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Abstract

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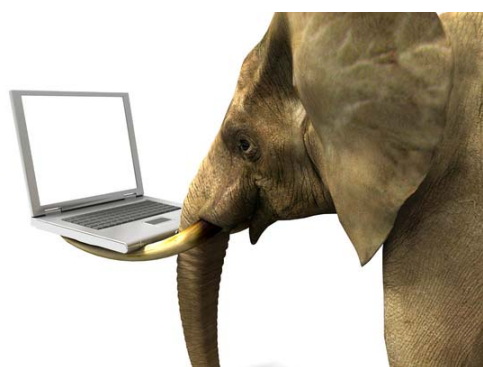
The elephant in the chat room: will international students stay at home?

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With free, quality online education from brand-name universities, will overseas students come to Australia?

Elephant image from www.shutterstock.com

FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION: We continue our series on the rise of online and blended learning and how free online courses are set to transform the higher education sector. Today, Wollongong University's Thomas Birtchnell looks at what online education will mean for the international student market.

In 1923, a young boy leaves his small village in India and travels by boat to study at Columbia University in the United States.

This is a time when only five out of every hundred of India's three hundred million people can read and write. His story, featured in a Boy Scouts' magazine, was billed as "The Boy Who Would Educate India". He would return to India with his degree to "teach the people something besides religion" and put India on the path to development.

The aim of the feature was to be an inspirational story for young Americans – they, too, should strive for an education and help others.



The Boy Who Would Educate India

That is an ambitious aspiration. It is especially ambitious for a messenger boy, a regular "swift" of the Western Union force. He sent himself through college while delivering telegrams and working as an elevator boy. He earned a degree and after working his way over from India on shipboard; he is now, as you read this story, working his way back to his home land, scrubbing decks in order to earn his passage back to the land he hopes to educate.

The Boy Who Would Educate India. Boy Scout Magazine, 1923

[Click to enlarge](#)

But not all goes to plan. His job at as a messenger boy at the Western Union falls through (most likely due to visa issues). In order to complete his degree, he takes up an informal job as a carer for a wealthy family's children. And his own family need him back in India.

Unable to balance his lowly job with his study, he makes the long trip home without his doctorate, scrubbing the decks to pay for his passage.

This story will seem somewhat familiar for many international students from India today, who come to Australia expecting to earn a degree, find a secure job and eventually to apply for residency. This is the dream of a better life through mobility.

But in many cases they find themselves balancing study with poor work and living conditions and, once their degree is finished, they are told to head back home.

But does the arrival of free quality online education change all this? Had "The Boy Who Would Educate India" been a student today, would he have still made the journey?

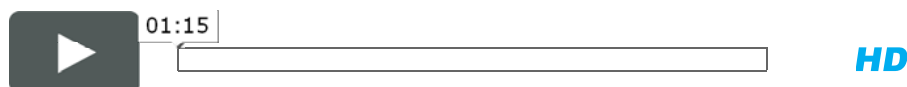
Study Without Moving

New technologies are making their way into the global education system and may challenge the way universities operate.

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), for example, offer expert tuition from the world's most prestigious universities for free — Stanford, Harvard, Columbia and now Melbourne to name a few.

Most seriously for education exporters, these new technologies appear to threaten the lucrative international student market, now a considerable slice of universities' incomes. The market for Indian students alone is worth over \$3 billion to the US, and was expected to grow exponentially alongside aspirant middle classes.

With MOOCs, rich students from poor regions can earn degrees from premier providers from the “comfort” of their own homes. In the future they may even interact with others through iPad Doubles (see video below). But at the moment this interaction mostly occurs in chatrooms and quizzes.



Face-to-face tuition could become a luxury commodity. University senior executives and policymakers need to consider this conundrum in how to target infrastructure, tuition, graduate placement, student experience and — much less publicised — pathways to residency.

A Better Life Through Mobility

There is a very good reason universities and policymakers are so far unfazed by MOOCs. They recognise that for international students the fantasy of self-betterment through a combination of learning and mobility is what motivates them to study abroad.

Universities are well aware of how much the dream of migration means to international students. They make significant investments in global road shows, which trumpet residency pathways, exchange programs and visa sponsorship deals in order to attract enrolments.



Indeed, research shows that up to three quarters of the Indian students coming to

Australian University Games advertisement for international students.

Australia successfully apply for permanent residency afterwards. Studying in Australia is seen by many as a way to get a residency outside India.

The show goes on despite domestic pressure on incorrect visas, overstayers, visa scams and dodgy colleges and agents. More worryingly, behind the scenes are exploitative “bodyshops”.

The issue here is that the dreams of students for a better life through mobility diverge considerably from the dreams of education providers. They want students they can enrol, educate, award and then wave off at the airport. But these students do not just want a quick degree and a short working holiday.

Hard Truths

Students often move internationally to escape the hard realities of life in countries such as India. Many are simply seeking amelioration in places with less poverty, greater job prospects, low corruption, better infrastructure, more safety and a higher Human Development Index.

Universities and policymakers dream of knowledge customers buying their prestigious degrees online in a global market divorced from migration. MOOCs seem to be progress in this direction. But for international students MOOCs is a non-issue.

The elephant in the (chat) room is that most international students pay exorbitant fees, undergo complex administration processes, live in austere conditions and satisfy local business demand for poorly regulated informal labour in the dream of a better life. Both the needs of students and providers demand critical thought in debating the future of education.

The series will conclude on Monday with a panel discussion in Canberra co-hosted with the Office for Learning and Teaching and involving the Minister for Tertiary Education, Chris Evans.

We'd love you to take part: leave your comments, join the discussion on twitter.com/conversationEDU, facebook.com/conversationEDU.

This is part fourteen of our series on the Future of Higher Education. You can read other instalments by clicking the links below:

Part one: Online opportunities: digital innovation or death through regulation?, Jane Den Hollander

Part two: MOOCs and exercise bikes – more in common than you'd think, Phillip Dawson & Robert Nelson

Part three: How Australian universities can play in the MOOCs market, David Sadler

Part four: MOOC and you're out of a job: uni business models in danger, Mark Gregory

Part five: Radical rethink: how to design university courses in the online, Paul Wappett

Part six: Online education: can we bridge the digital divide?, Tim Pitman

Part seven: Online learning will change universities by degrees, Margaret Gardner

Part eight: The university campus of the future: what will it look like?, David Lamond

Part nine: Deadset? MOOCs and Australian education in a globalised world, Ruth Morgan

Part ten: Research online: why universities need to be knowledge brokers, Justin

O'Brien

Part eleven: Online education at the coalface: what academics need to know, Rod Lamberts & Will Grant

Part twelve: A little bit more conversation: the limits of online education, Shirley Alexander

Part thirteen: What students want and how universities are getting it wrong, Alasdair McAndrew