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MOOCs, institutional policy and change dynamics in higher education

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Abstract

The last couple of years have witnessed a growing debate about online learning in higher education, notably in response to the global Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) phenomenon. This paper explores these developments from an institutional policy perspective, drawing on an analysis of the initial stages of different approaches to MOOCs and e-learning being taken up at three Australian universities. It points to four commonalities emerging from the institutional constructions of these initiatives including (1) the use of e-learning policy as a vehicle for curriculum redesign; (2) an

emphasis on internal curriculum redesign as a core rationale for MOOCs; (3) a desire to capitalise on promotional opportunities but a reticence around wholly embracing the concept and structure of MOOCs and (4) the absence of access-driven concerns in university policy despite the prominence of such concerns in broader public debate. The approach is framed by a consideration of change dynamics in higher education and highlights the emphasis on internal university work within the policy narrative, suggesting this could represent an attempt to reframe the debate about MOOCs away from popular arguments about systemic disruption and instead use them to progress forms of change that align to broader strategic objectives.

Keywords: Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs); institutional policy; higher education curriculum; change dynamics

Introduction

Over the last couple of years, debate about online learning in higher education has intensified, notably in response to the global Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) phenomenon. MOOCs, as the name suggests, are subjects which are made freely available through various online platforms and have attracted significant numbers of student enrolments. The term MOOC has been around since 2008, but the concept began to generate significant media attention and debate in 2012 with the launch of MOOCs offered by or in association with prestigious US institutions through providers such as EdX, Coursera and Udacity.[1] In response to widespread media attention and debate, uptake of MOOCs has since spread globally. Coursera and EdX have partnered with elite institutions in Europe, Asia and Australasia, and new MOOC platforms have been developed including FutureLearn in the UK, OpenupEd and iVersity in Europe and Open2Study in Australia. This paper explores the MOOCs phenomenon from an institutional policy perspective, drawing on an analysis of the initial stages of different approaches to MOOCs and e-learning being taken up at three Australian universities. The approach is framed by a consideration of change dynamics in higher education (Maassen et al. 2012), meaning that unlike much of the broader commentary, it is interested not so much in the implications of MOOCs for the university system as a whole, but in how those implications are being understood and negotiated within institutional policy contexts.

The paper forms part of a broader research project which is investigating changing curriculum practices in the context of these new online developments, including in relation to the ways in which different sites, institutional policies and online forms encourage a particular approach to the curriculum. The approach is informed by traditions of policy sociology (e.g. Rizvi and Lingard 2010) and draws on interviews with curriculum policy leaders as well as documentary analysis to explore how particular

[1] This paper is concerned with these later forms of MOOCs, and not with the earlier and subsequent forms developed under a connectivist learning model as these typically remain on the fringes of institution-level developments (see Daniel 2013).

Australian institutions are organising their practices in response to global developments. The paper begins with a discussion of the international debate around MOOCs and higher education and goes on to identify commonalities in the framing and intent of institutional initiatives, and what this might suggest for change dynamics in the university more broadly.

MOOCs, e-learning and change dynamics in higher education

MOOCs came to popular attention amid a wave of excitement about their potential to open up access to university courses and challenge the elitist practices of the traditional university. Coursera's website announces that "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" (Coursera 2013). This narrative has been embraced by the media and popular reports were initially highly enthusiastic. The *New York Times* pronounced 2012 "the year of the MOOC" (Pappano 2012) and *Time Magazine* suggested that the study of MOOCs by an 11 year old Pakistani girl was evidence that after years of promise, "several forces have aligned to revive the hope that the Internet (or rather, humans using the Internet from Lahore to Palo Alto, California) may finally disrupt higher education" (Ripley 2012).

In response to this coverage, the past year has seen a proliferation of reports on MOOCs as governments, think tanks, and other bodies seek to understand, or define, their impact. These reports typically align with broader commentary and interpret the development of MOOCs as heralding great change for institutional practices and the university system as a whole. The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) report *An avalanche is coming: Higher education and the revolution ahead* (Barber et al. 2013), for example, proposes that MOOCs have the potential to drive an 'unbundling' of the traditional roles and functions of higher education in relation to research, curriculum content, teaching and credentialing. A review of the literature around MOOCs by the UK Department of Business Innovation and Skills (2013) suggests that the consensus is less inflammatory than Barber et al. suggest. However, they nevertheless affirm that "the disruptive and potentially threatening nature of MOOCs emerges consistently from almost every formal analytical report", and the typical conclusion is that "MOOC formats will pose huge challenges for existing HEI business models, for institutions at all levels, for pedagogy, and for international educational demand." (p. 59). These reports and the broader media coverage constitute the bulk of analysis of MOOCs to date and emerging research typically presents a similar narrative of significant change and disruption (e.g. Siemens et al. 2013, Lombadi 2013).

