

University Education as Relational: The Challenge of Online Studies

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“To learn is to meet someone in whom the knowledge lives”
(Martin Buber)

Abstract

Online tertiary level program delivery challenges traditional models of university. Online delivery removes face-to-face contact between persons, in particular the person of the teacher and that of the learner. Since persons are essentially relational beings there is necessarily a loss of quality, compensated, some might argue, by the possibility of inexpensive mass education. However, what passes for education can be little more than training as the learner accesses only data and information which is all that can be supplied by a computer.

Key words: online studies, teaching and learning, idea of a university, MOOC, human persons as relational, economic rationalism, spiritual values.

Introduction

Traditional learning-teaching modes in higher education, characterized by students and teachers (a term used in this paper to include a variety of titles such as lecturers, instructors etc.) as scholars growing in love for what they do together is expensive and is currently under threat. In 2011 the prestigious Stanford University in the US, offered three computer science tuition-free units over the Web, attracting 450 000 students, a development now referred to as a *massive open online course* (MOOC). This initiative was then followed up by private companies and other leading US universities (Yardi, 2012). Rapid development and deployment of these courses has continued through 2013 (Table 1). There are now multiple platforms which make academic courses prepared by various universities universally available to masses of students on an anywhere, anytime basis.

Table 1 MOOC Platforms (Gallagher & Garrett, 2013)

Platform	Participating Universities	Courses	Total Students
Coursera (US)	83	393	4,000,000
edX (US)	28	44	1,000,000
Canvas Network US)	27	22	
Future Learn (UK)	24	Late 2013	
Open 2 Study (Australia)	13	23	
OpenUpEd (EU)	11	61	
CourseSites (US)	20	30	
NPTEL (India)	8	8	
Udacity	2	26	1,500,000

Not only do these platforms offer possibilities of lower costs of program delivery and greater availability, but they also raise questions about the nature of the university and its purpose, *vis-a-vis* other institutions in the higher education sector.

Furthermore, the very viability of smaller institutions is in question if larger and more prestigious universities can prepare and deliver expensively produced programs online with vast economy-of-scale savings, in the world of higher education where financial pressures now tend to dominate traditional educational considerations. The viability of smaller regional universities is important as support centres for regional growth and the preservation of local and even national culture in smaller nations such as PNG, as well as for local provision of learning.

This paper seeks to identify various modes of online learning with a view to evaluating these online modes in comparison with traditional modes of program delivery by considering the nature of a university (Newman, 1958), the deeper purposes of teaching and learning (Ozolins, 2003) and the spiritual values of university learning (Gaita, 1990, Gaita, 2000).

Online learning

Online learning is a form of distance education initially made possible by electronic Course Management Systems (CMSs) or

platforms such as the proprietary Blackboard and the open source MOODLE (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) software (Daniel, 2013, this volume). Like the MOOC platforms (Table 1), these platforms make instructional materials available over the Internet or other electronic devices and also make possible limited forms of student-student and student-teacher online interaction (Figure 1).

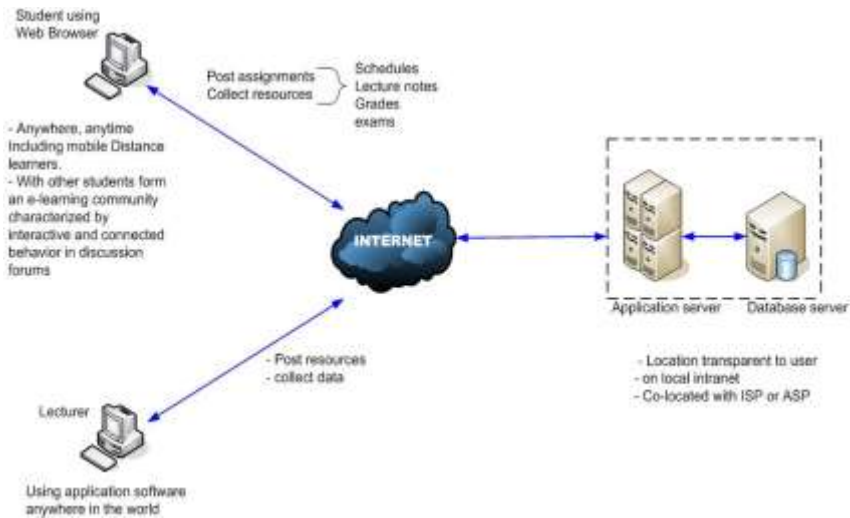


Figure 1 Schematic diagram showing online studies components (Suwamaru & Anderson, 2012)

Because the CMS server is required to be always on, the enrolled student has participation access which is fluid over place and time, providing of course that students have available sufficient bandwidth for server access which is not always the case. Participation is possible from anywhere and at any time. Even interaction can be, like email, asynchronous.

