# THE LEGITIMACY OF THE UNIVERSITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EXPANTION OF MASIVE OPEN ONLINE COURSES (MOOCs)

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**Abstract:** *How does a MOOCs potentially challenge our notions of what a legitimate university is? Is this a legitimate question in the context of MOOCSs becoming more and ore similar with face to face programmes - online credentials are on their way (with checks for cheating).These courses are merely 50% as effective as a face-to-face one but a fraction of the cost (professor Daniel Mc Farland on Coursera.org). Is this the beginning of the end of the face-to-face university programmes? 455 students enrolled on Organizational Analyses on coursera.org have answered that question .*

**Key words:** *MOOCs, university, neo-institutional theory, organization, legitimization*

While organizational models have been studied in depth as it relates to schools and businesses, massive open online courses MOOCs, present a fascinating case where organizational theories can be applied to understand how the online courses operate as a form of organization.

As such, I will first review the concept of MOOCs and I will analyze it in the relation with the neo-institutional theory of organizational development..

A **MOOCs** is a model of **educational delivery** that is, to varying degrees, massive, open, online, and a course. Most MOOCs are structured similar to traditional online higher education courses in which students watch lectures, read assigned material, participate in online discussions and forums, and complete quizzes and tests on the course material. The online activities can be augmented by local meet-ups among students who live near one another. MOOCs are typically provided by higher education institutions, often in partnership with "organizers" such as Coursera, edX, and Udacity, though some MOOCs are being offered directly by a college or university. MOOCs arise from the confluence of several important trends, and they raise important questions and spark essential conversations about **curriculum design, accreditation,** what constitutes a valid learning experience, and who has access to higher education.(ELI-Seven things you should know about MOOCs, http://www.educause.edu/ELI).

Given their impact and their massive number of learners, MOOCs tend to become a form of specific organization, highly depended on the environment. Why is MOOCs an organization? Because it has :

- **Technology**: courses, curriculum, reading materials, video lectures, quizzes, learning tracks, enrollment and graduation procedures in order to fit to educational environment, to be recognized as quality higher education providers

- **Participants:** universities**,** teachers, learners, experts in e-learning learning, adult learning, instructional design

- **Goals: surviving in the educational market through institutional isomorphism toward the successful face-to-face universities; become legitimate, recognized by the society as trustable education providers**

- **Social structure:** Formal structure conforms to the educational environment. The Courses respect the enrollment procedures, scientific information are delivered through video lectures, enhanced by supplemental readings and evaluated to periodically and final quizzes. **Often there is a loose coupling between technical core and i**nstitutionally defined organizational structure. For example the formal organizational structures correspond to those of an university but sometimes, the delivered knowledge is not academic level. The logic of confidence makes inspection less necessary, and practice may be very different from "ceremonial" classifications or structures.

In accordance with the principles of Neoinstitutional Theory, any MOOCs platform strive to *legitimize itself in the environment higher education providers*

How does a MOOCs like Coursera potentially challenge our notions of what a legitimate university is? Is this a legitimate question in the context of MOOCSs becoming more and ore similar with face to face programmes - online credentials are on their way (with checks for cheating).These courses are merely 50% as effective as a face-to-face one but a fraction of the cost (professor Daniel Mc Farland on Coursera.org). Is this the beginning of the end of the face-to-face university programmes? 455 students enrolled on Organizational Analyses on coursera.org have answered that question .

Stephen Dowle, information system engineer and former Royal navy submariner affirmed that Traditional universities serve three purposes: (https://class.coursera.org/organalysis-002/forum/thread?thread_id=75)

- The transmission of Knowledge
- The creation of knowledge (ie research)
- Reproduction of the hegemony (along with other institutions ).

The majority of posters on the Coursera forum were of the opinion that the traditional university will continue to exist and remain relevant.

In the short to medium term the Coursera students do not see MOOCs replacing universities in these last two functions. As regarding the transmission of knowledge we could remark that :

- Those students wishing to benefit from research opportunities or wishing to take up key posts within the hegemony will continue to seek out universities for first degrees; this will particularly benefit elite universities

- Some of the content delivery within universities may include elements of MOOCs but this will be set off against traditional face to face education all intimately

tied to an argument over value for money (why should I pay top fees for something I can get for free or vastly less cost elsewhere?)

