Wharton University of Pennsylvania | SEI Center for Advanced Studies in Management

QS STARS AWARDS 2017
REIMAGINE EDUCATION

New Learners, New Models

REPORT TEAM

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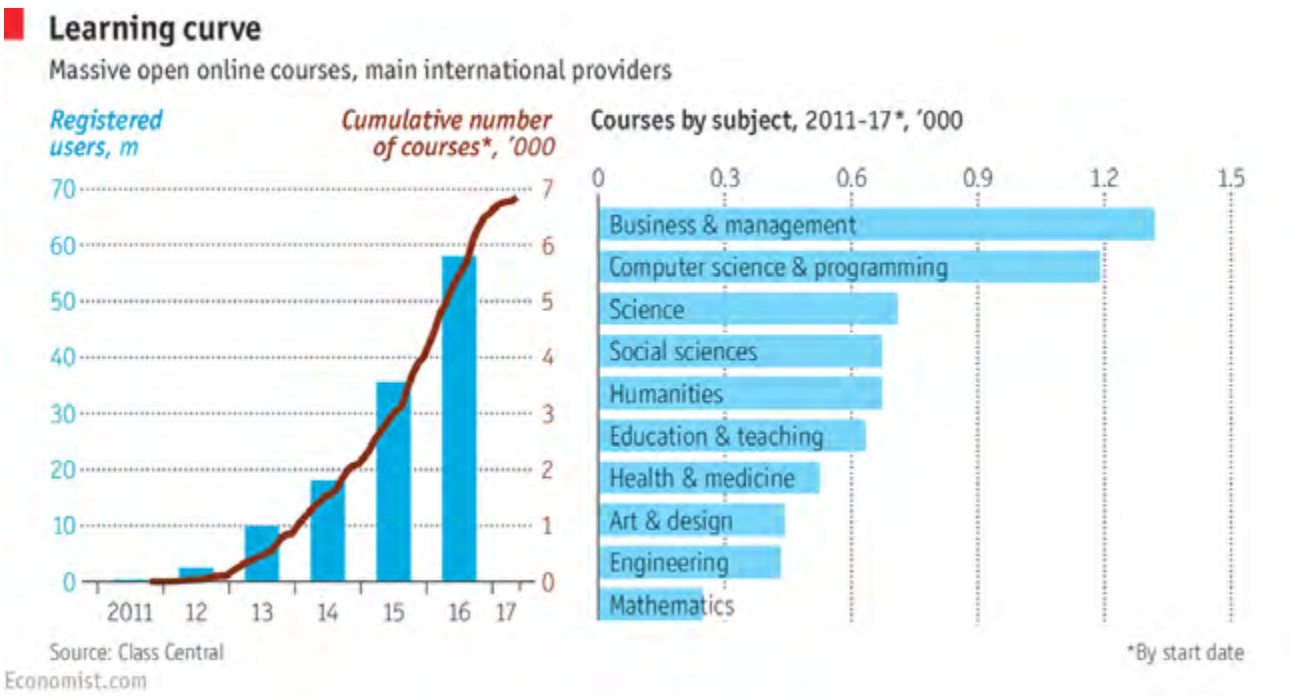
Behind the Reimagine Education initiative lies one fundamental premise: current pedagogical approaches are insufficient, and will prove insufficient, for preparing learners to tackle the range of educational, social, and economic challenges we – and they - will face. We hear employers speak of a widening skills gap; we hear them lament the shortage of twenty-first-century skills.[1][2][3][4] We hear students express doubts about the value of the degrees in which they're investing ever-larger sums of money. We hear from economists, concerns about productivity in prosperous nations. We believe that this landscape needs to change.