Online learning can be delivered in various modes depending on the possible levels of presence of the teacher. Instructional materials can be made available on the CMS whilst retaining the traditional presence of the teacher in the campus-based university, as the class itself can be in lecture, tutorial or laboratory participation modes. One step removed from this would be students attending classes at scheduled times and places, but the

instructor present only by video link. Again this is still quite a traditional mode, but with diminished presence of the teacher.

A further alternative would be for the CMS to include video clips for students to view at times and places of their own choosing and convenience. This latter mode provides maximum availability of access to higher education for students who, for various reasons such as cost and lack of proximity to traditional learning sites are unable to be otherwise present.

However, what must be challenged is any claim that the removal of the presence of the teacher, to whatever degree, can be effected without loss of quality of learning. It will be argued that:

“the Web affords a vast potential for education delivery that generally subsumes almost all the modes and means of education delivery previously used – with, perhaps, the exception of rich face-to-face interaction in formal classrooms, the most critical component of formal education consists of interaction between and among multiple actors – human and agents included” (Anderson, 2011, p67).

The further question is: is online learning a desirable substitute for the classical model of in-class placed-based learning which involves face-to-face teaching, where the teacher functions as an academic role model as scholar, and where formative and life-long relationships are established between the students themselves and between teachers and students?

It is a common experience of students at all stages of the educational process of the life and often career changing effects of meeting with an inspirational teacher who imparts a love for learning or for a particular academic discipline. As academic role models, teachers demonstrate academic values such as a love for learning and study, rigour required for the integral search for truth, and illuminate by their own practice and example approaches to problem solving as well as assisting students to deal with success and failure. There is also the development of

personal networks forming bonds between students at university, and then these forming relationships of life-long duration.

Educational Considerations

The previously mentioned MOOCs are potentially leading to a revolution in higher education as they make educational offerings accessible at a global level (Cooper & Sahami, 2013) via interaction with a computer only, and so with lowered delivery costs. This is an example of where educational considerations can become dominated by financial pressures leading eventually to the commercialization (education for profit), commodification (items to be bought and sold) and even trivialization (interaction with machines) of education. In this scenario we have products to be bought and sold, the product being what can be stored on a computer, namely data and information. Whilst this material can be useful, it will be argued here that its accumulation cannot be considered as that which constitutes a university education, compared, for example, with what is presented by other institutions of higher education.

With online delivery, data and information can be readily provided but with limited possibility of the development of love for the area of learning the student and teacher, as academic role model, study together. There would seem to be much more than data and information that the presence of the teacher brings to the learning process especially when the nature of human persons and the deeper purposes of teaching and learning are considered. Clearly, the presence of the teacher brings more human instances of communication through eye contact, body language, even physical contact, enabling expressions of enthusiasm, encouragement in overcoming experienced difficulties, and even compassion.

There are also integrity issues involved in online learning where all communication is between persons and computers. From this limited form of communication arises the potential problem of plagiarism or cheating, in online responses to assessment tasks when the performer of the task cannot be verified as the nominated student since the assessment response is, at all times,

hidden from view of the assessor. Unless at least some of the assessment is undertaken under supervision at a testing centre it will be difficult to ensure that the person to receive the university credentials is also the one completing the assessment task. Thus the possibility of corruption entering the accreditation or certification process must be considered if awards are to be offered for online courses.

It should also be noted that online assessment would most readily be limited to automated quizzes. Adding more sophisticated assessment items would prove very time consuming to design and assess. A web camera, for example, could be used to view the student taking the assessment item, but such one-on-one viewing would be prohibitively expensive in terms of paid supervision time. Even in traditional university programs, time given to assessment represents a very large proportion of academic time. Online assessment, undertaken with integrity, will not represent any time saving economy for the university.

