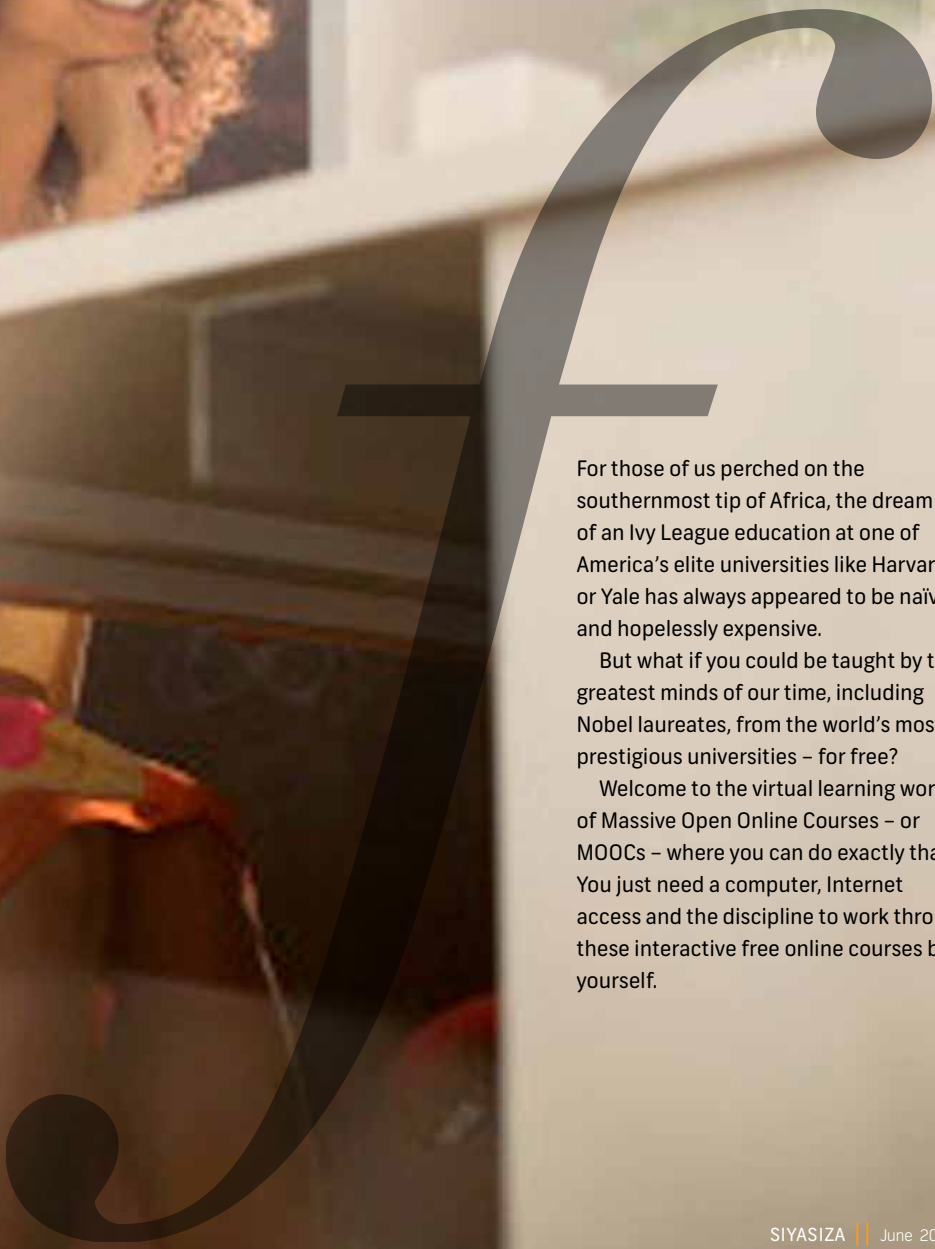


To MOOC or not to MOOC?



It's an eLearning phenomenon – and its pioneers believed it would democratise tertiary education. But have Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) lived up to their grand revolutionary hopes? And more importantly, can they boost your career development?

Words || CARLA HUSSELMAN



For those of us perched on the southernmost tip of Africa, the dream of an Ivy League education at one of America's elite universities like Harvard or Yale has always appeared to be naïve and hopelessly expensive.

But what if you could be taught by the greatest minds of our time, including Nobel laureates, from the world's most prestigious universities – for free?

Welcome to the virtual learning world of Massive Open Online Courses – or MOOCs – where you can do exactly that. You just need a computer, Internet access and the discipline to work through these interactive free online courses by yourself.



START OF A REVOLUTION IN LEARNING?

The term 'MOOC' (pronounced 'moo-k') was first coined by a Canadian lecturer in 2008. It was only in 2011, however, that public interest was caught by a free online course on Artificial Intelligence (AI) by Stanford University professor and MOOC pioneer Sebastian Thrun when more than 160 000 students from some 190 countries signed up for it.

