RETHINKING EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA- THE USE OF MOOCS IN FASHION DESIGN MANAGEMENT DEGREES

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Abstract

There have been criticisms recently, about the lack of practical value of a post graduate degree and this has led to debate about the shape and role of education in today’s turbulent changing environment (Hay, 2008). How can curriculum reflect the rapid adoption of digital?

Graduate fashion designers tend to become entrepreneurs, typically working solo or with one or two employees as start-ups (Narra, 2008). Historically, they used a bricks and mortar model and not a digital platform. The digital era has allowed many fashion entrepreneurs to embrace digital technology wherein most activities can take place on a digital platform. In consequence, the skills graduates need to take advantage of this opportunity are changing. Adding to this dynamic environment is the popularity of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), having been largely driven by IT-centric business entrepreneurs (i.e. Futurelearn), who created a business partnership model with universities. With low completion rates (Fisher, 2014) an undeveloped business model (Dellarocas and Van Alstyne, 2013) in MOOCs their value has been questioned. However, the production of and enrolment on MOOCs is rising and MOOCs can become a high value component of education. They can be developed and updated quickly and can incorporate rapidly developing changing and developing topics. This paper explores these dilemmas and asks - can MOOCs make education more relevant to entrepreneurship in the digital era?

Keywords: MOOC development, Digital era, digital entrepreneurship, fashion education.

1 INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurs use digital technology to innovate their business models thereby reducing costs, improving internal operations and customer services (Davidson and Vaast, 2010). Digital enterprises go beyond simply adopting and using technology to improve isolated functions. They use digital technology as the infrastructure to support their entire operations and manage stakeholder interactions. The digital era provides an opportunity to gain more efficient access to geographically distant, prospective customers and other potential stakeholders (Reuber and Fischer, 2011). This infrastructure enables entrepreneurs to manage their entire value chain with their online presence giving them global reach to access a wide range of customers and partners. One example is Christine Hunsicker of Gwynnie Bee (https://closet.gwynniebee.com/) an online fashion entrepreneur. In under five years, she’s rapidly grown her company from four staff operating in a New York apartment to 350 employees. Her business is the only clothing rental subscription service for women sizes 10 to 32. The company’s targets two thirds of the US population who are size 14+, yet only 16.8% of apparel spending. By offering a rental service, women can pay a fixed amount each month (from $49 to $199) for their apparel. This traditional entrepreneurship fashion business has moved into the digital arena with great success. This dependence on digital platforms is what makes digital entrepreneurship unique from other types of enterprise. Digital businesses face unique challenges and opportunities with mode of entry, methods of producing and delivering products/services, payments/revenues, and managing stakeholder relationships. This in turn requires proactive education programmes which consider the impact on business models in the digital era.

However, despite all the publicity, MOOCs are really just content—albeit presented in smaller bite sized chunks and to a degree interactive, with the use of online student discussion and in some cases the presence of facilitators. MOOC content is presented in a way that is similar to a book and as such can be read and studied intently or browsed through to pick up useful pieces of information. If treated as a standalone pedagogic tool MOOCs they can be subject to the criticisms that have already been laid at their door, notably low completion rates and a weak business model. However they are a small piece of the education jigsaw and need to be wrapped up in an education strategy, to offer discrete bespoke short opportunities for learning in subject areas that are niche and fast changing.
Another consideration is the cost-orientated moves to expanding online provision through emergent technologies and the growth of alternative HE strategies, such as credit-bearing MOOCs, traditional group-orientated student and tutor interactions are developing into a continuum (Collins et al 2017).

A proliferation in technological enhancements coupled with new UK governmental funding regimes has led many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to seek a route to quality, mass-customised learning provision for student retention support in what Laurillard (2011) has identified as ‘affordable and acceptable ways’ (in Collins et al 2017). With the advent of changes within the UK HE marketplace, in particular issues around the increase of student loans in England in 2012, the part time (PT) undergraduate (UG) sector declined by around 20%. However, with the recent fanfare around credit-bearing MOOCs, and associated promises to offer ‘more efficient, competitive and learner-focussed study options’ (Peter Horrocks, VC, Open University, in Weale, 2016) this marketplace continues to appear challenging, as well as offering opportunity, to incumbents.

As some universities have started to offer a shortened version of their own courses through platforms like Future learn, it has been commented on that a learner can almost design and embark upon their own course of study by enrolling for a range of MOOCs free of charge. Executive education programs, an increasingly competitive market in times of economic challenges, are likely to be affected as companies weigh up the savings they could achieve by directing employees to MOOCs as part of their continuing professional development instead. These executive education programs are a crucial source of revenue for universities contributing on average 20% of annual revenue.

At present, MOOCs developed by top universities do not appear to threaten existing programmes, rather like the low cost airline expand the travel market rather than taking business from the main stream airlines. They do however, seem to attract students for whom traditional university offerings are out of reach.