- MOOCs role will be primarily reaching out to those who: don't have access to traditional university education; could attend traditional university but looking for a cheaper option; don't have aspirations either to do research or join the hegemony.
- Universities could benefit by creating new delivery models that build on MOOCs (eg by enhancement).

What could happen of course is that MOOCs merely serve to bolster the privileged position of universities.

Regarding the legitimacy of physical university campuses some subjects consider that MOOCs and Universities will find ways to coexist (through a dialectic) as they each specialise and offer differentiated value propositions. Universities, as the "incumbents", will be altered in the process, but will survive with potentially altered legitimacies.

Richard L Powers thinks that: MOOC's add flexibility and may challenge universities through competition, but they don't challenge the legitimacy of universities.

Some of the reasons that were given for universities retaining legitimacy / relevance were:

- University gives so much more to the young individual than just specific knowledge in the chosen field. (Vanessa Brigh)
- As online industry conferences have not replaced in-person events, the traditional university will survive and continue to thrive.
- At a university, especially in the undergrad programs, useful connections for future activities can be formed.
- Today Alumni network of Harvard, Stanford and other good universities creates a very powerful network which provides networking platform much beyond today's MOOCs platform can offer.(Jatin)

One important aspect is the certification of a highly reputable University where you have to attend full time. In certain sectors such as law or medicine, such certification is very important.(Yan). For many, the traditional campus provides a passport to the employment process.. This is represented by the official transcript/degree.

Certain aspects of conventional universities can never be matched by online universities/institutions such as grooming of personality in a conventional university environment, learning opportunities outside the books and class rooms, networking opportunities, discipline, confidence building, interpersonal skills, interaction with "real world", impact of the company of learned teachers/scholars etc. (Waheed Iqbal)

As regarding the role for MOOCs alongside Universities the subjects saw MOOCs as an efficient way to learn a specific topic, but not a attending a Bachelors or Masters.

Some of the roles that MOOCs can play alongside universities:

- These courses should help younger students to "try before they buy", test out their true interests and get a feel for their preferred universities before embarking on a residential degree course.( Philippa jane Stone)

- MOOCs is the ultimate public relations/advertising opportunity for universities ever invented.
- MOOCs stimulate innovation within Universities, by "forcing "them to create new delivery models that build on MOOCs (eg by enhancement). MOOCs and other similar formats realize the immense potential of technology to deliver education cheap and as required to a vast audience of people. This would challenge the modern universities to become better and threaten the existence of weak universities.

The respondents stressed the main advantages of MOOCs in relations with adult learners such:

- Working professionals (who do not have the time or need to attend university, but wish to obtain specific knowledge);
- Underprivileged or working class (who either cannot afford university, or have other conflicting commitments - family, full time employment);
- Life-long learners (who have no interest in attending or paying for university);
- .Test-drivers (students wishing to get their feet wet prior to commitment).

An interesting point of view of John Roth is that MOOCss are substantially recreational, at least for now. They represent a substantial threat to **non-fiction book sales**; being way better than reading bad literature. Raising the quality of recreation could be a serious boon to a society.

There are areas that MOOCs would need to address:

- MOOCs will need to legitimize their certificates if they are to have any currency in the workplace.( Andrew Lugton)
- Dropout rates on MOOCs. The main issue for MOOCs providers is how to avoid big dropout rates.
- Evaluation. Making the evaluation valid by avoiding cheating is another aspect to be addressed. One subject affirmed that if cheating on exams is such a big issue associated with on – line learning then why don't we prepare for the tests with on – line courses and conduct the exams on – site like TOEFEL exams.
- The accessibility and knowledge of the use of the technology, as this being the vehicle for communication and delivery.( Urania Joseph). We cannot forget that there is still a massive proportion of population around the globe that have no access to these communication vehicles.
- Due to the lack of a screening process as a qualification to enrol, the quality of peer interaction is hard to control.

How it will be? What will prevail? Human face-to-face interaction or computer mediated transmition of knowledge? "The smell" of books or their online measured "impact factor'? Only time can tell. Until then, I must confess that, as learner of Organizational Analysis course on coursera.org, I couldn't wait for another week to come in order to see what the video-lectures will be about, or to share ideas with my world wide colleagues on the course's forum.

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