New learners: the iGen and beyond

The first, and perhaps most obvious, group of new learners are the group defined by Jean M. Twenge, Professor of Psychology at San Diego University, as the iGen: new, because they are still undergoing their 'traditional' education period, but also because they belong to a new demographic with unprecedented characteristics.[5] The iGen group of new learners will have been born between 1995 and 2012 – a group thus spanning the primary, secondary, and tertiary education sectors, have grown up with smart phones, and do not recall a time before the internet permeated popular life. As early as 2010 – before personal digital devices became commonplace for teenagers – fewer than 1% of



1 https://www.roberthalf.co.nz/press/85-new-zealand-companies-worry-about-looming-skills-gap
2 https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-04-12/america-has-to-close-the-workforce-skills-gap
3 https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/national-initiatives/business-leaders-united/latest/growing-skills-gap-80-of-small-businesses-cant-find-qualified-staff
4 http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2017-Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-Final-Report.pdf

5 https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/

15-year-olds in OECD countries reported having never used a computer.[6]

The second relevant group of new learners are those returning to education at a later age – those undergoing 'adult', or 'lifelong' learning: new, because they may have been absent from the formal education system for a period of years or even decades. Their most prominent motives for returning to education include: the desire for later career progression, the desire to challenge themselves to acquire new skills and attain new knowledge, and the fact that we are all living longer and may later have resources to learn things that were not available earlier in their lives.[7] These categories of motives may, of course, all be linked.

The third group of new learners are those that have the opportunity to access formal education for the first time, or to access higher strata of education than ever before. These learners include those from the growing tertiary-age populations in emergent nations in Asia and Africa, including Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Nigeria, and Pakistan.[8]

Each of these groups faces a unique combination of challenges, and, as such, will adopt different new learning models, to differing extents. Here, we outline some of these novel approaches to post-secondary education. The first is the MOOC – massive open online courses. These are typically free, typically accessed by 'class' sizes numbering hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of students. Providers including edX, FutureLearn, and Coursera, have taken the classroom and turned it worldwide.

Who takes MOOCs? Perhaps the better question is 'Who doesn't?' Figures from the start of the year suggest that, by the end of 2017, leading MOOC providers will be catering to approximately 60 million learners – six times the number recorded as recently as 2013.

Which new learning models?

As is the fate of numerous new technologies, MOOCs were initially the source of idealistic expectations. The New York Times (NYT) saw fit to declare 2012 the 'year of the MOOC', while Sebastian Thrun, founder of Udacity, predicted that only 10 traditional universities would remain by 2060.[9]

As is also the fate of new technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, these elevated expectations were soon tempered. Just as the NYT crowned 2012 'the year of the MOOC', David Pritchard and Lori Breslow (2013) were observing completion rates of under 5% for edX's first MOOC, MIT's undergraduate Circuits and Electronics course (6.002x).

Concerns about completion rates were combined with anxieties that the accessibility of MOOCs had been overstated: of the twenty-five million people that took online offerings provided by Coursera, edX, and their peers, initial figures reported that 80% had already attained an undergraduate degree, while 60% were from developed nations.

However, Zhanghao et al. (2015) - a group of researchers from Coursera, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Washington - aimed to challenge this consensus.[10] Though the MIT 'Circuits & Electronics' course was taken predominantly by students from the US and the UK, there is some inconclusive evidence that the reach of these courses also encompasses the non-traditional learning communities. Zhenghao et al offer an argument for the efficacy of MOOCs. They note that "*people from developing countries more frequently report benefits from taking MOOCs and, also in developing countries, people with lower socioeconomic status and with less education are more likely to report benefits*". They also rightly point out that the potential reach of

6 http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/45053490.pdf
7 https://www.pearson.com/us/0/adult-learners.html
8 https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/postgraduate_mobility_trends_2024-october-14.pdf
9 https://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21714173-alternative-providers-education-must-solve-problems-cost-and
10 https://hbr.org/2015/09/whos-benefiting-from-moocs-and-why

such courses is exponentially larger than the reach of bricks-and-mortar offerings: if even 1% of the 25 million MOOC registrants complete a course within the first three years, the absolute number of course completers is still approximately 25 times the number of on-campus students studying at MIT at any one time.