Of all the relevant educational considerations, however, the most important is arguably the removal of the presence of the person of the teacher from the teaching-learning situation.

Human Persons Essentially Relational

For the famous mystical theologian of Judaism, and existentialist philosopher of dialogue Martin Buber, (1878–1965), the fundamental fact of human existence is the interaction of one person with another, because humans are relational beings and cannot be explained in isolation. The human person develops as a person by means of what Buber describes as “I-Thou” relationships which develop between persons where each is recognised as a being of value, each holds the other in mutual regard and each is completely available to the other. Persons experience truly human existence only in so far as they enter into such relations with other persons. Glimpses of these ideas are found in Buber’s dense and often difficult to understand aphoristic writing as exemplified in the following selections (Buber, 1958) of his writing:

“In the beginning is a relation.” (p18)

“The one primary word is the combination *I-Thou*. The other primary word is the combination *I-It*. Primary words do not signify things but they intimate relations.” (p3)

“Primary words do not describe something that might exist independently of them, but being spoken bring about existence.” (p3)

In contrast to the I-Thou relation, Buber describes the much more common “I-It” relationships in which one person relates to the other as a means or object required for one’s own purposes to fulfil one’s basic needs. Here the person relating is detached and trying to be objective. Any claim on one which the relationship makes is not recognised. As well as often being useful and necessary for survival in daily life, such relationships can lead, when taken to extremes, to various forms of racism and prejudice where others are simply objectified, considered as non-persons and thereby placed outside the moral sphere.

I-Thou relations, on the other hand, are the highest form of relationship which can exist between persons. They occur when one person confronts another and accepts the other fully as a person. Individuals become authentically human by entering into I-Thou relations thereby becoming persons with rights and duties, the basis for ethics.

“If I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things.” (Buber, 1958, p8)

Love is the taking of responsibility for an I-Thou relation, of an I for a Thou. Development of persons cannot take place by instruction alone. For Buber the I-Thou is a relationship of dialogue, but it does not have to include conversation. It includes the characteristics of mutuality (experiencing the other side) and Buber makes frequent references to concepts such as communion and spontaneity.

In an I-Thou relationship a “between” or a new presence develops which is more than the sum of the parts, and which is a necessary condition for authentic human existence. It is of further interest for a Christian university to note that for Buber every I-Thou relationship also opens the way to the “I-Eternal Thou” relationship as he claims that:

“... through each process of becoming that is present to us, we look outward to the eternal *Thou*; in each we are aware of a breath from the eternal *Thou*; in each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou*.” (Buber, 1958, p6)

God is present, therefore, in every I-Thou relationship, the ground from which all I-Thou relationships spring, the point of contact between all human beings, the “between” of the I-Thou relationship:

“Spirit is not in the I but between I and Thou ... like the air that you breathe.” (Buber, 1958, p39)

In each I-Thou experience there is formed some kind of relationship with God himself. Buber finds God in personal encounter and dialogue with another human subject.

The forming of I-Thou relations is seen by Buber to be at the heart of the educational process and requires the mutual presence of two persons, the teacher and the learner, growing together and growing in love for what they do together. Learning takes place when the learner meets someone in whom the knowledge lives. The teacher, as role model, must be what the student is ideally to become. This is arguably not possible with online learning, where the presence of the teacher is replaced by the presence of a machine carrying only that which a machine can carry, data and information.

This conclusion makes assumptions about the nature of a university and the type of academic life it traditionally represents. It is therefore necessary to try to define what it is for an institution offering tertiary education to be classified as a university. Here we are guided by tradition and philosophy of education rather than by dictionary definitions.

Traditionally a university is a community of scholars following a way of life dedicated to learning as a search for truth according to the highest possible standards of dignity, integrity, rigor and excellence.

The Idea of a University

There are many agents of education in society (clubs, church, schools etc.), but the university has the specific role of intellectual development. If it fails in this role, it fails as a university, no matter what its other achievements might be.

