Imagining the future of assessment: for evidence, for credit and for payment

Beverley Oliver
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education)
Deakin University
Kay Souter
Director, Learning Environments, Research and Evaluation,
Deakin University

MOOCs are beginning to affect the business models of higher education providers by hastening the 'unbundling' of some of the central functions of higher education, particularly formal credit for learning and providing pathways to further study. This paper reports on Deakin University's work in this sphere in a newly launched MOOC, *Humanitarian Responses to 21st Century Disasters*. In this course, assessment has been 'flipped', so that instead of being examined, students are invited to demonstrate their achievements against learning outcomes and achieve peer credit badges that can be shared on LinkedIn and Facebook. If they choose, up to 100 students can also pay $495 for formal assessment. Those whose learning evidence is assessed as meeting all the requirements will be granted the equivalent of one subject credit when applying for entry to particular degree courses. This developing model may extend the benefits of higher education.

Keywords: Badging, assessment, evidencing achievement, MOOCs, 'Unbundling' university functions

During 2012 and 2013, the headlines in higher education news have kept reminding us that we live in a disrupted environment, one where MOOCs have triggered enormous change in learning (Coaldrake & Stedman ; IBIS Capital; Norton, Sonnemann, & McGannon). Not everyone agrees: some claim that this is just massification of thirty years of endeavor in online learning and its predecessors (Matt & Fernandez). Regardless of our thoughts about MOOCs, the quality of the learning they offer, and their longevity, the real change is occurring in the business models that underpin higher education providers. Free learning resources have been available for years through Open Courseware and iTunes U—and institutions such as Open University have found them a great channel for recruiting paying students (Attwood). MOOCs have begun to blur this 'openness', as startups and institutions attempt to offer some courses for free, some for payment, and some as pathways to paying students. In the United States, Coursera is moving to become a   third party provider, onselling the courseware of Ivy League universities to colleges and others . VentureLab offers interactivity, proclaiming itself to be 'the only online learning platform that provides a connected, effective and engaging learning environment for students' (https://venture-lab.org/about). Udacity is offering MOOCs for credit, in association with Georgia Tech (Rivard). In Australia, some universities have joined the startups (Coursera and EdX); Monash University has joined FutureLearn. Some have carved their own path: Open Universities Australia has set up its own platform (Open2Study) which offers assessment and badges and pathways to courses; the University of New England (UNE) has created its own platform (UNEOpen) and enables MOOC completers to take a challenge exam for $495.

<u>A case study in flipped assessment</u>

This paper reports on a similar project: Deakin University has created [DeakinConnect](#) as a new open learning space. The first open course offered in DeakinConnect, *Humanitarian Responses to 21st Century Disasters,* commenced in July 2013. It is designed as a 'conventional' MOOC, in that it is free and open to all comers, but it also allows interested students to provide evidence of their learning. On completion of the course, successful participants can demonstrate their achievements in the following learning outcomes:

- Discipline-specific knowledge and capabilities: the history of the humanitarian sector; the principles and practices that inform responses to natural and man-made disasters and emergencies; key humanitarian organisations, individuals and their roles; and the complexities and ethical challenges of disaster and emergency responses.
- Communication skills: using oral, written and interpersonal communication to inform, motivate and effect change
- Critical thinking: evaluating information using critical and analytical thinking and judgment
- Digital literacy: using technologies to find, use and disseminate information
- Global citizenship: engaging ethically and productively in the professional context and with diverse communities and cultures in a global context

These are five of Deakin's eight Graduate Learning Outcomes and, as we will argue, students are invited to think about how they might evidence them rather than being challenged to do so through traditional testing and measuring.

The DeakinConnect platform, then, enables participants to:

- **Learn** by accessing resources such as expert commentary and interviews, and by testing response strategies in Lolesia, an imaginary country in South East Asia, suffering from decades of economic stagnation and oppressive rule
- **Engage** agree, challenge or question others' ideas
- **Network** with humanitarians and peers from across the globe
- **Evidence** their knowledge and capabilities in an online portfolio
- **Credit**: give and receive peer credit and feedback on others' learning. In addition up to 100 participants will be able to apply to earn credit towards a Deakin University qualification in this field for $495.

This work is central to Deakin's mission. Deakin University has chosen to offer this open course exactly because it seeks to drive the digital frontier and offer brilliant education "where students are and where they want to go" through personal, engaging and relevant learning experiences (Oliver, 2013a). DeakinConnect is a prototype of the type of cloud learning space that enables learners to have a 'flipped' assessment experience. This is analogous to the 'flipped classroom' model in which transmissible material is prepared outside the classroom, and the classroom experience is given over to interactive work (King). Although MOOC participants are under no obligation to complete any assessments, and most will not do so, these participants may be interested to see the learning outcomes. DeakinConnect sets out learning outcomes, but onus is on the learner to persuade rather than the examiner to probe for evidence that the learning outcomes have been achieved, in keeping with suggested practice in judging performance in broader graduate attributes (Yorke, 2008). Instead of asking students questions, DeakinConnect offers assessment opportunities that are intended to prompt the learner to create and curate rich digital evidence of learning. Participants are invited to create up to six 'learning exhibits' that specifically demonstrate their capabilities. DeakinConnect also invites students to assess each other's work, explicitly testing the viability of peer assessment and feedback, using digital badging, a technology which has been gaining attention in recent years (Raths; The Mozilla Foundation and Peer 2 Peer University; Young).

