

Learned Luddites

Many professors are hostile to online education

Some people hope that the internet will revolutionise higher education, making it cheaper and more accessible to the masses. Others fear the prospect. Some academics worry that they will be sacked and replaced by videos of their more photogenic colleagues. Others argue that MOOCs (massive open online courses) are nowhere near as good as a class taught face-to-face.

Earlier this year academics at Amherst, a liberal-arts college, decided not to offer MOOCs. Professors in the philosophy department at San José State University wrote a letter of complaint because they were encouraged to use a popular online Harvard course, "JusticeX", as part of their own curriculum. Even at Harvard, which has invested \$30m in MOOCs, much of the faculty is prickly. In May 58 professors wrote to the dean of arts and sciences to demand greater oversight of MOOCs.

Online education reached 6.7m students in 2011. A third of those enrolled at traditional colleges took an online course as part of their degrees. MOOCs are only a little different: they cater to learners outside an old-fashioned university, generally offer only certificates of completion, and can be used by, and assess, large numbers of students simultaneously.

A recent study of faculty attitudes to technology by the online publication Inside Higher Ed found much scepticism about MOOCs, but also that staff who have actually taught on them are far more positive about their quality. Nishikant Sonwalkar, the editor of MOOCs Forum, says professors do not want to teach on courses they did not create. At the same time they are concerned about "academic marginalisation". Popular MOOCs are creating star professors, such as Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller at Stanford University. Mr Sonwalkar observes that many of the academics he has approached to appear in MOOCs decline because they feel uncomfortable on camera.

Academics are over-reacting, argues Jack Wilson, the president emeritus of the University of Massachusetts. MOOCs are an interactive textbook, he says. Not every professor writes a textbook, but all can use them. Pre-recorded lectures and multiple-choice questions can lighten the load on lecturers. Sanjay Sarma, the director of digital learning at MIT, describes them as a "force multiplier". Professors will eventually get used to them. But first, says Mr Wilson, they must "get over the fear factor".

Fonte: The Economist, London, v. 409, n. 8856, p. 41, 12 a 18 Oct. 2013.