

TREO

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Higher Education 4.0:

Uni for nothin', MOOCs for free?

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In 2017, the newly-elected, left-of-centre government of New Zealand boldly declared access to higher education to be a universal right and committed to a year's "fees-free" studentship, with the promise of eventually extending it to an entire first-degree programme. Against such a backdrop, this TREO talk will examine the role of Massive Open Online Courses as surrogates for "fees-free" higher education (HiEd) and whether the design of such a HiEd 4.0 platform is even a credible proposition. Can higher education ever be for nothing? Specifically, in the delivery of knowledge and skills, it has been suggested that MOOCs could provide cost-effective and accessible platforms that address some of the shortcomings of conventional models (Czerniewicz et al., 2017). This talk will attempt to provide a socio-technical view of such a "value proposition" and suggests that the charter of HiEd extends beyond the distribution of knowledge and skills. A university is more than a certification of core-competencies in that it also brings about socialization and participation. With the undercurrent of design ideals such as "tech for good", the academic community must examine whether MOOCs are credible substitutes or at-best, complementary platforms. The effectiveness of university-level teaching in large lecture halls may not be perfect, but neither will be the delivery of MOOC style education to the faceless masses as their very low completion rates seem to suggest in empirical studies. Rambe & Moeti (2017) have argued, in the African context that MOOCs may turn out to be double-edged swords resulting in either disruptive democracy or entrenching elitism. In an Asian OECD environment, a case was made for the middle path of blended learning which incorporates online materials with face-to-face engagements, may be a more effective solution (Jones & Sharma, 2018). In some field studies, online delivery provided greater engagement and unintended benefit, but the outcome is not always positivist. Not even in the celebrated OLPC initiative did online content effectively replace classrooms (Sharma et al., 2018). The research gap is in establishing a contingency theory of designing online HiEd. In this era of Industry 4.0, HiEd should *not* be about the creative destruction of all that we value in universities, but their digital transformation. The focus of this talk will therefore be an articulation of ideas for a design science approach to digitally disrupting HiEd that could fulfil the aspirations of the key stakeholder groups – students, faculty and regulators. It will address the key challenge of how blended learning could capture the essence of universities through a set of socio-technical considerations. It will conclude with the axiom that MOOCs must provide design complementarity to traditional higher education rather than serve as substitutable commodities.

References

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