Perhaps the university, more than other institutions, is tempted to lose the focus of its primary goal. In trying to achieve multiple goals, it could fail in its primary goal, though this might not be immediately evident. It would be unthinkable, for example, for a hospital to lose the focus of its primary goal (e.g. by taking a patient off a drip), to focus on other goals at the expense of the curing of the sick. Pastoral or spiritual care may well be a goal of a hospital, but never at the expense of the primary goal.

A university is a place of learning for adults who take responsibility for their own learning, and who take opportunities for personal development as these become available. "Holistic" development is the primary responsibility of the adult learner, not the University. Adult learners will establish clubs, societies and religious fellowships to foster their own interests and welfare. For the university to focus itself on these aspects at the expense of the academic program borders on vandalism.

It can also be argued that holistic learning should take place when the learners apply themselves to any academic discipline with integrity. Holistic development will be fostered by such things as students learning how to work in a logical manner, to apply themselves to a task, by associating with and learning from other students, to handle and solve problems, to search for truth with integrity, to develop a love for study and truth, and to persevere in the face of difficulty, even failure.

It will be further argued that academic work (study, learning, research, writing, teaching etc.) is valuable in its own right irrespective of the use it can be put to as developing saleable skills for use in the work place.

Academic values include the recognition of knowledge as a value and end in itself, a high point, together with love, in the development of the human spirit.

Knowledge as Its Own End

(Cardinal and now Blessed) John Henry Newman (1801 – 1890) is famously remembered for his classic text: “*The Idea of a University*” (2006). This text provides the classic view of the modern university tradition, predating current post-modern and economic-rationalist models to be discussed later.

Newman defined a university as an institution where academic discourse occurs between the learned themselves and between the learned and learners where:

“an assemblage of learned men (sic), zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, are brought, by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. They learn to respect, to consult, and to aid each other. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes, though in his (sic) own case he only pursues a few sciences out of the multitude. He profits by an intellectual tradition, which is independent of particular teachers, which guides him in his choice of subjects, and duly interprets for him those which he chooses.” (Newman, 2006. p. 84)

Through these interactive experiences, arguably the main purpose of a university, the student forms:

“A habit of mind... which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom. This then I would assign as the

special fruit of the education furnished at a University, as contrasted with other places of teaching or modes of teaching. This is the main purpose of a University in its treatment of its students.” (Newman, 2006, p. 85)

Traditionally, universities seek to foster and protect the conditions where the pursuit of learning flourishes and is valued for its own sake. Voicing this tradition of the further purpose of university studies, Newman asserts that knowledge is valuable for its own sake prior to any other end it might have:

“(The university) has a very tangible, real, and sufficient end, though the end cannot be divided from that knowledge itself. Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward.” (Newman, 2006, p. 86)

Regarding the prior value of knowledge compared to other apparent benefits of education, he questions:

“What the worth of such an acquirement is, compared with other objects which we seek, - wealth or power or honour or the conveniences and comforts of life.” (Newman, 2006, p. 86)

Thus, a life given to learning for its own sake, rather than for other ends, is deemed to be a life worthily lived:

“I would maintain, that it (knowledge) is an object, in its own nature so really and undeniably good, as to be the compensation of a great deal of thought in the compassing, and a great deal of trouble in the attaining.”

“Knowledge is, not merely a means to something beyond it, ... but an end sufficient to rest in and to pursue for its own sake”. (Newman, 2006, p. 86)

Further, whilst knowledge is valuable for its own sake, its possession is seen as valuable for all:

“both intelligible in itself, and has ever been the common judgment of philosophers and the ordinary feeling of mankind. That further advantages accrue to us and redound to others by its possession, over and above what it is in itself, I am very far indeed from denying; but, independent of these, we are satisfying a direct need of our nature in its very acquisition; and, whereas our nature, unlike that of the inferior creation, does not at once reach its perfection, but depends, in order to it, on a number of external aids and appliances. Knowledge, as one of the principal of these, is valuable for what its very presence in us does for us after the manner of a habit, even though it be turned to no further account, nor subserve any direct end.” (Newman, 2006, p. 86)

Many today, whilst possibly in general agreement with Newman’s values, might consider them to be rather dated and unsustainable in these days of mass tertiary education and the prevailing economic rationalism. Thus we are left with the many current reductionist approaches which bring only a market model to understanding and describing education. Here reductionism is taken to mean reducing the whole to only the sum of all the parts or even to only some of the parts. Thus the complex concept of learning, a concept which defies exhaustive exploration, is reduced to what can be marketed or what can be stored or presented on a computer.

