



## Learning by MOOC or by crook

Massive open online courses are a new way of learning and offer potential in the health field

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For those who have not been keeping up with recent developments in education, MOOCs, or “massive open online courses”, are the latest potential benefit — or threat — to higher education, depending on your point of view.<sup>1</sup> The idea is that someone puts their course of lectures online for free and thousands of people access and learn from them. There had been some early courses placed online and open to all, but the term “massive” came into its own when two Stanford University lecturers put a course online and 160 000 people enrolled. Education by the world’s best can be made available to all, although most courses do not yet offer university credits. Students can join discussion forums with the tutor and with other students. Individualised feedback to students is limited by class size, although social networks evolve between students. This type of education has advanced rapidly, and companies have been established to develop or, alternatively, exploit, this trend — again depending on your point of view. As might be imagined, this has caused some universities to fear that they may be replaced by the advance of the MOOC, and, probably as insurance, many Australian universities are now partners in the various MOOC companies. A recent literature review found “Formal comprehensive analyses of MOOCs mostly concur that they are disruptive and possibly

threatening to current HE [higher education] models” although the review concludes: “MOOCs are heading to become a significant and possibly a standard element of credentialed University education, exploiting new pedagogical models, discovering revenue and lowering costs.”<sup>1</sup> The Open University in the United Kingdom showed it was possible to enrol all-comers into tertiary education and to educate them successfully to graduation and successful academic and professional careers. The Open University now owns a private company that provides a platform through which many UK universities, one Australian university and one New Zealand university offer MOOCs.<sup>2</sup>

This development builds on two major advances — the internet, with its almost ubiquitous reach; and the open source revolution,<sup>3</sup> which has allowed computer software to be freely shared and has led on to open publishing, including free sharing of research findings in open access journals,<sup>4</sup> and open educational resources (OER)<sup>5</sup> — of which there are many thousands available on the internet to be freely accessed and shared.

What is the global reach of MOOCs? There is a fear, since some of the companies formed to develop and distribute MOOCs are for-profit, that the business model will inhibit global spread to where they could do most

good by providing very low-cost access to high-quality education — such as in Africa.<sup>6</sup> Coursera is one of the main companies offering MOOCs (with over 80 universities as partners, including at least one from Australia). An exploration of their global footprint reveals a very low uptake of students and partners from the developing world to date, although there are plans to expand.<sup>7</sup>

What is the relevance of MOOCs to health workforce capacity building? A previous editorial in the *MJA* described the development of a low-cost, fully online program for public health capacity building for health professionals in developing countries.<sup>8</sup> The Peoples-uni (<http://peoples-uni.org>) is a totally online program, led by volunteers and using OER to keep costs low.<sup>9</sup> There have been over 1000 students registered, and a number have graduated with a Master of Public Health granted by a partner university in the UK. Students come from more than 40 countries, mostly from Africa. There is a strong Australian presence among staff, with 30 of the 120 tutors and support staff in Australia. (If any Australian university or other institution is interested in partnering, please make contact.) The Peoples-uni is a “mOOC”, which differs from a MOOC in that it has smaller student numbers and offers formal credentials to the masters level — reflecting depth of commitment by tutors to run discussion forums and set and mark assignments.

MOOCs and other forms of OER provide considerable scope for online learning. Many resources and courses are available, including many health-related MOOCs created by some of the world’s best universities, and a vast array of

OER in the health field. It is an area of massive potential for continuing professional development (CPD) as well. As far as I can see, most Australian colleges have, to date, ignored the potential for the use of online resources for CPD, as well as for discussions through social networking.

The use of open resources, including MOOCs, with modern social networking, has the potential to reshape CPD and shake up the higher-education sector.

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