

The Economist

Special report:
Universities

Technology **Not classy enough**

Online learning could disrupt higher education, but many universities are resisting it

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WHEN MASSIVE OPEN online courses (MOOCs) took off three years ago, there was much concern that they would destroy traditional universities. That isn't happening. "We're doing a better job of improving job skills than of transforming the university sector," says Rick Levin, a former president of Yale, who runs Coursera, the biggest of the MOOCs.

At the margins, technology is making education cheaper, more convenient and more effective. University of the People, a non-profit American-accredited online university, offers degrees to students all over the world at a total cost of \$4,000; if they are poor, they can get scholarships. It started teaching in 2009, was accredited last year, has produced 65 graduates so far and now has 1,500 students. The faculty is made up of academics who volunteer their services.

The convenience of online study makes it especially suitable for working people. According to Phil Regier, dean of Arizona State University (ASU) Online, the market for online degrees in America is the 30m or so 25- to 40-year-olds who dropped out of college first time round. Mr Levin says that 85% of Coursera's students are over 22. The for-profit companies are also big providers of education to older people, and they increasingly rely on the internet. Of Kaplan University's 42,000 students, 94% study online. A handful of state universities are also in the online market: ASU has 13,000 online students as well as 70,000 on campus.

Derek Bok, the former Harvard president, is optimistic that computers can make teaching more effective: "Technology is gradually causing a number of professors to re-examine the

way they teach, away from a passive form of learning to a more interesting and active form.” Carnegie Mellon University developed an introductory statistics course in which professors teach for less than half the time they do in the traditional model, and students spend more than half their time on a computer programmed to help them when they get stuck. Only when a student has got the hang of that part of the course will he move on to the next.

William G. Bowen, a former president of Princeton University, tested such courses at several universities and found that students learned as much as with conventional teaching in three-quarters of the time, with cost reductions of 19-57%. Carol Twigg, president of the National Centre for Academic Transformation, tested similar methods in 156 projects, with similar results.

Established companies such as Kaplan, Apollo and Pearson (which owns 50% of *The Economist*) are all investing in “edtech”, and a host of startups are piling in too. Kevin Carey, author of “The End of College”, believes that electronic “badges” now being created by a number of startups, proving that the holder has earned a particular qualification (at a relatively low cost), will eventually undermine traditional high-cost university education. But so far edtech has not made much of a dent in it.

One reason is that universities are wary of undermining the value of their degrees. So the certificates that students get for completing MOOCs do not, by and large, count towards degrees, and are therefore unlikely to make much difference to their earnings. And online degrees tend to be priced so that they do not undercut the traditional, campus-based sort: at ASU they cost \$60,000, compared with \$40,000 for campus-based degrees for in-state students and \$80,000 for out-of-state students. Thus they have not helped hold down costs.

Resistance by faculty also slows down the adoption of new technology. When academics at San Jose State University were asked to teach a course on social justice created for EdX, a MOOC, by Michael Sandel, a Harvard professor, they refused, telling Mr Sandel that such developments threatened to “replace professors, dismantle departments and provide a diminished education for students in public universities”. Similar protests have been echoing around the country. For now, the interests of academics generally prevail over those of students.

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