Economic Rationalism

Much current discourse on education conceives education in economic terms which, as previously noted, can result in a commodification, commercialisation and trivialization of knowledge by making it an object of exchange in a commercial buying and selling process (Ozolins, 2003). Teaching and learning is considered only in terms of measurable outcomes without any reference to deeper meanings of education involving formation of human persons who are clearly ends in themselves in any Christian context.

The economic conception of education determines the ways in which teaching and learning are understood. For example, if education is concerned only with the role and functions that persons perform in society as in a marketing or industrial model, then this will also determine the kinds of models of teaching and learning that are adopted.

The language we use plays an important role in our self-construction. We grow into the world of our established language and this determines the way we think since we only have language to think with. When this industrial model of education is discussed, the language used often differs little from the language that could be used in the development of a commercial organization such as a manufacturer or a chain of supermarkets. Rather, a language is needed which will preserve the educational nature of the discussion.

In the industrial model, knowledge is seen as a commodity. Knowledge is understood as what can be stored or presented on computers and hence, since what is able to be stored on computers is information, this is what knowledge becomes identified with. Information can be translated into computer language, appropriately packaged and then sold. Thus, when economic rationalist considerations prevail, the personal presence of the human teacher is readily replaceable by online presentations on a computer.

Thus when knowledge is construed as information, and the assertion made that the economic well-being of the state relies on its accumulation and exploitation by the “knowledge society”, it follows that the role of educational institutions is the production of information and the skilling of workers who can manipulate and exploit it.

When knowledge is considered to be a marketable commodity, normal marketing requirements follow:

- i) “the customer needs to know clearly what she (sic) is buying and know when she has acquired it;
- ii) there needs to be quality control of the product;

- iii) it has to be delivered in as cost-effective way as possible and
- iv) demand for the product has to be created.”
(Ozolins, 2003, para, 8)

The teacher is reduced to a resource, albeit a human resource (and so we have Human Resource Management), with attractive attributes being a resource for the potential employer. However, resources are consumables, can be replaced and can be discarded when no longer needed. In the marketplace, resources are chosen on the basis of the highest quality for the lowest price.

What further follows from this conception of knowledge is an emphasis on quality control, on cost effectiveness and marketing strategies designed to attract buyers of the goods that are on sale. These business management processes are considered appropriate to improve the way in which teachers teach and students learn. Just as in other industries, the need for quality improvement such as innovation and change becomes important for education to compete in its own marketplace.

Of course, there still remains a place for quality assurance in teaching and learning. Students still need a clear idea of what is expected of them, classes need to be thoroughly prepared and learning assessed and evaluated. The marketing model, however:

“shifts the focus from the engagement between teacher and pupil in the human activities of teaching and learning to one in which what is human is abstracted. What drives quality assurance are marketing goals, that is, the sale of products, not the education of human beings and these two goals are incompatible.” (Ozolins, 2003, para. 8)

Questions about ends and goals of education come to be regarded as so obvious (based as they are on the reductionist model) that they are almost totally excluded from the busy life of educational administrators. Little critical consideration might be given to values or of ends to which various educational processes are expected to lead. Blank faces often confront such questions and the questioner borders on being considered a trouble maker as the

questions are often construed as unwelcome distractions from the busy world of administration, and also perhaps as unnecessary pedantry. However, the challenge of Plato, that “*the unexamined life is not worth living*” (Apology, 38a) still demands our closest attention.

Further, the industrial model and particularly the online model also shifts the focus from the interaction between the teacher, in whom the knowledge is alive, and the student, in the human activities of teaching and learning, to one in which what is human is abstracted. It needs to be realised that human persons develop slowly. The path to knowledge is a long, difficult and arduous task and takes place by long and patient repeated interaction between the teacher and the learner. What is missing in the industrial model is a valuing of knowledge which is not just functional, but regarded as intrinsically valuable because of its role in the enabling the human person, dignified particularly by the intellectual function of the mind, and society to flourish. This leads, then, to the idea of a university as a place where human persons flourish.