There was – and is – perhaps a tendency for category errors to be made when approaching MOOCs, expecting them to have completion rates comparable to those of traditional university courses. This ignores that new education models require new frameworks with which to assess them. Naive application of conventional outcome expectations to unconventional models will lead to inapt, unhelpful conclusions.

Beyond the MOOC

The rapid reconfiguration of education is not limited to the rise of the MOOC, and the range of options available to learners is far greater than that which can be found

on edX and other such platforms. Compare the two classrooms pictured overleaf: one, a nineteenth-century lecture theatre; the other, the main lecture theatre at the University of Oxford's English Faculty. The presence of technology in the latter belies the fact that the classroom structure remains broadly similar: students are arranged in rows, facing an instructor holding court at the front of the room.

One way of reconfiguring educational models, then, is to reconfigure the space in which that education occurs, and Reimagine Education has provided a platform for those seeking to do so. The 2016 conference featured a panel entitled The Future of the Classroom, which sought to examine the ways in which innovative spaces can improve educational outcomes.

Playing a prominent role in this panel was Grace O'Shea, COO and co-founder of room2learn – a platform designed to allow educators to share examples of enhanced classroom design.[11]

'The first elite American university to be launched in a century'

There are two fatal flaws in Thrun's forecast of the demise of the traditional university. The first is that online models remain a poor substitute for truly high-quality presence learning environments. Pritchard and Breslow's initial research into learning outcomes in

the 6.002x MOOC offered one crucial finding: those practicing offline collaboration when learning 6.002x material, saw learning outcomes substantially superior to those that did not, even with other factors controlled for.[12] Collaboration remains an essential element of

11 http://room2learn.org/

12 https://www.ft.com/content/7216d448-f9fb-11e5-8f41-

effective learning, and, as of today, online platforms have struggled to effectively replicate this.

The second reason for questioning Thrun's prediction follows from the first: the demand for the 'elite' education attacked by William Deresiewicz – who will be speaking at this year's Reimagine Education conference – remains as high as ever. While American university enrolments overall remain in decline, demand for the type of education offered by Ivy League institutions and top public universities remains undiminished.[13] Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the allure of the highly personalised tutorial system as offered by Oxford and Cambridge remains sizeable.

This demand for exclusive, 'elite' education means that some of the new university models with which Reimagine Education has come into contact are selective. Last year's panel on Alternative University Models did feature free coding school 42 – and it also featured Ben Nelson, CEO of the Minerva Project, (as discussed in the previous report section on the skills gap and employability) an institution that has dubbed itself 'the first elite American university to be launched in a century'.[14] Both are highly selective, despite their differing financial models.

For the Minerva Project claims to offer a unique educational experience. As previously mentioned, the program – with a 1.9% acceptance rate, that makes it 'the most selective undergraduate program in US history' – offers an international, interdisciplinary education to the 60 or 70 students it enrols each year, with the opportunity to reside in seven different countries across four continents throughout their four-year course.[15] If future learners are to be highly critical global citizens with the ability to make connections across disciplinary boundaries, the Minerva Project is keen to make itself central in the creation of that learner.

Limitations

It would be unfair to criticise Minerva as inaccessible to quite the same extent as, for example, Harvard is. Minerva prides itself on eschewing those easily-trained-for, easily-gained aspects of college application lambasted by Deresiewicz in 'Excellent Sheep': SAT scores, for example.[16] Perhaps most importantly, the tuition costs charged are approximately one-third of those of Harvard and its prestigious peers.[17][18] Minerva is evidently attempting to unite the elite segment and more general accessibility, and, in doing so, it shares a commitment with 42.

However, one central question we ask of any project submitted to Reimagine Education is the extent to which it is scalable. While both 42 and Minerva are proving to be successful new models, it seems reasonable to make a distinction between accessibility in theory and accessibility in practice.

