

Is education's future online?

By [GetSmarter](#)

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Remember when *The New York Times* declared 2012 the Year of the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course)?

The same year that saw the launch of numerous online education startups - including Coursera, Udacity, and FutureLearn - leading *The New York Times* to proclaim: "The shimmery hope is that free courses can bring the best education in the world to the most remote corners of the planet, help people in their careers, and expand intellectual and personal networks."

Four years later, off the back of dismal course completion rates and against a slew of disillusioned headlines questioning the "MOOC revolution that wasn't", we're witnessing evolution in action when it comes to digital education, with many of the latest certified online short courses being designed to address what many have recognised to be the three key areas in which MOOCs are failing to deliver on the utopian goals set back in 2012.

There are three trends on the rise in the online education sector worth watching: *broadening access to workplace-relevant knowledge* through designing a *truly engaging and highly supported* online learning environment.



Designing education accessible by all

Having a meticulously constructed education programme with engaging content and valuable outcomes is of little use if it is only able to be accessed by a select few.

Accessible is defined as “able to be reached” and therefore includes considerations like location and admissions limits. The downfall of a physical university campus is that it limits access to those who live far away, and puts a cap on the number of students it can accommodate.

Online learning answers both of these considerations as students from anywhere in the world are able to participate, as long as they have a reliable internet connection and sufficient financial backing.

There is already evidence of this shift locally in South Africa, with prestigious institutions, such as the University of Cape Town, broadening access to education by collaborating with companies such as [GetSmarter](#) to allow for certain programmes to be completed online and part-time.

Designing short courses that result in relevant, verifiable competencies

Although many will rightly argue that a primary education from a recognised school and a tertiary education from a prestigious university will continue to hold some weight, at least for the foreseeable future, it’s hard to deny the fact that *people want relevant, practical and immediately applicable knowledge* - a desire not often fulfilled through traditional education.

Consider the amount of learning that is still a necessity for most as soon as they enter the workplace, even if their studies were focused on the field they entered. An efficient education programme would make this a seamless transition, leaving further education up to the employee’s desire for career advancement, and not up to necessity.



According to [GetSmarter](#)’s Chief of Education, Amy Johnson, their team collaborates with the world’s leading universities to adopt a *competency-based* approach to learning design that empowers students to master their own learning journey and access premier education in short, flexible timeframes. “Highly practical learning outcomes are purposefully crafted to scaffold students towards higher order cognitive abilities, and are made explicit and measurable for students,” Johnson

explains.

Designing an online learning environment to match the face-to-face tradition

Maybe the biggest challenge facing online education is the recreation of the benefit students derive from physical interaction and interpersonal discussions in classrooms and lecture halls, as well as the traditional 'university experience'.

Rita Kop, Dean of Education at Yorkville University in Canada - whose interests lie at the crossroads of human learning and technology - writes about how "presence" has an effect on meaningful learning. She notes how certain scholars believe that "the closer the ties between the people involved, the higher the level of presence and the higher the level of engagement in the learning activity."



It is obvious how a traditional classroom or lecture theatre environment would benefit students in this regard, but it poses an obvious challenge to online education.

Online learning providers are, however, taking steps to mimic this environment through engaging learning material, discussion forums, dedicated course instructors and continued support throughout the online learning journey.

Johnson noted the importance of these factors when she said, "Support of this nature ensures that learners remain motivated throughout their online learning journey."

"[GetSmarter](#)'s Closed-Loop Learning Analytics capability, for example, provides real-time analytics from our students' online learning activities to their dedicated Course Coaches on our Student Performance Team. This empowers them with the information they need to identify students who are at risk of falling behind with their studies, and proactively intervene to keep them on track."

Online educators around the world are starting to see the value of investing in the human capital required to equal, and even improve upon, traditional learning practices, but only time will tell if these measures are effective enough to shape the future of education.

From the looks of it, they just might be.

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