MOOCs, however, are hardly the first impetus for change in higher education. Over the past decades, university practices have changed considerably as government funding has waned and societal expectations for research and teaching have increased (Maassen et al. 2012, Maassen and Stensaker 2011). Universities have become more publicly accountable, more centrally governed, more entrepreneurially-minded and subject to greater cross-institutional comparison and competition. They are increasingly driven to meet external demands and ensure learning is practically meaningful for students, and curriculum construction has become more student-centred and more oriented to outcomes

and the skills and competences seen to best prepare students for employment (Karseth 2006, Barnett and Coates 2005, Muller and Young 2013). The use of technology in education is commonly held as an essential part of ensuring the institutional growth required to survive in a changing environment, and e-learning strategy is increasingly being used as part of institutional change management (de Freitas and Oliver 2005). Uptake of e-learning technologies has increased over the past decades, although research has suggested that change to core educational practices and profile has for the most part tended to be limited (Stensaker et al. 2007).

Maassen et al. (2012) argue that in this context there is a need to pay attention to "change dynamics" in higher education reforms to determine where change is driven internally and where these processes are overwhelmed by wider political developments, and to distinguish between reforms that stay within stable organisational and normative frames, and change that threatens the legitimacy of traditional ways of operating (see also Olsen 2007). This work directs attention towards institutional responses to wider demands for reform. If the dominant discourse is to be believed, MOOCs represent a powerful force for change on traditional university curriculum and teaching practices and the university system as a whole. They are developed within universities but delivered via new institutional forms and encompass new logics around modularisation rather than program coherence within a single field. What then are the rationales and policy logics (Maassen and Stensaker 2011) informing institutional decisions in entering this space and what might this imply for change dynamics in higher education?

Reports on take up of MOOCs by universities have identified their justifications or concerns as "access, experimentation and brand extension" (Educause 2012), with some acknowledgement of a herd mentality in what has been called "the stampede to produce MOOCs" (BIS 2013). Lombardi's report (2013) on Duke University's decision-making processes and institutional response to the possibility of MOOCs emphasises the initiative was begun in the "spirit of exploration and experimentation" to focus the attention of faculty on "innovative teaching strategies", as well as "showcase faculty" and support strategic goals around internationalisation, "knowledge in service of society" and interdisciplinarity (pp. 240-241). This paper provides some insights into Duke's public intentions in developing MOOCs but is primarily framed to give a positive rationale for institutional strategy. In the current competitive university environment, e-learning strategy is a fiercely protected space and there is typically limited critical examination of the nuances in institutional responses, particularly where MOOCs are concerned.

Institutional policies on MOOCs and e-learning

This paper takes up these issues through an examination of the introductory framing of e-learning policies at three Australian universities. This includes two former technical colleges which are developing MOOCs for an Australian platform (University 1 and 2), one of which is also expanding its online offerings through an external provider (University 2), and one elite research university that has partnered with a U.S. MOOC provider (University 3).

All three universities have recently developed or are in the process of developing new e-learning policies which foreshadow significant changes in learning and teaching practices.[2] They are institutions which have not traditionally emphasised distance education and have typically provided wholly online courses in only a small number of subjects and programs. All three have either previously not had policies relating to e-learning, or have provided very limited strategic direction about its use. University 3, for example, finalised its first e-learning strategy in 2012, and had previously placed a lot of emphasis on its campus-based teaching as a traditional marker of distinction. Similarly, University 1's former e-learning policy simply mandated the use of the university's learning management system (i.e. the provision of an online site for individual courses) but left it up to staff to determine how that system would be used. Across all three institutions, the last few years have encompassed a significant shift from mostly on-campus education with some broad encouragement of technology use as a component of regular teaching towards greater institution-wide strategic direction.

