Credit for MOOCs

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INTRODUCTION

The availability of Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, has been around in different formats for many years. While the term MOOCs seemed to rise in popularity in 2012, online and open enrolment courses have been offered by post-secondary institutions for years. With the advancement of technology, the ability to deliver educational content to a larger audience free from geographical restriction has become not only prevalent but widespread. Many institutions were eager to jump on board the MOOC trend in 2012, believing that offering MOOCs would be a low cost solution to filling enrolment gaps, while at the same time providing access to education for students who would not otherwise be able to attend in person. As the popularity of MOOCs grew, the question of whether full credit could be offered became germane. The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of some of the existing literature on the awarding of academic credit for MOOCs, and discuss the implications for transfer for post-secondary institutions in BC.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the widespread study of MOOCs and their overall efficacy, the literature on academic credit for completion of MOOCs is relatively sparse. Therefore the focus of this review will be to discuss the history of MOOCs, the overall success and challenges with MOOCs, and the implications with regard to academic and transfer credit for students who successfully complete a MOOC.

The acronym "MOOC" has its origins in Canada in 2008, when a course titled "Connectivism and Connective Knowledge" was offered online by the University of Manitoba (Sandeen, 2013). The University decided to open the course to online "auditors" who were given the ability to take the course free of charge. To the University's surprise, over 2,000 students initially enrolled in the course. The success of the online offering led to a number of universities in North America experimenting with the open course concept. For higher education institutions, it was believed that offering a wide variety of courses in an online environment was a solution to the inability of some learners to access post-secondary education. Key to the concept of MOOCs was that they be based upon open resources, that they have no enrolment limits, and that they be free of charge for students. Rather than relying upon facilitation by faculty, MOOCs encouraged a community approach to learning, where interaction with classroom peers helped to facilitate and encourage learning. While the learning outcomes were the same as courses offered in person, MOOCs offered no academic credit for course completion.

As MOOCs gained popularity amongst students, it provided the impetus for three major MOOC providers. Established in 2012, Coursera and Udacity were two for-profit start-ups led by professors from Stanford Univeristy. A third provider, edX, was initially a partnership between MIT and Harvard University, and is now operated as a consortium by a number of universities (Sandeen, 2013). Numerous institutions developed and offered MOOCs either through one of these three platforms, or on their own online course software platforms.

The rise of MOOCs was hailed as a revolutionary, disruptive technology that could possibly change the shape of universities forever (Booker, 2013). No longer constrained by enrolment requirements or financial barriers, the notion of providing education to anyone

regardless of location was seen as attractive to the university mission. However as students began to enroll in courses en masse, a number of issues began to emerge with regard to course completion. Despite widespread enrolment in some courses, it was not uncommon for institutions to report successful completion rates in single digits. For example, MIT offered a course in Circuits and Electronics where only 4.6% of the 155,000 students enrolled successfully completed the course (Daniel, 2012). UC Berkeley offered a similar software engineering course through Coursera where only 7% of the 50,000 students successfully completed the course (Meyer, 2012 as cited by Daniel, 2012). Some estimate that overall completion rates for all MOOCs are less than 10% (Agarwala, 2013). While 10% is low number, it should be taken in the context of a course registration of over 100,000 students This represents a significant number of completions.

The challenges were not limited to course completion. Accusations of plagiarism and fraud have been rampant amongst critics of MOOCs. In a large community of learners, and in the absence of direct oversight by faculty, the quality of learning can be highly differential depending on the motivations and study habits of the students. Since the majority of courses do not offer credit, it has become difficult for students to leverage their learning into a meaningful credential that can lead to future employment. From an institutional perspective, the cost of delivery of MOOCs is not trivial, and a workable model to recoup costs has remained elusive. Some have argued that MOOCs have acted as a drain on academic resources, as institutions have invested thousands of dollars and staff hours in developing MOOCs that have not made higher education more affordable or accessible (Peterson, 2014). It has been estimated that 80% of students enrolled in a MOOC currently already have a post-secondary degree (MIT News, 2015). This raises questions about whether the completion of a MOOC is for the purpose of completing an academic credential, or a general interest of the participant.

ACADEMIC CREDIT

There have been numerous attempts to award academic credit for MOOCs. Institutions have pursued various options to try and validate learning obtained through MOOCs, with the goal of providing academic credit that can be used towards a credential. In 2012, Colorado State University-Global became the first college in the US to grant credit to students who successfully completed a MOOC. Students were eligible to pay a fee of $89 for a required proctored exam, whereby upon completion they would receive credit for their MOOC. A typical course fee at Colorado State University-Global was $1,050, so even with the cost of a proctored exam, the MOOC fee represented a significant savings for the student. As of 2014, not a single student has taken advantage of this opportunity (Negrea, 2014; Peterson, 2014). Georgia State University (GSU) announced in 2013 that they would consider granting prior learning credit for students who had completed a MOOC, provided students could demonstrate learning through an exam or an oral interview. However according to GSU's chief enrolment office, not a single MOOC taker has made a request (Rivard, 2013). In an effort to consolidate a group of MOOC offerings, the American Council on Education selected a total of 14 MOOCs offered by seven institutions with the goal of granting credit for any students who completed one of the courses, provided they enrolled in a tuition-based program at one of the partners. As with other initiatives to award credit for MOOCs, no students as of 2014 have sought credit under this arrangement (Kolowich, 2014). It does not appear that obtaining academic credit is a priority to the vast majority of MOOC learners.

