MOOCs and Accreditation: Focus on the Quality of "Direct-to-Students" Education

Judith S. Eaton

We are again talking about innovation in higher education and it is a refreshing change. The most conspicuous, challenging and controversial subject of these discussions is "MOOCs" - massive open online courses. MOOCs such as Coursera, Udacity and edX, all launched in early 2012, have received extensive media coverage accompanied by a lot of commentary. What type of education is offered here? Will it last? How do we judge its quality? Is there a role for accreditation?

MOOCs: "Direct-to-Students" Education

MOOCs are a form of "direct-to-students" education: Students do not need to enroll in a college or university; offerings are available on-demand to anyone. Students do not need to become involved in a federal or state student assistance program, paying little (even as compared to lower-cost community college tuition) or nothing for the offerings. Students are not bound by an academic calendar with semesters or courses and they are not part of a structured degree program. MOOCs provide an opportunity for connection between internationally known professors from elite institutions and millions of students.

MOOCs take creative advantage of current technology that not only allows for a massification but approaches a universalization of higher education once barely imaginable. Offerings involve consideration of a concept or skill, generally via video, followed by exercises or quizzes. They sometimes rely on an approach to teaching and learning that removes faculty from the heart of the educational experience, pushing students to use their own initiative to seek out and benefit from learning experiences, much as the healthcare industry has modeled greater patient responsibility for sustaining health. This shift away from the traditional central role for faculty is one of the more controversial aspects of MOOCs.

MOOCs also build on longstanding practices in higher education, including continuing education, online education and competency-based education such as the work of Western Governor's University (WGU) and Excelsior University. WGU, since its inception in 1997, has been offering online, competency-based education. Excelsior, founded in 1971 as Regents College in New York, has been a pioneer of adult and online learning. MIT's Open Courseware initiative has been around for 10 years, as has Carnegie Mellon University's Open Learning Initiative. Straighterline, a private company offering low-cost online courses since 2009, has established transfer partnerships with a number of institutions and, most recently, entered into agreements with Education Testing Service and the Collegiate Learning Assessment that allow students to be tested and attempt to transfer their Straighterline credits. However, the scale of MOOCs, their extensive online presence, their international appeal and tuition-free approach set them apart even as they reflect some traditional features.

What is a MOOC experience worth to a student? Students can receive an acknowledgment of their achievement by earning certificates or "badges" that affirm mastery of skills or specific portions of learning.
This can help with employers and obtaining a job. The Mozilla Foundation has constructed an electronic platform to support the issuing, collecting and sharing of badges. Students may also convert MOOC experiences to college credit. UC-Berkeley is exploring the award of transfer credit to California community college students who enroll in Berkeley MOOCs. Colorado State University-Global Campus is offering credit for MOOCs. Will longstanding organizations devoted to assessment of prior learning such as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and the American Council on Education's College Credit Recommendation Service include MOOC experiences in their scrutiny?

**MOOCs, Quality and Accreditation**

As with any effort at change in higher education, the emergence of MOOCs has quickly been accompanied by questions about their quality, a key element in their staying power. Are students learning? How do we know? Such discussions often lead to discussion of accreditation, higher education's primary means of assuring and improving quality.

If there is a role for accreditation with MOOCs, what might this be? If accreditation is not an appropriate vehicle for quality review for MOOCs, what is? Questions include:

1. **Through what lens do we examine MOOCs for quality?** With traditional higher education, we have a lens through which to determine baseline quality. This includes curricula, faculty and student support, for example. Does it make sense to judge MOOCs through the lens of traditional higher education? Or, do we need a different lens and what is this?
2. **Do MOOCs call for additional rethinking of expectations of teaching and learning - beyond current conversations?** MOOCs may not have faculty in the traditional sense, curricula may come from elsewhere and traditional student support may be absent. MOOCs offer:
   - Alternative delivery of instruction - noncredit offerings to a mass, potentially universal, audience.
   - Alternative approaches to instruction - a more modest faculty role, expanded reliance on students and peer-to-peer grading and auto-grading.
   - Alternative evaluation of learning - use of data analytics.
3. **To what extent does current accreditation review address the key features of MOOCs?** The 80 U.S. recognized accreditors review and accredit programs, colleges and universities. Accreditation review includes attention to continuing education and most accreditors address online learning and competency-based education. Regional and faith-related accreditation address degree education; the national career-related accreditors review both degree and non-degree postsecondary education. At present, accreditors are not focused on the scale of MOOCs, do not accredit elements of courses and still expect that faculty play a significant role in students' educational experiences.
4. **If accreditation is to address MOOCs, what needs to be done?** Accrediting organizations were created by traditional higher education and have changed as traditional institutions have changed. If MOOCs continue to build connections with colleges and universities that result in the conversion of MOOC experiences into college credit, what tools do accreditors need? Is such scrutiny desirable or valuable? Will the review process change and, if so, how?
5. **If it is not appropriate for accreditation to address quality in this context, what are alternative forms of quality review?** Do alternative tools need to be created? If so, what are their characteristics? What are other approaches to determining quality that might be developed?

MOOCs offer an unusual direct-to-student opportunity for expansion of learning, apart from the traditional structure of programs and degrees. Whether ultimately apart from or connected to the environment of currently accepted teaching and learning, judgment about quality will be essential. The questions above provide a start to address how to judge quality in MOOCS and determine whether accreditation is the appropriate tool for assuring and improving quality in this environment. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation began to focus on this issue at its 2012 Summer Workshop and is continuing the dialogue at various meetings, including
Inside Accreditation is a publication intended to keep presidents of CHEA member institutions informed about developments in external quality review of higher education.