The new policies and strategy documents are each developed around a small number of priority areas. For University 1, these include using technology to join up courses and promote interaction between campuses, content aggregation and the use of available materials (including MOOCs) within courses, the development of curriculum design teams that incorporate staff with different levels of expertise, and documentation of best practice. For University 2, the strategy is structured around staff professional development, business management, scholarship and innovation (including the development of MOOCs) and expansion of online learning through external providers. University 3's strategy similarly identifies as priority areas greater emphasis on student interaction and engagement, improving access to resources, engaging with different cohorts of students, and supporting those leading technology use.

Notwithstanding the different approaches being taken up in these institutions, there are a number of parallels in the policy emphases of the different initiatives. All policy documents point to the importance of meeting student needs and "enhancing" and "transforming" the student experience as a rationale for this shift. They highlight a need for stronger investment in technology use, and the need to use technologies to effectively target learning, including through changing traditional course design practices and the way technologies are used. The term "curriculum" is used infrequently, but the documents nevertheless contain curriculum implications and promote the need for restructure. Reference to MOOCs is not made in all documents, but there is considerable emphasis on the importance of "embracing change", and two of the institutions (2 and 3) report an intention to become "leaders" in the field of online education and position themselves at the forefront of new developments. The documents express both the emphasis on the student experience and the emphasis on institutional reputation dominant in today's higher education climate (see Barnett and Coates 2005, Maassen et al. 2012).

[2] The overview of these policies is based on documentary analysis of institutional strategy documents and websites, as well as some reporting of developing priorities in the interviews where eLearning-specific strategy documents were still being finalised.

In the interviews, these priorities were also present. The interviews were undertaken with five senior academics with responsibilities for curriculum and e-learning oversight at the three institutions (referred to hereafter as curriculum leaders or by pseudonym). Each interview was semi-structured and approximately an hour in length. The interviewees were academics with formal spokesperson roles for the issues discussed, and three of the five were also experts in the field of e-learning. They were inclined to support the lines articulated in institutional strategy and policy documents (unsurprisingly given they no doubt had a hand in their development) and tended to frame the benefits of the approaches in terms of the potential for curriculum renewal offered through online course redevelopment, and in terms of institutional promotion. However, the interviews also brought to the fore some of the tensions in the institutional responses, and evidence of some reticence towards MOOCs. The rest of this paper examines the narrative contained in the interviews, including its relationship to the wider discourses of access and disruption prominent in public debate. This is considered in relation to both wider e-learning strategy and the specific narratives around MOOCs and structured in four sections which identify: (1) the use of e-learning policy as a vehicle for curriculum redesign; (2) an emphasis on internal curriculum redesign as the primary rationale for MOOCs; (3) a desire to capitalise on promotional opportunities but a reticence around embracing the concept and structure of MOOCs and (4) the absence of access-driven concerns in university policy in contrast to the broader public commentary.

E-learning policy as a vehicle for curriculum renewal

All five of the curriculum leaders interviewed at the three universities emphasised the potential for curriculum renewal as a primary justification for taking up new initiatives and expanding e-learning strategically. They saw the incorporation of new technologies as an opportunity to restructure teaching programs, and as allowing for new curriculum design practices. Professor Brown, for example, advised that the e-learning strategy at University 1 was part of a broader 5-10 year vision for implementing a new approach to curriculum design, and that the eventual aim was to broaden the strategy to all forms of student learning:

> …one of the things that I commented last week when I was talking about the e-learning strategy, is we'll know that it's working when we can drop the 'e' from it and that's eventually where we want to be. (Professor Brown, University 1, 6/08/2013)

All curriculum leaders felt that academic curricular approaches required rethinking both in relation to thinking holistically across courses as a whole and in relation to subject or course content. They pointed to an unhealthy emphasis on content in existing courses, at the expense of assessment, student activities or similar. Professor Brown advised that:

> [We want to move] the emphasis for our teaching staff to be learning designers or learning creators. So in other words creating or designing the learning activities as opposed to the content. So we want them to shift their emphasis and to think about what's the student going

> to do with this, okay you've got a whole bunch of content but that's just content, how does the student engage and interact with that. (Professor Brown, University 1, 6/08/2013)