<u>Re-imagining credit</u>
Learning achievements are often accompanied by credit—informal credit from peers, friends, family and colleagues; and formal credit from educational institutions. The DeakinConnect course is open and free, and in addition, up to 100 participants will have the opportunity to apply to have their learning formally assessed (for a fee of AUS$495) for entry into and credit towards a Deakin qualification. The formal assessment process will be based on FOUR learning exhibits: two learning exhibits from DeakinConnect; a formal research paper; a 20-minute interview. Those whose learning evidence is assessed as meeting all the requirements will be granted one credit point when applying for entry into Deakin University's Graduate Certificate of International and

Community Development or Master of International and Community Development (additional entry requirements apply to both degrees).

In DeakinConnect, then, participants can both earn peer credit, and also use their learning exhibits to earn formal credit towards entry into a Deakin University qualification. When participants share their learning exhibits, peers can award credit signifying that they believe the exhibit shows mastery of learning outcomes at or beyond agreed standards. Alternatively, peers are guided to provide constructive feedback on how participants can improve their learning exhibits to meet or exceed the standard. When peers award credit, participants receive a DeakinConnect Peer Credit badge that can be shared on Facebook or LinkedIn.

Successful completion of all the assessment means gaining credit for the equivalent of the first unit of an eight unit Graduate Diploma or a 16 unit Master degree (the participant pays $495 instead of in excess of $2000—a substantial saving). It is difficult to foresee how this might play out in the market, but using a low-cost but high-value and fully accredited learning experience to cut some of the costs of a full-price degree is beginning to gain some popularity among students. This is particularly the case in the United States, where the cost of degrees is soaring (Selingo). Costs at public universities are rising (by 8.3 % last year, the biggest jump on record: Simon), and at the same time, as Selingo puts it 'the unbundled alternatives are improving' (Selingo, 66). That is, teaching and online delivery are being separated from the stratospherically expensive research, athletics, and 'party' functions (Armstrong & Hamilton) that make up the modern US residential university. There seems to be a slowly growing tendency for some students to take some of their degree at much cheaper institution: community colleges, institutions close to the family home, and so on, thus making substantial savings on the overall student loan they build up (Selingo, 124).

The Australian context is certainly different, and currently much less expensive. But costs are rising here too, and it will be interesting to see how attractive a significant cut in overall costs might prove to be. MOOCs have triggered an exploration of new business models, and are testing the market to see what students will pay for. Essentially, those offered by UNE and Deakin are about offering a loss leader as a pathway to recruiting fee-paying students. Interestingly, the market catches on very quickly. When this idea was first made public, comments from readers focused on "the cost of this to the university"—that is, "how can a university charge $495 for an exam, when the marker is barely paid $20 an hour" (Oliver, 2013b). Universities have probably seen themselves as selling many things to their students: an experience as an undergraduate or postgraduate, a branded degree, a career connection, student satisfaction and extra support services, convenience and reliability. MOOCs are show that universities in fact sell credit: credit for learning, whether for separate units or whole degrees, or even a certificate of completion is portable currency—students can take their certificate of completion or credit to a competitor and ask for recognition of prior learning. This is already happening as a consequence of the MOOCs. It is part of the 'great unbundling' that is already occurring , and students may very soon ask us to flip this model: they may well to want to do a challenge exam only ($495) instead of the 12 week unit with all its classes and experiences and assessments, and price tag of $2000 (simple credentialing of this sort was, after all, initially the role of the University College London in the nineteenth century). Students may also want to pay more basic fees, then pay as they go if and when they wish to access one of the service that is now for bundled with the whole fee, such as counseling, careers, subsidised child care, and so on.

Conclusion:
Just how the rise of MOOCs might change the global higher education landscape is yet to be seen, but there is evidence that one outcome may be exactly this unbundling of functions. If this comes about, we may well see the best of both worlds. The expensive on-campus, now usually blended, learning experience-- with all the bells and whistles of ancillary services -- would be maintained as that prized transition-to-maturity experience for undergraduates who are usually relatively young and relatively middle-class. At the same time, new models of assessment for credit, such as we are piloting in DeakinConnect, could also extend the benefits of learning and the acquisition of credentials to those non-traditional students who may previously have lacked the time or the money to undertake traditional 'on-campus' or 'off-campus' study—even those terms need revisiting as we learn and teach at the digital frontier.

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Author contact details: Kay Souter, kay.souter@deakin.edu.au

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