By 2012, MOOCs had so exploded in popularity that The New York Times declared it 'The Year of the MOOCs'. During this heady time, Thrun and other pioneers

predicted that their education-for-all system was set to democratise higher education and break down economic, geographic, racial and gender barriers to tertiary learning, including alleviating its staggering costs.

MOOCs would ultimately be able to offer a master's degree for as little as \$100, Thrun predicted, and in 50 years, only 10 institutions would be responsible for delivering higher education. Its e-vangelists went so far as to predict the collapse of 'brick and mortar' universities.



Career-boosting opportunities

One of MOOCs' chief successes is that its availability and flexibility allows working professionals access to appropriate skills and knowledge as they need it, when they need it, says Janet Small, the course development manager at UCT's Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching (CILT),

'MOOCs' biggest growth is to provide career and professionally orientated skills that can lead to career advancement. There is a growing trend for MOOCs students to showcase their certificates on CVs, on job portals or on LinkedIn.'

Coursera reported last year that in a survey of 52 000 of its students, one-third who took MOOCs to advance their career said that they'd received a

tangible benefit like a raise or secured a new job.

It may not land you a new job but completing a MOOC does show an employer that you are motivated and curious, career experts worldwide have agreed.

'It's still new, so it's not 100% respected by executives who are used to hiring people with similar education backgrounds, who went through the traditional route. But we're early on,' said best-selling author and millennial career expert Dan Schwabel in an interview with leading US business news site, CNBC.com.

'More and more companies are looking outside of traditional degrees for talent,' he says.

440 000
learners registered
at FutureLearn's biggest-ever course

30 million
learners
around the world

50 000
people from over
100 countries
have signed up for UCT's MOOCs

LEARN LOCAL

The University of Cape Town (UCT) and Wits University were also inspired to create MOOCs with 'proudly African' content.

Stellenbosch University (SU) has followed suit, recently announcing its first free and open online course, partnering with FutureLearn for a four-week course, around the theme of the African Philosophy of Education. UCT's first partnership was with FutureLearn in 2014, and, in December last year, it partnered with the largest platform, Coursera, says Janet Small, the course development manager at UCT's Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching (CILT), which has already developed five MOOCs (<http://www.cilt.uct.ac.za/cilt/moocs-uct>). 'The growth of MOOCs usage worldwide is impressive: Coursera has 18 million learners and over 3.5 million course completers. EdX and FutureLearn contribute an additional 12 million learners,' says Small.

Last year, FutureLearn hosted the biggest ever course, 'Understanding IELTS: Techniques for English Language Tests' with 440 000 learners registered.

Last year, 1 800 new courses were announced, taking the total number to 4 200 from over 550 universities, according to Class Central, a MOOCs directory. Around 50 000 people from over 100 countries have signed up for UCT's MOOCs – and UCT is currently developing another five courses. Its most popular course, 'What is a Mind?' featured as one of the top 10 courses of 2015 on Class Central.



6-8%

of tertiary school-aged youth or adults are enrolled in higher education in South Africa compared to a global average of 32%

5 REASONS TO SIGN UP FOR A MOOC

1. To test the waters and gauge your true interest in a course you're considering registering for.
2. You may feel that the degree programme you've chosen is missing a crucial subject that may provide you with a skill that will help you when you start your career.
3. To update your skills in your career field.
4. If you're considering a new career path, MOOCs could offer you insight into a new discipline or provide you with new skills.
5. To learn for fun and self-enrichment.

FORMAL ONLINE LEARNING COURSES VS MOOCs

Unlike formal online courses, for which there is a cost, and which have a fixed number of participants, MOOCs are free, non-formal courses designed for mass participation, with no entry requirements.

'Students drive their own education, studying alongside peers who come from all over the globe and may be schoolgoers, working professionals, PhD candidates and even grandmothers,' explains Small.

Other than online access to video and audio lectures and course materials, MOOCs have interactive features such as online forums, as well as quizzes, writing assignments and peer-review exercises.

Unlike formal courses, there is no individual and personalised interaction with lecturers or coaches, and MOOCs don't offer regular credit-bearing, formal degree or diploma courses. However, MOOCs do have Certificates of Participation or Attainment (for a small fee) that you can use to augment your CV or LinkedIn profile.

Spotlight on SA

In South Africa, formal online courses are increasingly catering for the crucial need for higher education, says Amy Johnson, GetSmarter's Chief of Education (<http://www.getsmarter.co.za/>).

'Higher education in Africa is fraught with challenges: in sub-Saharan Africa, only 6 to 8% of tertiary school-aged youth or adults are enrolled in higher education compared to a global average of 32%,' says Johnson.

Compounding this problem is the growing global demand for post-secondary education, but a marked employer dissatisfaction with graduate skills. In 36 African countries, 54% of employers identified the mismatch of skills between job seekers and job requirements as a major challenge.

Universal debt challenge

Student debt is a global issue that has led to many questions regarding the impact and value of higher education, says Johnson.

'Most students simply can't afford to exit the workforce or delay entering the workforce to obtain a degree,' she says.