As in the policy documents, there was a strong emphasis on learning outcomes and the student experience as the primary focus for university curriculum. Other curriculum leaders emphasised the benefits of redeveloping courses for new online platforms as providing an opportunity to rethink didactic approaches. Professor King, who has responsibilities for an online initiative offered through University 2, saw academic curricular practices as out of step with the outcomes-oriented approach required for online course development:

> So when we come in and go "okay what are your learning outcomes?" They go "this is the book I use". "No, we're not actually interested in your *content*, we'll come to that, what are your *learning outcomes*, what are your *assessments*". And …a lot of the academics have…actually said "oh I've never thought about this stuff before, no one's ever sat down and helped me think this through or supported me to think this through". (Professor King, University 2, 20/08/2013)

Here, and elsewhere, there was an emphasis on outcomes-driven approaches as best practice, and a belief that the pedagogical expertise of the typical academic required additional support. Similarly, Professor Roberts who has broader responsibilities for e-learning at the same institution advised that moving courses online required an emphasis on outcomes to ensure coherence:

> We should be driving from learning outcomes, start with the end in mind and work back because…what a lot of people do is put a bit of digital stuff in and everything else stays the same. So you get this misalignment. Whereas if you start with assessment and feedback and opportunities for that, they see it as part of the learning and then work back on your learning design, then you get a coherent course. (Professor Roberts, University 2, 24/10/2013)

She later clarified that this was not just about online learning, but that she was overseeing a broader initiative incorporating the same design principles for all courses. Professor Roberts noted that she saw this as less about enforcing a particular curriculum approach than a particular approach to curriculum design:

> I suppose I think the curriculum should dramatically change but I wouldn't be able to say it would have to change from this to this, I'm just saying the process of development needs to be changed. (Professor Roberts, University 2, 24/10/2013)

These arguments align in many ways with the logic behind 'unbundling' university and faculty roles, seen in the aforementioned IPPR report (Barber et al. 2013). In accordance with this view, unbundling the teaching component of faculty work to assign tasks such as facilitation, assessment and academic advice to specialised staff improves both the quality and the cost effectiveness of teaching. Such changes are seen as particularly important where online teaching components are incorporated given the more common need for technological expertise and support (see Neely and Tucker 2010). At the

time of the interviews, Professors Baker, King and Roberts were all overseeing online initiatives and policies that incorporated implementation of new forms of curriculum design involving technologists and e-learning specialists in tandem with academic staff. The curricular intentions they refer to are therefore not simply about redesigning and enhancing student learning experiences, but also intentionally about restructuring faculty roles in how curriculum is developed and delivered.

At University 3, this broader approach wasn't present but similar benefits were seen in individual approaches that incorporated the same design. Talking about the development of an online course Professor Owen noted:

> So they've [the learning design team] kind of talked them through what the steps are and…thinking about where they want the students to get to, and work back and what needs to happen when if they're going to be able to achieve that outcome. All excellent educational practice but it's actually amazing in some cases that's actually a new experience for people because they might have inherited a course or there's just sort of a general understanding that certain topics have to be in a first year course on this kind of subject. (Professor Owen, University 3, 5/08/2013)

Similar sentiments were also evident in an interview with Professor Jones, another curriculum leader at the same institution, who talked about the "persistent and never-ending problem of asking academics to curtail content into a new curriculum structure" (Professor Jones, University 3, 21/08/2013). All curriculum leaders felt that current curriculum practices required modification in some way, saw e-learning and e-learning curriculum design practices as a mechanism for improvement, and tended to emphasise the benefits of a similar kind of outcomes-based or student-centred approach.

Internal curriculum redesign as the primary rationale for MOOCs

Similar justifications about curriculum benefits were present in discussions of the MOOC developments. In all interviews, the primary rationale for MOOCs was presented as 'experimentation' around new ways of delivering material:

> I mean we intentionally got into this to experiment. (Professor Jones, University 3, 21/08/2013)

> We think in order to innovate you've got to experiment and so we saw [the MOOC platform] as an opportunity to experiment in different forms of e-learning (Professor Owen, University 3, 5/08/2013)

> They're experiments, so you try things. (Professor Roberts, University 2, 24/10/2013)

This emphasis on experimentation was frequently framed in relation to the data that could be obtained from MOOCs about student interactions within courses (often referred to as learning analytics[3]):