42 offers an innovative, employment-focused educational experience at no cost – but the project is funded by French billionaire Xavier Niel. The Minerva Project costs less in fees for its students than Harvard, for example, and with an applications process theoretically less subject to the privilege conferred by higher socioeconomic status. However, an educational institution that has fewer than 300 students on its program each year must be seen as one of limited scalability and accessibility.[19]

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13 http://fortune.com/2016/12/19/college-enrollment-decline/

14 http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/higher/will-the-minerva-project-the-first-elite-american-university-to-be-launched-in-a-century-change-the-9624379.html

15 https://www.ft.com/content/7216d448-f9fb-11e5-8f41-df5bda8beb40

16 Deresiewicz, William, 'Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite' (2014)

17 https://www.minerva.kgi.edu/tuition-aid/tuition-fees/

18 https://www.harvard.edu/about-harvard/harvard-glance

19 http://uk.businessinsider.com/college-startup-minerva-harder-to-get-into-than-harvard-2017-5

Assessing new models

New models are also more likely to be driven by a wealth of data on learning interactions and outcomes, allowing educational researchers and instructional designers to identify – more clearly than ever before – what drives effective learning. This is welcome, and it is clear that there is still work to be done. The 2017 Online Education Trends report illuminates this clearly, and gives providers insight into precisely what data students seek. At the top of the priority list is data on placement and employment rates (77% of survey respondents desire such information), followed by completion rates (58%) and post-graduation salaries (48%). [20]

The need for better – and ideally comparative – data on the outcomes fostered by online learning models underlines our own Reimagine Education Awards criteria. Projects that show clear evidence of rigorous attempts to prove the efficacy of their work – whether the desired outcome is increased intellectual curiosity, more students getting an A grade, or a higher graduate employment rate – are rated more favourably. Even as the number of programs available gathers apace, students still demand nothing less.

Conclusions

Despite these reflections on projects like 42 and Minerva, and despite the continuing challenges that MOOCs face, it is important to recognise – as does The Economist in its report on new forms – that seeking universality for any model will, inevitably, prove disappointing. If the new models outlined here are all valuable, it is because they increase the range of options available to different categories of learner

For example, it is not only the case that adult learners will find it harder to justify the temporal and financial commitments demanded by full-time degrees; it is also that such programs may be unsuitable to their needs. In order to scale up a career, for example, a series of micro courses teaching specific skills may prove more profitable than a Master's.

In a similar vein, numerous stakeholders are likely to continue querying current assumptions about the number of people who need to attend traditional universities in order to achieve career success. A proliferation of quasi-apprenticeship programs that combine the critical thinking competencies universities claim to nurture with the practical skills employers claim to find missing in many prospective employees, may give learners better, more viable, non-university options. Examples include the Dyson Institute of Technology – a tertiary institution sponsored by British investor James Dyson – whose degrees are initially being awarded by Warwick University.[21]

For these options to become truly viable, it will not be enough for providers to offer them and for students to wish to take them. Employers are the third, and perhaps most influential, party here. The degree retains its value as an indicator of certain desirable competencies.[22] Until employers are widely prepared to acknowledge that the qualifications provided by alternative models can prove as conducive to successful employment as the degree, reluctance to take these up is likely to remain among learners.

We hope that this year's Reimagine Education conference will provide an opportunity to take these conversations further with those delegates interested in alternative forms of higher education. Representatives of both 42 and MOOC provider FutureLearn will be in attendance, and delegates will have the opportunity to share their thoughts on credentialing, course design, accreditation, and accessibility along with many other aspects.[23]

20 http://www.bestcolleges.com/wp-content/uploads/2017-Online-Education-Trends-Report.pdf

21 https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/04/james-dyson-addresses-engineering-skills-gap-with-university-launch

22 http://pearsonblueskies.com/2014/the-signalling-mechanism/

23 http://www.reimagine-education.com/agenda-2/

ABOUT QS

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QS Intelligence Unit (QSIU) was formed in 2008 in response to growing public demand for comparative data on universities and other higher education providers, and for institutions to develop deeper insight into their competitive environment. Committed to the key values of rigorous integrity, undeniable value, unique insight and charismatic presentation, QSIU strives to be the most trusted independent source of global intelligence on the higher education sector.

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