Furthermore, the pace of change is such that they need to constantly be looking to keep their skills set relevant.

Online education meets this need.

This local online course provider has partnered with top universities to educate more than 400 000 students to date, and has achieved a 94.7% completion rate on over 60 university-approved online courses.



'More and more companies are looking outside of traditional degrees for talent.'

Dan Schwabel
MILLENNIAL CAREER EXPERT



CASE STUDY

'MOOCS INDICATE THAT CANDIDATES HAVE A GOOD ATTITUDE TO LEARNING'

Bernard O'Flynn, a South African electrical engineer who is the chief technical officer and chief product officer at Berlin-based fintech startup Savedo GmbH, says he's started 21 MOOCs and completed 11. 'I don't take MOOCs into account when hiring someone and I don't suspect anyone else does either, even if someone has paid for the official certificate,' he says.

However, O'Flynn believes it shows that someone is a continuous learner, which indicates a good attitude to learning and a willingness to expand their traditional degree. 'But,' he says, 'I don't hold them up to the same standard as a university course and no one I know at my level takes them as seriously as a degree. It's too easy to cheat on a MOOC and some courses don't go into any depth.'



DEMOCRATISING LEARNING

University of Pennsylvania research, published in the journal *Nature* in 2013, showed that some 80% of MOOC users already have an advanced degree.

In Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, 80% of MOOC students came from the richest 6% of the population, the study reported.

'Far from realising the high ideals of their advocates, MOOCs seem to be reinforcing the advantages of the "haves" rather than educating the have-nots,' Ezekiel Emanuel, the study's author, told *The Wall Street Journal*.

Even those at the forefront of the MOOCs phenomenon have been forced to conclude that this online learning tool has not been

the cure-all for tertiary education that they'd envisaged.

However, it has imparted important lessons to build on, such as the fact that people can be educated at scale. 'To all those who declared our experiment a failure, you have to understand how innovation works,' Thrun has written on his blog.

'Few ideas work on the first try. Iteration is key to innovation,' he says.

The overblown claims about the disappearance of brick and mortar universities were always seen as hype by informed commentators, adds Small.

'It was naïve to believe that MOOCs would solve the profound challenges facing higher education.'



siyasiza.com

Find further information on MOOCs, visit siyasiza.com.





THE DOWNSIDE OF MOOCS

1 Digital and critical literacies: Research has shown that participating in MOOCs requires skills and competences to thrive in a digital environment. This is a problem in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa where there is a lack of digital and critical literacy.

2 Connectivity: Most MOOCs work on the assumption of good, reasonably priced connectivity and bandwidth, which limits participation for many on the continent.

3 Language barriers: MOOCs are primarily delivered in English, although Spanish and French courses are emerging.

Drop in or dropout?

One of the main criticisms levelled against MOOCs is their high dropout and low completion rates. According to research conducted by the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education in 2013, only about 50% of those who register for MOOCs even look at a single lecture – and an average of only 4% actually complete their courses.

Yes, UCT's MOOCs do have high dropout rates and low completion rates, confirms Small. 'However, it is the large number of dropins – people who enroll but only complete part of a course that interests them – that contributes to the impact of MOOCs.

'Our completion rates range from 10% to 20%. This still means that hundreds of people are working through these courses every year. MOOCs' fully flexible mode also means that when life gets busy, the course can be dropped with no penalties and no guilt.'



One of MOOCs' chief successes is that its availability and flexibility allows working professionals access to appropriate skills and knowledge as they need it, when they need it.

- Janet Small

UCT'S CENTRE FOR INNOVATION
IN LEARNING AND TEACHING



TOP MOOCS PROVIDERS TO TRY

1. Classcentral: <https://www.class-central.com/> [A MOOCs directory]
2. Coursera: <https://www.coursera.org/>
3. edX: <https://www.edx.org/>
4. FutureLearn: <https://www.futurelearn.com/>
- Canvas Network: <https://www.canvas.net/>
6. Udacity: <https://www.udacity.com/>



'Qualifications will increasingly be a patchwork quilt that draws on best practice course modules from universities across the world.'

- Taddy Blecher

CO-FOUNDER OF THE BRANSON SCHOOL
OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

LONG LIVE THE MOOC!



Online learning and MOOCs are a massive advance for education, but are still in their infancy, says Dr Taddy Blecher, the pioneer of the free tertiary education movement in South Africa who co-founded the Branson School of Entrepreneurship with Sir Richard Branson.

'We will see enormous developments over the next decade,' he says. 'The future of learning in my view is "mass personalisation", where every student can ultimately learn at their own pace, with individualised automated support that builds their unique individualised skills.'

Blecher believes that colleges and universities will increasingly offer a blended approach, where much of the content and skills will be learned online in advance. But, he says, there will still be 'bricks and mortar' institutions in the future for the human interaction that it facilitates and the deeper networks and trust between the students that it engenders.

'Qualifications will increasingly be a patchwork quilt that draws on best practice course modules from universities across the world,' he says. 