> There's a much broader agenda around what we learn and part of what we learn is not just how to build resources for a specific course but we learn much more about how to build course designs, assessment regimes, learning analytics frameworks from a course that will have much broader value to the university (Professor Owen, University 3, 5/08/2013)

> The other reason that we're getting into MOOCs ourselves, so we can get the analytical data back from that to look at what—how do we relate those analytics back to the learning design…So what we will do is feed any of the information we get from our MOOCs back into our curriculum design. (Professor Brown, University 1, 6/08/2013)

Experimentation and data-driven narratives are present in other reports on MOOC rationales (Educause 2012, Lombadi 2013). However, in contrast to these reports, in the interviews there was a stronger emphasis on the *internal* benefits of MOOCs for university courses rather than experimentation that broadened educational practices. The curriculum leaders explicitly linked their rationale for 'experimenting' with MOOCs to improving university programs offered within a traditional enrolment framework, and MOOCs were seen as a significant part of improving course design practices. Professor Roberts noted that she saw this impact as more significant than the business implications of MOOCs:

> Everybody [is] going around talking about the impact of MOOCs on the business model but in the long term the big impact might be on course design…I mean really for the first time ever I'm going to have big data that's going to impact on how I will design future courses…that's one of the areas I think that MOOCs are helping with…because people are doing things very differently so they think differently. (Professor Roberts, University 2, 24/10/2013)

As with e-learning practices more broadly, MOOCs were seen to promote a different approach to curriculum design. Since the content for MOOCs could be finalised prior to the course or developed elsewhere, MOOCs were seen to allow for targeted attention on learning activities at the university, including through approaches like the 'flipped classroom' where students are exposed to new material though reading or lecture videos in their own time, and class time is used for activities or discussion:

> …one of the things we're looking at about using MOOCs is actually saying well if another university or another entity has put up a good MOOC and the content is fine for what we want, let's allow our students to…get the content from there and…we'll design the experiences and the learning activities. (Professor Brown, University 1, 6/08/2013)

> A key consideration for us is that the resources that we create through [the MOOC platform] then become available for our on-campus classes and that becomes the stage two of the innovation is to actually now kind of encourage people to rethink what they're doing in their

[3] Learning analytics is defined as "the measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of data about learners and their contexts, for purposes of understanding and optimizing learning and the environments in which it occurs" (see the Society for Learning Analytics Research (SOLAR) website: http://www.solaresearch.org).

> own course that makes use of the resources that they've created, both the videos but also the approaches to assessment, and then that kind of allows the on-campus part of the course to really add value. (Professor Owen, University 3, 5/08/2013)

Here, there was an acknowledgement that the intention for using MOOCs was around changing teaching practice to allow for more time for classroom activities and interaction. However, some of the curriculum leaders also gave the impression that MOOCs necessitated this kind of approach, in forcing universities to define their relevance around their approach to curriculum design and their in-class activities, rather than the content. Professor Brown acknowledged that:

> …making content freely available…doesn't necessarily allow you to get an award and doesn't necessarily allow you to have an experience where you can use that content to be able to help you move forward with your life in some way. So that's the bit that you still need the universities and their structured approach to a curriculum design. (Professor Brown, University 1, 6/08/2013)

Here, the professor constructed his account around the "need" for universities and what they are able to offer education that cannot be easily captured within a MOOC. Other curriculum leaders also tended to frame MOOCs as adding to rather than replacing university courses and the data they generated was promoted as benefitting normal university practices rather than the development of MOOCs themselves.

The desire to capitalise on promotional opportunities but a reticence around the concept and structure of MOOCs

In addition to curriculum renewal and experimentation, all curriculum leaders acknowledged that institutional promotion and reputation was a factor in the decision to develop MOOCs as part of broader e-learning strategy:

> Well the reason we got into MOOCs…one was the publicity because quite frankly that's why most people are into MOOCs, is the publicity…So the MOOCs are also advertising for how [the university] does things…so that's a bit of "yes what would we like to showcase". (Professor Brown, University 1, 6/08/2013)

> There's a little bit about putting [our] profile out there…so we were keen to have some courses in areas that we regarded as key research strengths of the university, so that the university's profile on [the MOOC platform] had some resemblance to…our research profile. (Professor Owen, University 3, 5/08/2013)