The Spiritual Value of University Studies

Traditionally the university fosters the conditions required for learning to flourish and to be valued for its own sake. Gaita (1990, 2000) takes up the challenge of trying to articulate this intrinsic or spiritual value of university studies. He seeks to distinguish the university from other tertiary institutions in terms of the passionate search for goodness and truth as a vocation for each member of the academic staff. For a vocation, as distinct from a profession, the search for truth, non-accidentally and worthily fills a life.

The truth referred to by Gaita is more than the technical definition of the correspondence of statements with reality, of what is said to be the case and what is actually the case. Truth is here seen as a value and is used in this sense when we speak of a person giving his/her life in the search for truth, of being more concerned with truth than wealth or fame. This search is not about seeking more and more truths, but it is about truth in an ethical or spiritual sense, a life commitment arising from the deepest desires of the

human spirit leading to a nourishment of the soul. Fundamentally truth is seen to be a value, something worthily desired by the human spirit.

Being an affair of the human soul, the commitment grows out of and is accompanied by love. Thus we can validly speak of a love for truth as that which characterizes each member of the community of scholars which is a university. In a university there is a place for intellectual passion. We can go further than speaking of a love for truth and describe what we are talking about as the search for truth in the service of a certain kind of love. This love can be based on a religious motivation or it may simply be spiritual in the sense of a stirring of the human spirit with a sense of gratitude for all that is.

Summary

The paper invites a conception of a university as a place where:

- teaching is regarded as a vocation involving the search for and the passing on of truth, to the satisfaction of the human spirit and without reference to commercial value,
- scholars pass on to their students, most importantly, a love for what they are doing together,
- there is appreciation of the intrinsic worth of the life of the mind without regard to material or professional consequences,
- search for knowledge is something to which a human life may be worthily devoted,
- there is unconditional and passionate commitment to the True and the Good,
- there is continual challenge to convention and the critiquing of all our most hidden assumptions, realising with Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth living.

Academic work (study, learning, research, writing, teaching) is valuable in its own right irrespective of the use it can be put to as

saleable skills in the work place. A life given to academic development is arguably a life worthily lived. True academics share such values. All members of the academic faculty of a university should be truly academics possessing proven academic achievement and ability, as well as academic values. The more senior members of staff bear the burden of being the more proven academics. All members of the scholarly community should have demonstrated an ability to think, reason, solve problems, and write as academics, at very least, with the verified evidence of academic performance of a substantial written thesis.

Conclusions

This paper has collected and summarised a body of thought drawing attention to certain limitations of current developments in university education, in particular to online learning. It argues for the essential and irreplaceable value of the meeting of persons in the process of learning and questions the quality of a learning process in which persons are absent. In particular it argues for the presence of the teacher as academic role model.

It has drawn attention to the nature of the human person particularly as viewed in the Judeo-Christian framework. The human person is described as essentially relational and as developing humanly in the context of the presence of other persons, in particular with the learning process in the presence of other learners and their teachers functioning as scholarly role models passing on a passion for learning.

It has also drawn attention to aspects of the traditional understanding of the nature of a university which distinguishes it from other institutions of higher education and which have been present from their origins. This understanding sees the university as an “assemblage” of scholars passionate about their own disciplines, interacting with each other and creating an “atmosphere of thought the student also breathes” (Newman, 2006). Again the presence of scholars as researchers, teachers and learners is deemed to be essential.

Finally, it has to be conceded that online education is here to stay and higher education will be irrevocably changed, somewhat as it was changed by the printing press and the book (Gallagher & Garrett, 2013). Its limitations need to be addressed. For example, its use should importantly be limited to postgraduate students, leaving face-to-face teaching as essential for undergraduate students who are in the most important phases of their academic development and in need of academic role models.

Universities need to consider a number of adverse consequences of online learning. If students, particularly undergraduate students can take their course online supposedly without loss of quality, why should they bother with the “bricks and mortar” university at all? Smaller universities are under threat if students can attend more prestigious universities more conveniently online and at greatly reduced cost. Smaller universities wishing to remain viable will need to be able to demonstrate that what they are offering is much more than can be provided online.

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Glossary

CMS	Course Management System
MOODLE	Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course