**MOOCs: What we have learned, emerging themes, and what next**

**Senate House, University of London**
**Tuesday 28 January 2014**

The MOOCs juggernaut has momentum yet. On 28 January 135 delegates gathered at University of London's Senate House to discuss 'what we have learned, emerging themes, and what next' in the world of MOOCs (massive open online courses). This was the third such joint initiative from the Observatory and University of London International Programmes, and the second in conjunction with the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. The programme can be seen **HERE**.

Context is important. The introductory session included observations from Professor Sir Adrian Smith and Tim Gore from the University of London, and Dr William Lawton from the Observatory.  Reference to Gartner's 'hype cycle' is unavoidable: if it was not coined for the MOOCs trajectory, it should have been.

## Gartner Hype Cycle
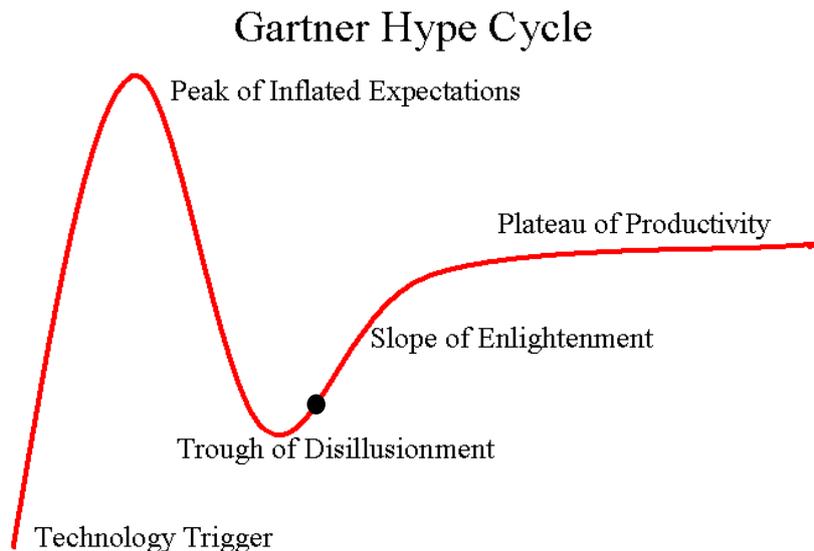


Thus, 2012 was the year of the MOOC and at the time of the previous conference, in February 2013, the US and UK had reached the 'peak of inflated expectations'. The

glut of sceptical press coverage over the past few months suggested that we are now emerging from the 'trough of disillusionment'.

Among the considerations discussed were the ongoing accreditation of MOOCs, their integration into formal degree courses, how this challenges the original ideal of widening access through free courses, and how MOOC methods will impact on pedagogy. Lawton suggested that it will become normal for MOOCs to have parallel streams for different constituencies of students: those who want to pay for a credit or externally verified certificate (the minority) and those for whom that is not important (the large majority). Low completion rates are a recurring theme but mean little for courses that are free, it was argued: many of those who register have no intention of completing them. Daphne Koller of Coursera made the same point later by video link.

Similarly, Simon Nelson from FutureLearn argued that MOOCs should not be measured by conventional metrics. The MOOC evangelists and doom-mongers both needed to get real because MOOCs were never intended to supplant a university education. One conclusion is that the impact of MOOCs on how higher education is delivered and consumed will be slower and more gradual than many still think.

Nelson indicated that FutureLearn will release some usage data soon (Edinburgh and London International have both published data from their first waves of MOOCs on the Coursera platform).

Martin Bean, Vice-Chancellor of the Open University, provided a scathing and humorous critique of the 'tyranny of conventional wisdom' and of those who want things always to stay the same. He congratulated the University of London for being pioneers in both distance learning (started 1858) and MOOCs and pointed out that even Senate House's famous art deco style was a monument to new thinking. Later in the day, his counterpart at Delhi University, Dinesh Singh, characterised institutional resistance to new thinking: Q: 'How many faculty members does it take to change a lightbulb?' A: 'Change?!?' Singh's main point, however, was the power of ideas over technology, illustrated by the spread of the Vedas (ancient Sanskrit texts) across the subcontinent 3,000 years ago via the massive open learning technique called the oral tradition.

Updates and perspectives from continental Europe were supplied by Professor Fred Mulder, UNESCO Chair on OER and Michael Gaebel of the European University Association (EUA). Gaebel covered the rapid spread of MOOC portals and platforms on the continent. Mulder's critical view touched upon the inflexibility of MOOC design and the gap between MOOCs and the principles of OER, notably in regard to open-source software. Professor Neil Morris at Leeds provided a detailed analysis of their own MOOCs on the FutureLearn platform and extrapolated to a discussion of

good MOOC design and creating a powerful learning environment. He took issue with the widespread but erroneous belief that university undergraduates are all somehow automatically proficient at learning online.

The 'world café' breakout format was again used, following positive feedback from last year's conference. Tables were facilitated by the Leadership Foundation, Google UK, Stephen Haggard, the Association for Learning Technology, the Minerva Project, and the EUA.

The Twitter feed for the conference was quite active and provides a further rich overview of themes and reactions (see #moocs2). The commentary is critical, enthusiastic, sarcastic and thoughtful; it extended even to the famed setting: 'Senate House, ex-Ministry of Information [in WW2]. Great place to think about the future.'

*William Lawton*

[www.obhe.ac.uk](www.obhe.ac.uk)
[www.i-graduate.org](www.i-graduate.org)
[www.tribalgroup.com](www.tribalgroup.com)

**Further reports on the conference:**

Please click **HERE** for the blog of Professor Martin Hall, Vice-Chancellor, University of Salford, 3 February 2014

**University of London hosts third one-day MOOC conference**, University of London International Programmes' online magazine 'London Connection', 30 January 2014