A number of curriculum leaders also emphasised recruitment and improving market share as a factor in institutional promotion. Professor Brown advised that:

> One of the things that we're looking at is how do our MOOCs actually lead into our other programs. So it's a bit of advertising as well. (Professor Brown, University 1, 6/08/2013)

While seeing the potential of involvement in MOOCs for promotion of the university concerned, the curriculum leaders interviewed also noted some concerns about how MOOCs impacted on them and what kind of impression they presented of the university:

> They're nice little tasters, you know we're happy with them…But they're not really the showcase in the way that you'd want a MOOC to be a showcase. They're showcasing ideas and knowledge that we have but they're…so much at the opposite end of the spectrum of the very high touch collaborative, engaging process [of the University's other online offerings]. (Professor Roberts, University 2, 24/10/2013)

> [Our e-learning strategy is about] what is distinctive…[it] says "well we're not just going to copy someone else" and that's the problem with the MOOCs at the moment…everyone is just copying everyone else…because they think "oh everyone else is and if we're not there then it's going to look bad for us and it looks like we're not modern and keeping up with where things are". (Professor Brown, University 1, 6/08/2013)

Here, there was an acknowledgement that MOOCs were important for institutional reputation, and as a means of being publicly seen as active within technological developments and innovations, but also an admission that this created conflicts with broader strategy.

As indicated in the previous section, the curriculum leaders frequently framed the value of MOOCs in terms of what they could offer *as part* of the university experience. Related to this, they demonstrated concerns about what MOOCs could offer on their own and what they represented to the university as a whole:

> I'm immediately uncomfortable when people separate content from delivery…I think there's a role for blended learning...but I don't think you want to do that all of the time…So I'm just terribly nervous that you know when we break down some of those connections…that the quality of the experience as a learning experience may go down. (Professor Owen, University 3, 5/08/2013)

> [Regarding the use of other's materials] you have to think carefully about what's happening in that model, particularly with the idea of discipline based academics having a role in teaching and learning in universities where it's not just about content delivery, it's about discipline based academics having an intimate understanding of the discipline and having an understanding of pedagogy and teaching and the combination of those things is incredibly important…You know I think that that starts to raise alarm bells for me. (Professor Jones, University 3, 21/08/2013)

Curriculum leaders at two of the universities also distinguished between the views of their university's primary governing body, which includes government appointments as well as university representatives, and their own. Professor Roberts noted that she was skeptical of the belief in MOOCs as a recruitment tool held at that level, and Professor Brown noted that the development of MOOCs and

the latest e-learning strategy was begun as a result of requests from the governing body in response to the public debate.

The absence of access-driven concerns

As indicated earlier, experimentation, promotion and access have been identified as core institutional drivers for MOOCs in the US (Educause 2012; see also Lombadi 2013). Although the first two of these are evident in the interviews and discussed in the preceding sections, rationales around access were primarily absent. Professor Brown did mention the issue of access, but he framed it in the space of recruitment to a traditional university program and saw the debate as moving beyond access towards new forms of course design:

> I think it's good if we can have open access to some of these things and it actually allows people who you know haven't formally committed to a university degree or perhaps they don't have the prerequisites even to enter into a university degree, it gives them access to that experience, a small part of that experience. Which quite frankly is why I reckon that Stanford and Harvard and Yale and all the rest of them went into it in the first place…I think that was the original idea of the MOOCs and that's why it was those types of universities that started out doing that and also because they could afford it. They also knew that it was no threat to them because students aren't going to do a MOOC from Harvard instead of going to Harvard…Whereas I think now there's a bigger picture around the MOOCs and that is well how do we actually incorporate open educational resources into our mainline programs. (Professor Brown, University 1, 6/08/2013)

Here there was an acknowledgement that MOOCs as access constitute a "threat" to university practices and survival, and the link from that acknowledgement to the use of MOOCs in "mainline programs" suggests an attempt to instead reframe the MOOCs debate around the educational practices of the traditional university and away from the potential for disruption. Professor Brown emphasised the importance of the university "experience" and presented MOOCs as a way of showcasing a "small part" of what that experience might offer, rather than offering an educational offering in their own right.

