**The international higher education revolution:
Impacts on mobility, qualifications, networks**

**Regent's University London
11-12 December 2013**

On 11-12 December 2013, some 170 higher education stakeholders participated in the Observatory's conference, 'The international higher education revolution: Impacts on mobility, qualifications, networks'. It was held in the beautiful surroundings of Regent's University London (to which we extend thanks for accommodating a last-minute change of venue for the opening night).

The purpose of the conference was to speculate on some likely downstream impacts of current technological developments, including MOOCs, on patterns of international student mobility, how qualifications are gained and recognised, and why and how universities form partnerships and networks. Speakers travelled from Mexico, Malaysia, India, Hong Kong and continental Europe; participants representing universities, agencies and the business sector were from Canada, US, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Dubai, Uganda, South Africa, India, and many European countries.

William Lawton, Director The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education

Sir Michael Barber, Chief Education Advisor at Pearson, opened the conference with a thoughtful and engaging presentation built around his influential report for the IPPR, **'An avalanche is coming'**. He said there is no reason to think the technological revolution will not change higher education. The avalanche metaphor is that there is already movement under the surface and that it will become fully apparent in unexpected ways. As to whether we should accept everything in the report, Sir Michael quoted former New York mayor Ed Koch: 'If you agree with me on 9 out of 12 issues, vote for me. If you agree with me on 12 out of 12 issues, see a psychiatrist.' He noted the significance of the 'unbundling' phenomenon (delinking provision from qualifications), not least in bringing competition into what universities do, and argued that the 'distinctiveness' of a university's offer is what will determine success or failure.

Sir Michael Barber, Chief Education Advisor at Pearson

In a similar vein, David Black from Google UK presented a number of statistics to illustrate the rapidity of technological change and the behavioural changes that attend this, including that fact that Britons now spend one in every 12 waking minutes online. The proportion of 'UK consumers' with a smartphone increased from 58% to 72% in the last year alone, and bandwidth will increase by a factor of 12 by 2020. He went on to discuss 'how to make the web work for universities'; this included 'winning moments that matter' by engaging people with personalised experiences and using data to enable better decision-making.

Mark Jeynes from OC&C Strategy Consultants picked up this last theme in his presentation of their analysis of Google search data. He demonstrated growth in international searches in order to highlight the continued interest from prospective

overseas students in UK universities. Growth in searches for the UK's 'top 50' universities has been rapid, particularly in Asia and South America. There is a great amount of detail in his presentation which is available from our website for members and conference participants.

David Willetts, Minister for Universities and Science

David Willetts, Minister for Universities and Science, began the second day with an enthusiastic overview of MOOCs and their likely impacts, which he believes will be significant. He drew a distinction between good and poor-quality MOOCs but suggested that what is really revolutionary about online education is the potential for user data (learning analytics) to improve pedagogy. He also discussed impacts such as disintermediation and the credentialisation of MOOCs. He suggested that if national accreditation bodies do not engage with this, they may be bypassed by employers who may care more about specific qualifications than degrees. He doubted that one MOOC platform would end up in a monopoly position.

The next three sessions covered the three themes of mobility, qualifications and networks. On mobility, perspectives were offered from Malaysia, Mexico and Germany. Dr Stephan Geifes from DAAD discussed the intersections of online and distance learning with both mobility and TNE, and the potential of ODL in developing TNE and international networks. Dr Fernando León-Garcia discussed how technology and flexible formats for study abroad are providing greater access and broadening the reach and impact of internationalisation among students.

The challenges posed to quality assurance by the expansion of TNE and MOOCs were discussed, notably in the context of the accreditation of MOOCs. Who has responsibility for the quality of OER and MOOCs: the platforms, universities, governments, QA agencies, or all or none? Carolyn Campbell from QAA pointed out that the 'recognition of prior learning' in the UK Quality Code has relevance to

MOOCs. Joe Hong examined the introduction of accreditation for TNE types in Hong Kong, as well as how this should be adapted for the online revolution. Sam Brenton from Academic Partnerships looked at 'Quality and competition in the global online learning market' and discussed the emergence of an unregulated 'badges' system in the US. He characterised some challenges as transferable credit, equivalence, and the 'granularity' of awards.

The impacts on partnerships and networks session included case studies from Steve Holloway from Liverpool University on their responses to the shifting landscape through research collaborations with universities, industry and governments. Graham Wood from Kaplan said that networks could benefit from thinking about MOOCs in alternative ways. Kaplan would stick with a blended model rather than do MOOCs. MOOCs could underpin their existing area of practice: the transition of students between different education systems. Ashwin Assomull from Parthenon used MOOCs usage data to explore whether MOOCs may be a crucial avenue for universities to expand their networks in emerging markets. He noted that apart from India, MOOC penetration of those markets has been modest. A number of factors worked against MOOCs being seen as a degree alternative: short times spent on sites, the low completion rates, and employers valuing traditional degrees over online.

An animated panel discussion brought together the themes. Professor Aldwyn Cooper said that society had changed profoundly and irretrievably over the last decades but asked why education hadn't. As with many experienced practitioners, he expressed scepticism about the impact of MOOCs and noted that no previous innovations, including radio and TV, delivered the avalanche to sweep away the past and usher in a radically new future. He said that 'computer-aided learning is still a pre-paradigmatic science waiting for sufficient, overwhelming evidence of a new world before the dramatic collapse of the old'. The problem was that they were

driven by 'obsessive technophiles'. He suspected that those who get into online education for financial gain are in for a shock, and ended with a plea for current developments to supplement and not substitute for the best of the Socratic tradition.

John Latham from the University of Law spoke about the value of networks as competitive assets. Dr Dirk Van Damme from the OECD made five concise points: the UK is too expensive to keep its market share and continental Europe's will increase; one-way mobility is not sustainable; multi-lingualism will increase and English-only offerings to the world are not sustainable; MOOCs are a regressive development with linear learning when technology can do more; MOOCs are an informal way of sharing knowledge and are best left outside formal accreditation.

The event was closed by Professor Nigel Thrift, Vice-Chancellor at the University of Warwick, who used a discussion of the Monash-Warwick Alliance and Warwick's participation in the Center for Urban Science and Progress (CUSP) in New York as examples of institutional responses to current pressures in higher education. UK higher education was not as successful as some believed, the Anglo-American ascendancy had peaked, and internationalisation cooperation strategies were key to survival and success.

William Lawton