

Finally, the web has disrupted higher education. One of the most conservative of industries - where institution age is the best gauge of market position - has jumped online in a radical way. "Massive open online courses" - "*Moocs*" - are being launched every day. Last week, a consortium of British universities joined the charge. Led by the Open University, they will deliver course content, lectures and assignments to hundreds of thousands of students at a time. And they will do it all for free. The courses do not count towards degrees, dropout rates are high and course design is not quite mature. But they are popular:

*Coursera*

, a leading Mooc platform, has 2m registered users and individual courses already attract hundreds of thousands of people. It must be possible to monetise this enthusiasm. Like newspapers, universities are experimenting with online business models. Ideas in circulation range from the complex - such as exploiting user data to make money through marketing - through to straightforward charges for course content. The hope is to tap into the thirst for learning across the world - particularly the growing middle classes in Asia who are desperate for higher education. If, as the Open University plans, it can use Moocs to sell UK universities' distance degrees into new markets, they can do serious good and make real money. This is a low-risk plan. Unlike newspapers, the Moocs are not competing with the universities' existing teaching business. Learners might pay a fee for a Harvard Mooc, but no one will confuse it with a Harvard degree. The real risk for institutions is that low-quality Moocs will tarnish their institutional reputation. Even if universities are ultimately unable to make profits, the impact of free online learning will be felt beyond higher education. First, popular Moocs should raise the prestige of excellent teachers within universities. That would be a healthy counterbalance to the research-obsessed world of academia. It ought to be welcomed: teaching is too often too poor even at the most elite institutions. Second, if Mooc technology advances to the point where parts of degrees can be delivered automatically, it could help reduce the cost of university. Professors could also spend more time in one-on-one work, and less on routine tasks. Finally, who can object to spreading knowledge? Even if universities were to make no money and remain unchanged, free learning is a gift to the world.

(Fonte: [Financial Times](#) 18-12-2012)