By Paul Belleflamme, 3 April 2013

Will we all soon be hooked on MOOCs? (1) Introduction

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I have been willing to devote a blog post to MOOCs (*Massive Open Online Courses*) for quite some time now, but I never found the energy, nor the right timing to do so (the only step I took was to propose the "market for MOOCs" as a master thesis topic for students of the Louvain School of Management).

Now, the timing seems right, as my university (Université catholique de Louvain, UCL) has just announced that it had entered a three-year partnership (2014-2016) with edX ("education X"), one of the main actors on the MOOC scene. According to the agreement, a minimum of four courses from UCL will be accessible online via the edX platform from January 2014 on. In this context, it is more than ever the responsibility of IPdigIT (which scrutinizes digital innovations, is used as a tool for blended learning, and is partly based at UCL) to explain what MOOCs are and how they are likely to affect university education.

Moreover, my ~~procrastination~~ lack of energy is no longer a problem as a colleague of mine just proposed me an in-depth analysis of the current and future situation of MOOCs. Julien Jacqmin is a PhD student in Economics from the Economics School of Louvain, and is affiliated with the CEREC/Université Saint-Louis – Brussels. Julien's dissertation is on the economics of education/science and on higher education policy. As an expert on these questions, he is well equipped to analyze the ins and outs of MOOCs.

I have cut Julien's article in three distinct posts. In this post, Julien sets the scene by giving a crash course on MOOCs. In the second post, Julien analyses five business models that could sustain the development of MOOCs in the future. Finally, in the third post, Julien explores the

educational side of MOOCs and shares his thoughts about the possible evolution of this technology and about the position that universities should adopt.

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Julien Jacqmin

MOOC (*Massive Open Online Course*) has been for quite some times the buzz acronym in the higher education sphere. Will it threaten the traditional higher education sector? Or will it just complement it? Should universities heavily invest in these new technological platforms? These questions have led to intense discussions in newspapers, blogs, universities' hallways and in parliaments (see, e.g., this piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* or the pieces written by the *New York Time*'s Higher Education specialist Tamar Lewin).

In this post and the next two ones, I'll try to convince you about the two main problems related with MOOCs. Depending, on whether or not they will be jointly solved, MOOCs will deserve, in my eyes, to be named the next big thing in the higher education landscape. As you will see, it is still too early to say! The first issue is related with the sustainability of their business model (see here) and the second with their pedagogical added value (see here).

Before I get into details why, a crash course on MOOCs might be of interest to some of you!

MOOC 101

MOOC is the acronym for Massive Open Online Course. These classes are taught by professors from some of the world's most famous universities via online platforms (the most famous are the for-profit Coursera and Udacity and the not-for-profit edX), which can reach large scale audiences, sometimes more than a 100,000 students at a time! They are open access as there is no barrier to enter for students and they are free. Except for some rare exceptions, no academic credit is granted to those attending and passing the class but a certificate can be obtained (often at a cost). Course contents are a mixture of traditional class materials (books, videos, problem sets, multiple choices, etc) and crowd-sourced materials provided by the interactions between students, professors and teaching assistants via online discussion groups.

(Read Julien's related posts on the business models and on the educational side of MOOCs.)