially likely to open up access to "areas of knowledge" experts and large groups of peers, for students who are not able to come to campus. Like some other online classes, it can provide good virtual company, and may well be supported by high-quality digital production. International doctoral students want "real" company, but they also want access to content anywhere, anytime. Nevertheless, there are concerns by some about the quality of the pedagogy in MOOC offerings. In addition, "whether massive open online courses are the approach that will win out and bring real change is not clear" (Lewin, 2013, August 17). Currently, the discussions are driven by business plan questions and questions about whether or not MOOCs are transforming universities. Educators need to have a more prominent place in these discussions; after all, quality lies within the pedagogy. Meanwhile though, it is likely that increasingly doctoral applicants will include completion of MOOC modules and courses in their applications and furthermore, doctoral students will increasingly seek "content" through MOOC offerings. So, a key challenge for universities is how to position themselves in an online world when they are not the only drivers in the uptake of innovative online programs. Students will be key drivers.

Reference

Lewin, Tamar. (2013, August 17). Master's degree is new frontier of study online. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/18/education/masters-degree-is-new-frontier-of-study-online.html>