In 2015, Arizona State University (ASU) in partnership with edX, announced the launch of the Global Freshman Academy which will offer a certificate comprised of MOOCs (Butler, 2015). This program of MOOCs differs from other MOOC offerings in that student transcripts will not differentiate between whether the course was taken online as a MOOC or in person. Students will only have to pay for the courses if they are seeking academic credit, and can even choose to do so after they have received their grade. It remains to be seen whether this model of MOOC delivery will be successful for ASU.

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DISCUSSION

Despite widespread popularity and high enrolments, it does not appear that MOOCs are having a significant impact on the attainment and completion of higher education credentials. As of 2014, Coursera had enrolments of over three million students, from 196 countries across 62 universities (Lepi, 2014). Yet despite these high enrolments, completion rates remain extremely low. With regard to transfer credit, very few students appear to be actively seeking academic credit for completion of their MOOCs, and the availability of transfer credit for MOOCs is largely non-existent. MOOCs appear to appeal to those who already have some level of higher education, and to those who are seeking knowledge of general interest without the need for credit or even course completion.

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There are numerous lessons that can be learned about the delivery of MOOCs to date. When MOOCs first rose to public consciousness in 2012, there was a sense that delivery of free, highly accessible courses from a wide variety of institutions could not only advance the enrolment initiatives of higher education, but provide access to previously untapped markets of learners. While some of these ideas have proven to be true, institutions to date have not been able to find an adequate solution for the amount of time and resources required to offer a MOOC. While the courses may be free for enrolment, there are considerable resources required to create, maintain, and deliver MOOCs even within an online environment. Several of the assumptions about what students were seeking in terms of credit and validation have proven to be false. In the rush to quickly develop and deliver MOOCs to take advantage of potentially higher enrolments, institutions could have benefitted from taking a more analytical approach to the way they deliver education, and determine whether the model will ultimately achieve the desired goal of delivering high quality education to a broader group of learners.

With regards to transfer credit in BC, there have been no indications that MOOCs are actively being sought for the purposes of transfer credit. Based upon the research currently available, transfer credit is not considered a high priority for degree seeking students enrolled in MOOCs.

FUTURE OF MOOCs

Distance and online courses have a long history in higher education. The more recent emergence of MOOCs as a platform can still play a role in higher education, however it may not be the role that many institutions originally envisioned. Much has been made about the low completion rates of MOOCs, however completion of MOOCs alone is not the only measure of success. MOOCs have shown that institutions have the ability to deliver education to large numbers of students. This may have an impact on the future class-size model for institutions. As more students engage in MOOCs, it is possible that MOOC completion may in the future be included in requests for Prior Learning Assessment (PLAR). This could lead to savings in time and effort for students and educational institutions alike.

Overall, MOOCs should not be viewed as a replacement of traditional higher education, but instead hold potential as a complement to traditional learning that may augment the current student learning experience. MOOCs as a platform for professional development, where they can be leveraged against future career growth, may also hold some value. MOOCs provide exposure to the type of curriculum and learning that will be expected of students who enroll in tuition-based programs. Therefore MOOCs allow students to experience the demands of higher education without requiring any financial investment. Likewise, MOOCs provide an opportunity for institutions to engage with students who may not have otherwise considered their institution for enrolment.

The fostering of relationships between students and institutions could lead to further enrolment at a future date. It remains to be seen whether a new financial model will emerge that will allow institutions to rationalize the investment in MOOC development and delivery. Should the private sector or public education sector be able to find a solution for the validation of learning, there may be future possibilities for the portability of academic credit.

Regardless of the future adoption of MOOCs for academic credit, the current delivery of MOOCs provides a lesson in making assumptions about what is being sought by the marketplace. When faced with future emerging technologies, higher education institutions would be wise to consider their experiences with MOOCs, and perhaps take a more measured, data-driven approach before deciding on the direction to proceed. Rather than taking a quick adoption approach to new technologies, institutions may be better served by spending more time determining their business model, and the goals they are seeking to achieve, before adopting an unproven technology with the hope of success at a later date.

When faced with future emerging technologies, higher education institutions would be wise to consider their experiences with MOOCs, and perhaps take a more measured, data-driven approach before deciding on the direction to proceed.

MOOCs SUMMARY

History

- First MOOC offered by University of Manitoba in 2008
- Popularity grew until 2012 when MOOCs were a popular trend in higher education
- Hailed as a revolutionary, disruptive technology that would change the shape of universities
- Some MOOCs had registrations of over 100,000 students
- Udacity, EdX, Coursera were established in 2012
- Academic Council on Education offered 14 MOOCs for credit in 2013

Results

- Completion rates were very low
- 80% of students already had a degree
- Costs to institutions were massive for delivery, yet no model for return on investment

Academic Credit

- Several institutions started offering academic credit for select MOOCs in 2012
- As of 2014, no students have sought or received transfer credit
- Obtaining credit does not appear to be a priority for the majority of MOOC learners

Discussion

- Enrolments in MOOCs remain high, while completion rates have not improved
- Application for transfer credit is largely non-existent
- Many institutions have realized that MOOCs cannot replace traditional learning
- MOOCs are not a supplement for enrolment gaps
- There does not appear to be a movement or desire from MOOC users for transfer credit

Future of MOOCs

- MOOCs have shown institutions can deliver education to a large groups of learners
- MOOCs do not represent a replacement to traditional brick and mortar education
- MOOCs hold potential as a complement to traditional education and also as professional development
- MOOCs provide opportunity for students to learn about the demand of higher education
- MOOCs provide institutions with opportunities to develop relationships with students that may be leveraged into future programs
- Remains to be seen whether a sustainable financial model will emerge
- Institutions may wish to take a more analytical view of adoption of emerging technologies prior to delivery

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