This issue of access was not raised in the other interviews and there was a notable lack of consideration of the MOOC student beyond the data they could generate for the university and the ways this could be used to improve offerings for enrolled students. When curriculum leaders talked about improving the student experience, they were concerned only with students enrolled at their own institution and not with the students undertaking their MOOCs from beyond their own boundaries. This aligns with the emphasis on internal university work in the interviews more broadly. Curriculum leaders were concerned with framing the benefits of MOOCs in relation to internal course development and promotion, which set considerations of the MOOC student beyond the frame of discussion.

Concluding reflection

This paper has provided an analysis of the early stages of e-learning reform based on policy analysis and interviews with academic curriculum leaders responsible for the oversight of e-learning initiatives at three Australian universities. It has shown that e-learning policies are being used as instruments to drive broader changes in curriculum and curriculum design practices at these institutions, that curriculum leaders see concurrent opportunities for curriculum renewal and institutional promotion in relation to MOOCs, but that they have concerns about what MOOCs represent for the university, and are reluctant to embrace narratives that promote changes to access and traditional enrolment practices.

Returning to Maassen et al.'s (2012) conception of change dynamics, this examination of institutional narratives and their relation to broader public discourse allows for some insight into the complex negotiations that institutions are confronting between external influences and internal rationales, and between incremental and disruptive change. The institutional rationales for MOOCs are set within dominant organisational frames (improvement to student learning and reputation enhancement) and the benefits are constructed around the traditionally enrolled student and the institution as a whole. These frames encompass logics that are influenced by the growing public scrutiny of academic work (e.g. outcomes-oriented constructions of curriculum, and institutional brand management), but their discussion in the interviews reflects a strong orientation towards institutional matters.

This construction can be seen to mask the influence of external developments on the uptake of MOOCs and new e-learning initiatives. The curriculum leaders interviewed in this study are leading new reforms centred around and in response to MOOCs and their policies take up strongly the public narrative around the need for change. Moreover, the curriculum leaders are not wholly pro-MOOC but are concerned with what the dominant model represents for traditional practice and pedagogy. This suggests that although they might see institutional benefits deriving from MOOCs, they have also felt pressure to develop them as a result of the public hype, and reluctance to conform to any narrative that decentres the institution from the frame of discussion.

This framing may be in part a response to growing concerns about varying levels of student participation and the typically elite profile of the MOOC student (see Kizilcec et al. 2013, Christensen et al. 2013). However, it also suggests institutions are seeking to reorient narratives of change to emphasise the central role of the university in tertiary education (in not only providing curriculum content, but educational experiences, learning activities and engagement), and at the same time capitalise on those narratives to drive institutional agendas (around curriculum restructure and promotion). In pointing to the importance of distinguishing between incremental change and reforms that threaten the legitimacy of higher education, Maassen et al. (2012) identify as a "puzzle" the ability of higher education to both resist change and to adapt significantly to external influences. This account potentially offers some insights into how these pressures are negotiated at the institutional level and to the strategic thinking of academics in institutional leadership roles in relation to the specific example of MOOCs. MOOCs threaten the legitimacy of traditional ways of operating according to how they are constructed in public debate, and what emerges from this analysis is that universities are confronting this challenge by seeking to enrol MOOCs within dominant institutional practices and frames, and use them to progress forms of change that align to broader strategic objectives. In other words, from an

institutional perspective, MOOCs are being transformed from moments of disruption to opportunities for co-option. This suggests that MOOCs are not simply an outward force instigating changes to the university system, but are being developed through a complex interrelation of different interests and drivers.

These dynamics raise a number of questions about the narratives surrounding MOOCs and the ways in which these narratives are taken up within the courses themselves and how they are designed. The paper has pointed to some differences between popular discourse (including the narratives of MOOC providers) and institutional discourse, but it is not clear how popular and institutional conceptions are influencing the development of MOOCs by individual academics or how MOOCs are conceived within departments. Maassen et al. (2012, p. 2) note the need to "address the process of change on all relevant governance levels alike, in order to better capture the dynamics of change" and to "distinguish superficial change…from profound transformation of the basic characteristics of higher education". This paper has explored change dynamics at the institutional level alone, and further research into how these dynamics are being taken up within specific academic departments and by faculty members is required to better understand the pressures of MOOCs and their implications for educational practice.

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