

## Introduction by Michel Gevers

The Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs have suddenly taken center stage in the last two years in our university world. Let me just quote the first few lines of an article in the French newspaper Le Monde of 5 April 2014. The title is

La “MOOCmania” déferle sur la France

*La France est en retard. La France n’a pas pris la mesure de l’incroyable révolution pédagogique à venir. La France doit réagir. Et vite !*

*Qu’on se rassure, depuis quelques mois la France est sortie de sa léthargie. Une espèce de frénésie s’est en effet emparée de l’enseignement supérieur français. La “MOOCmania” est en marche.*

As is often the case with new technologies, MOOC courses started in the US, about 2 or 3 years ago. Three main platforms, Udacity, EdX and Coursera, all of them based in the US, have dominated the field in the first few years. The co-founder of Udacity, the Stanford Professor Sebastian Thrun, who pioneered MOOC courses with a course on artificial intelligence that had more than 160,000 students, had initially announced that in 2060 only about 10 universities would survive world wide and that Udacity would be one of them.

But a year ago exactly, Sebastian Thrun threw the gauntlet and announced that he would no longer spend his time on MOOC courses for universities, citing a “moral” problem. MOOC courses do not deliver quality education, he stated. Studies had shown that only a small fraction of all registered students finished a course, and that very few of them were university students. These studies also show that the vast majority of people who take MOOC courses already have a university degree. In addition, the idea that MOOC courses would open university education to people who previously did not have access to it failed to materialise. A study by the University of Pennsylvania showed that 80% of MOOC participants in Brasil, China and South Africa came from the most affluent segments of society. So far for MOOCs as a tool for democratisation.

Thus, MOOCmania is invading Europe, just at about the time when some MOOC pioneers across the Atlantic ocean are voicing disappointments. So what should we think about this? Well, this is precisely the objective of a forum like this one. Let us think and reflect. And perhaps the first thing is to cool down from the mania and put the sudden surge of the MOOCs in its proper perspective.

Indeed, MOOCs are just the latest tool in a long line of research and development on technology-based teaching and learning. Distance learning, open universities, the use of podcasts and videos as a support tool, the concept of flipped classrooms are different technology-based tools that have developed and have been experimented with over the last two decades. As Pierre Dillenbourg, one of the enthusiastic supporters of MOOCs would say, it might well be that in 5 years from now MOOCs will have disappeared completely and been replaced by something else.

Today, we focus on MOOCs and, more generally, on e-learning in **Higher Education**. That is we shall not discuss the potential benefits of MOOCs for adult or continuing education, but narrow the discussion to the impact on universities. And we address our questions with the view that every new technology produces changes in the world in which this technology appears. So two questions must be addressed:

- Does the technology contribute positively to the object for which it is designed, in this case, teaching and learning?
- What are the side effects, positive and negative, on the university world in which this technology arrives?

There are all kinds of motivations for academics to engage into the MOOC adventure. One of them is the belief that they contribute progress to university education. But another one is academic curiosity and the idea of doing research on MOOCs and on e-learning generally. From this point of view, it is clear that there are clear advantages to being an actor rather than a spectator: don't stay on the side. Join the bandwagon, but with the critical view that befits university research and teaching.

Being an ethical forum, we should of course take the view that that a new technology, just because it becomes available, should not always be blindly adopted. The scientific performance indicators such as the h-index, the impact factor of journals, and the rankings of universities are a good case in point. These new "technologies" have been adopted without much thinking about 10 years ago, and in a few years time they have already had a disastrous effect on the quality of research.

Can we predict today what changes the widespread adoption of MOOCs may possibly introduce in the university environment? Probably not, but we should certainly reflect on them, and at least attempt to anticipate the most likely changes.

The objective of this ethical forum is thus twofold:

- To analyse the experience we have already collected on e-learning so far
- To also attempt to evaluate the possible consequences, positive and negative, of the arrival of MOOCs on the university scene

In order to reach this objective, we have collected a broad set of experts who, I believe, will enable us to cover these two objectives.

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