

Online courses a link to low-cost education

JP SMIT

STUDYING full-time at a residential university costs about R300,000 per degree, accommodation and basic maintenance included.

Funding an additional 100 students will cost R30m, another 1,000 R300m, and so on. The numbers spiral out of control in a hurry; university education is expensive, to put it mildly, and the majority of South Africans are poor.

Yet we live in an age in which information is practically free. Can we do better? A few years ago there was a lot of enthusiasm for massive open online courses (Moocs), but this has faded due to the lack of interested students. The online courses typically force students to finish a course within a set time frame and do not allow someone to pursue an existing degree course. Consider what can be done if the content delivery system of an online course is combined with the certification process of a traditional university.

Recording lectures and placing them online is not difficult. Class notes can be made available for free, and we can use free, open-source textbooks. Students can access these resources from home on their smartphones. We can schedule extra exam opportunities during student holidays and, for a nominal fee, students can take the exam and earn the exact same credits as earned by residential students. Just R100 per exam should cover the costs involved (assuming that R20,000 can pay for grading and the administrative overheads associated with an exam written by 200 people).

If all courses are available in this format, a degree could cost less than R5,000 — less than 2% of the current cost. Occasionally, of course, the use of copyrighted material and proprietary software would be unavoidable. Even where such costs are incurred, the cost of a degree would still be lower by an order of magnitude.

An initial problem is that students typically cannot afford to stream hundreds of hours' lectures online. Fortunately, a university's entire offering can fit on a modern hard drive. These could be distributed to every library in the region.

Students can study when time allows and register for the exam when they feel ready to take it. There is no need to require that students have university exemption or matric. If students can pass the exam, there is no reason to deny them the credits, no matter their educational background. (The number of students without proper credentials can be greatly decreased by making high school lessons available in a similar format. Students with mediocre teachers could access the lectures of the top teachers in the country.)

Students studying in this way lose out on student-lecturer interaction. For most, the gain from interaction comes from hearing questions asked by other students. Students watching recordings of actual lectures will see such interactions anyway.

One fear is such students will gain second-rate degrees. We must ensure that evaluation is of the exact same standard as for residential degrees and the exact same degree certificate must be issued. One option to ensure proper standards of evaluation is to set two exams for each course and through a random process decide which question paper is used at which exam.

Some courses, involving laboratory work, for instance, do require students to be present. Many degrees have few such constraints. There is little in most undergraduate degrees in humanities, economics, law or accounting that require the student to be present for class. Sometimes, the problem will be insurmountable. But even then, it may be feasible to let the student learn all the theory online and organise a repeat of the residence-required component of the course. Obviously, the "student experience", networking benefits and the learning experience of living far from home goes missing.

What the student would get, however, is a quality education and a recognised degree in a way that minimally disrupts their lives. And at a tiny fraction of the cost.

■ *Smit is a senior lecturer in philosophy at Stellenbosch University.*