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**Open and online learning:  
Making the most of MOOCs and other models**

Session: Models for Implementation

*How will Online Learning Climb the Slope of Enlightenment?*

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to be back at Universities UK. This was a familiar venue for the latter part of my eleven-year tenure as VC of the Open University. When I began UUK was called the CVCP and met in the gloom of the University of London's Senate Chamber. That dates me. It dates me even more to note that my career in open learning began 41 years ago with an unpaid internship at the infant Open University.

My final confession is that I walked the talk on lifelong learning by taking 25 years to complete a Master's degree in Educational Technology with Concordia University, Montreal. It was only during my time as VC at the OU that I wrote the required thesis, on the subject of 'mega-universities'.

With this background I bring three beliefs to this discussion. First, big is good. After my book on mega-universities I wrote one on mega-schools, advocating open and distance learning at scale in secondary education and teacher training. Last year I waded into today's topic of mega-courses with a paper titled *Making Sense of MOOCs: Musings in a Maze of Myth, Paradox and Possibility*.

This collection of 'mega's' means that I like enrolment figures with lots of zeroes behind them, whether in open universities, open schools or open online courses. I have devoted my career, in both universities and international organisations, to opening up access to education at all levels.

But, second, it must be access to success. Ordinary people want their educational achievements to be recognised by society. Open universities and open schools provide that recognition to successful students. Most MOOCs do not, which is their fatal flaw.

Third, I believe that using technology is the only way to enable wide access to successful learning at reasonable cost. My metaphor is to use technology to stretch the iron triangle of access, quality and cost that puts a straitjacket on conventional teaching. However, as a 40-year veteran of educational technology I have seen fads come and go. MOOCs are a fad that has come and will certainly go – or transmute into other things.

That is the background for my comments on 'Models for Implementation'.

Technology cycles

I start with technology cycles.

When I wrote *Mega-universities* I drew on Moore's technology adoption life cycle. Its key feature is the chasm that can occur between the early adopters and take-up by the early majority. Some innovations start well, exponential growth begins – and then suddenly it all stalls and falls into the chasm.

Today the talk is usually about the Gartner technology hype cycle. MOOCs illustrate it well. Right now, as more and more universities around the world pile into MOOCs, we must be nearing the peak of inflated expectations.

My Vancouver colleague Tony Bates, a perceptive observer of this scene, thinks MOOCs will head into the trough of disillusionment before the end of this year but, to quote him: 'I doubt they will hit bottom until 2014, when evaluation reports start to roll in, and the universities participating decide whether the business model works for them. I think there is enough momentum to carry them through 2013'.

It is useful to juxtapose the technology adoption and technology hype cycles and to ask whether the coming trough of disillusionment will create a chasm of reduced MOOCs activity. Some institutions may decide that the reputational advantage they hoped for is not worth the cost; and some potential newcomers to the flock may conclude that the game is not worth the candle.

But what happens then? Online learning is an important part of the future of higher education. Both an early and a late majority of institutions must eventually get online, partly to attract students, partly to get costs down and partly to benefit from the academic advantages of the knowledge media. How will universities climb the slope of enlightenment by adopting online learning in order to reach the plateau of productivity that beckons in the hype cycle?

For most institutions the plateau of productivity will mean a hybrid model that combines significant online learning with opportunities for face-to-face teaching and support. This is a large step from where most institutions are now, although those already offering some courses and programmes through open and distance learning should find it easier to take that step, not least because some of their students will already be mixing and matching learning in both modes.

An important question for us today is whether offering MOOCs will help institutions climb the slope of enlightenment towards this plateau of sustainable productivity and a hybrid teaching model. It is not obvious that it will. Indeed, some cynics argue that elite universities are offering MOOCs to give an impression of modernity while actually protecting the rest of the institution from the hassle of having to go online. That's an extreme view, but the little videos that are commonest feature of MOOC pedagogy may really be doing more to nurture the megalomania of the academics involved than to move the institution towards a hybrid teaching and learning model for its regular award-bearing programmes.

### The need for partners

One thing does seem to be clear. With the possible exception of established distance-teaching institutions like the OU that already use technology at scale, most institutions will need the help of a partner to climb the slope of enlightenment towards the plateau of productivity. In the US companies like Coursera, edX and Udacity provide an ICT

platform to enable universities to offer, at scale, ‘courses’ that mostly do not carry credit or lead to awards. Initiatives like Futurelearn here, OpenupEd across Europe, and the IIT ventures in India all involve partnerships.

Here I declare my interest as a Senior Advisor to Academic Partnerships, a company that has had considerable success in helping nearly 50 universities – mostly US state universities – to offer some of their regular programmes online.

I accepted this role because Randy Best, who conceived the model, shares my aspiration of expanding student access to recognised awards at low cost. The success of the model, which sees students graduate and pass professional licensure examinations at rates as good or better than on campus, is due to the Company’s close collaboration with institutional faculty and administrations.

The Company tailors its services to institutional needs, but they usually include advice on course conversion, provision of a technology platform if the institution does not already have one and, most importantly, student recruitment and support.

Although these partnerships aim for thousands of students per programme rather than the tens of thousands found in MOOCs, scale is important both for increasing access to socially important programmes like Education and Nursing, and also enabling reductions in students’ tuition fees.

The Academic Partnerships model helps to move institutions up the slope of enlightenment towards productive online programmes in the chosen areas. It does not preclude the offering of MOOCs. Indeed, some partners are offering the first course in their programmes as a MOOC, so as to give students a free taste of online learning.

But the aim is always to lead them into online award-bearing programmes and have them graduate at rates at least as good as those of their fellow students on campus.