If universities want to expand their target markets and take advantage of the MOOC opportunity to reach a more diverse group of students, they need to understand those students’ motivations. There has been criticism that MOOC learners have a very low rate of completion of around 5% and that these completers tend to be learners who already in possession of an undergraduate degree.

Taken at face value this seems to undermine MOOCs’ potential to enhance the diversity of university offerings. For many learners, completing an online course is not the most important outcome. It is the learning and the improvement in their job skills that is more important. This opens up an opportunity to use MOOC’s to not just sell certificates of completion but to tailor offerings to the goals of these learners. This then needs to be coupled with the drive for reduced costs universities are facing and the reduction in the part time post graduate market.

One such initiative is that of FutureLearn, the social learning platform owned by The Open University, has now launched an initiative to enable learners will now be able to use its massive open online courses (MOOCs) to earn academic course credits for degrees and MBAs, professional qualifications and formal CPD accreditation.

2 METHODOLOGY

The UK is renowned as the birthplace of some of the worlds most creative and innovative designer fashion labels. These labels have an important economic impact on the UK, particularly London. British designer fashion labels are largely wholesale operations, enhanced and underpinned by a wide-reaching supply chain and intermediary community. Karra (2008) has demonstrated that designers in the fashion industry rarely have formal strategic management or financial training, but soon find themselves in the role of Managing Director of their businesses.

The author is an external examiner for a Fashion Management post graduate course and also has an advisory role to universities within the realm of curriculum development and in conjunction the role of academic lead on the development of numerous MOOC’s focusing on creative industries or general business knowledge.

The content of this paper has been developed from the data collected during meetings with academic faculty from various universities in the UK who were concerned as they are suffering from a down turn in part time students and grappling with three issues.
The first being how to maintain courses as they are teaching out existing provisions with fewer students enrolled, particularly on part time provisions, and the second, how to keep the academic posts they have at present.

The second issue concerns delivering course material that is up to date and relevant on courses such as fashion management which are niche and whose industry is very specific, changing rapidly and in a turbulent environment. The issues extends to supporting these students on courses that are very specialized and require being taught by faculty with specific industry knowledge as well as academic qualifications. There is a need to fill in the gap and reverse the recognized shortage of high level business and entrepreneurial skills across the industry.

The third issue is that in order to be cost effective the business functions tend to be taught combining cohorts of students enrolled on different courses so the module material tends to be generic.

Interviews and informal discussions have also been undertaken with students and graduates of fashion management courses where students expressed the concern that the business and entrepreneurial course material they were being taught was at times out of date and not focused on their fashion specialism.

3 RESULTS

This brings us back to Christine Hunsicker, the fashion entrepreneur who has learned the skills to succeed in the digital era. The students who were interviewed however felt they were not being well equipped to become entrepreneurial in the digital era. Academics in various universities expressed their concern that they could not deliver specialist up to date knowledge because of a lack of funding, lack of specialist staff and a long development and shelf life of courses.

How can this gap be filled? How can we roll out Christine Hunsickers’ skills?

This paper proposes that the much maligned MOOC has a place in this dilemma. Specialist MOOC’s, for example Future Learns Business of film, with over 80,000 learners enrolled can also be used to ‘drop in’ to specialist courses giving a relevant and contextualised academic knowledge in a niche area. The universities can then develop their own assessment around this content. Postgraduate study has been accused of having little practical value but by extending the development of MOOCs and universities incorporating them within their course provision the practical business skills required in this digital era can be communicated quickly and efficiently. MOOCs attract additional students outwith the typical target market and this may also provide additional opportunities. Future learn has already launched credit bearing MOOCs which can be used towards a traditional degree pathway but these could also pave the way towards developing a low cost airlines’ model of provision for short courses and even degrees which could be built up from a variety of MOOC’s with assessment provided by accrediting universities.

4 CONCLUSIONS

It is becoming clear that, rather than cannibalizing post graduate course offerings and executive education, open, online business courses have the opportunity to expand the overall reach of education in general and fashion design management in particular. MOOCs are reaching groups of students most commonly targeted for outreach by universities, working professionals outside the UK as well as underrepresented minorities in the UK.

Given the cost constraints in HE, reduction in students studying part-time and consequent reduction in academic faculty numbers in universities recently, there is an opportunity to use MOOC’s as part of a post graduate and executive education portfolio to provide discreet niche areas of knowledge that a MOOC can provide and wrap this into an existing provision by using specialist assessment to integrate this up to date knowledge provision into courses that generally have a ‘shelf-life’ of up to eight years.

MOOCs are without doubt disrupting higher education. Universities will need to strategically adapt to changing circumstances. But the MOOC disruption may not necessarily be the threat everyone is worried about. In fact, it looks more like an opportunity to fill the gaps in education that more specialism such as fashion management have in the world of an increasingly generic mass education provision.
REFERENCES


