

# How to get a foreign education for free

Pursuing college-level courses can cost an arm and a leg. Fortunately for those without the means, there is an alternative – on the Web



BY JUNE MOH

**“About half a dozen US universities are beginning to offer college credits to those who have completed an MOOC, if they can demonstrate that they have learned something valuable.”**

**W**HAT do you do when you yearn to acquire new skills, improve your knowledge in a chosen field or keep up with developments in a specific area or expertise?

You could enrol for a course in an institution of higher learning, or buy the relevant books. But for those without the means, financially or otherwise, there is now a free option.

It is called the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) and it offers courses of your choice, with a college professor to provide the necessary guidance.

However, there is a caveat. You will not be issued with a college certificate for completing the requisite courses. The only thing you will gain is the knowledge acquired through your studies.

MOOC is a web-based, college-level class with unrestricted enrolment. It is offered through various platforms such as Coursera, Udacity, Canvas, edX and Khan Academy, among others and its main objective is to deliver higher education to virtually anyone who has access to the Internet.

Most MOOCs are structured along the traditional online higher educa-

tion courses that enable students to watch lectures, read assigned material, participate in online discussions and forums, and complete quizzes and tests on the course material.

However, there is a line, albeit thin and obscure, between MOOC and online degree courses. Students who take a course through MOOC are not awarded a degree.

Apart from this, participants can choose what they want to study and how they want to participate. Only the students can tell in the end if they have been successful in gaining the requisite knowledge.

Unlike traditional distant learning courses that keep the enrolment to a manageable level, a typical Coursera MOOC course can have as many as 40,000 to 60,000 students, says Jason Tham, a writing instructor based in Minnesota, United States, citing data from *Educause Review Online*. The online magazine looks at developments and trends in information technology, how they may affect the college or university as an institution and what these mean for higher education and society.

While the practice of not awarding degrees may not appeal to some, the situation may be changing. “About half a dozen US universities are beginning to offer college credits



## MOOC advocate

**JASON** Tham is a graduate student and writing instructor at St Cloud State University, United States, completing his Masters in Rhetoric and Writing, and in Mass Communication.

He has been published in the *Journal of Interpersonal, Intercultural and Mass Communication and Journalism*

and *Mass Communication Quarterly*. His most recent presentation on MOOC was entitled *Preparing for the MOOCacolyse: A Survey of Composition MOOC at Computers and Writing National Conference* in Maryland, United States.

View his work at [www.jasontham.com](http://www.jasontham.com)

to those who have completed an MOOC if they can demonstrate that they have learned something valuable,” Tham tells *The Heat*.

In a typical MOOC, students sign up through a provider, which gives them access to course materials. They will usually be given assignments or quizzes to complete – just like a typical class in college.

### Learning through socialisation

The first MOOC was launched in September 2008. Coursework completed by students is shared with their virtual classmates for them to reflect and comment upon.

According to Tham, MOOC emerged from the idea of connectivism, a theory of learning that emphasises socialisation and its importance in the cultural context, thus suggesting that people learn through contact with others. “Connectivism is the new way to learn in the digital age,” he says.

More importantly, it is a platform for people who care about the same subject matter to come together and talk about it in a structured way.

However, there are concerns as well, particularly with regards to the credibility of courses conducted under MOOC. The fact that students are asked to gauge the works of other students taking the same course raises the question of how credible is the course’s grading method.

Tham concedes that the credibility of assessments and evaluations in MOOCs are among the questions many scholars and researchers ask today.

“Although there are standard

practices across the MOOC delivery system, every instructional team makes up its own grading structure for the course taught and so there is no one way to determine the best grading method. However, I think we should learn to move away from putting too much emphasis on grades per se,” he says.

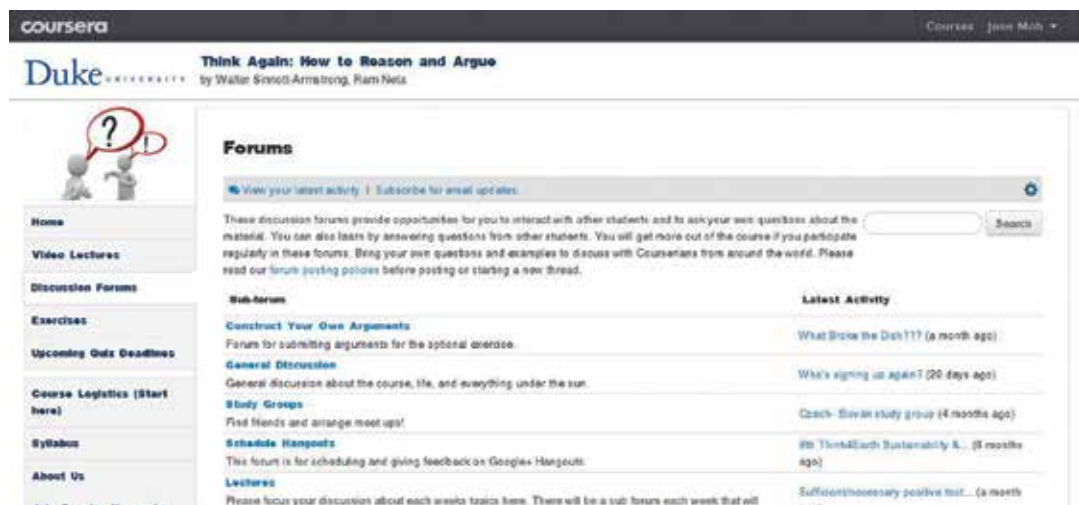
Nevertheless, Tham vouches for the quality, delivery method and grading exercises of digital education. “MOOC is a different learning environment – one that relies heavily on student initiative and motivation for learning, and the experience of participating in a connective knowledge community may outweigh the importance of the grade one receives from the course. For argument’s sake, I think we should not try to fit a square peg in a round hole.”

Despite the peer-grading system, Tham says students can still expect fair grading when they understand that in order to calibrate the grading exercise, students are usually required to undergo a short training or tutorial on how to score their peers’ work.

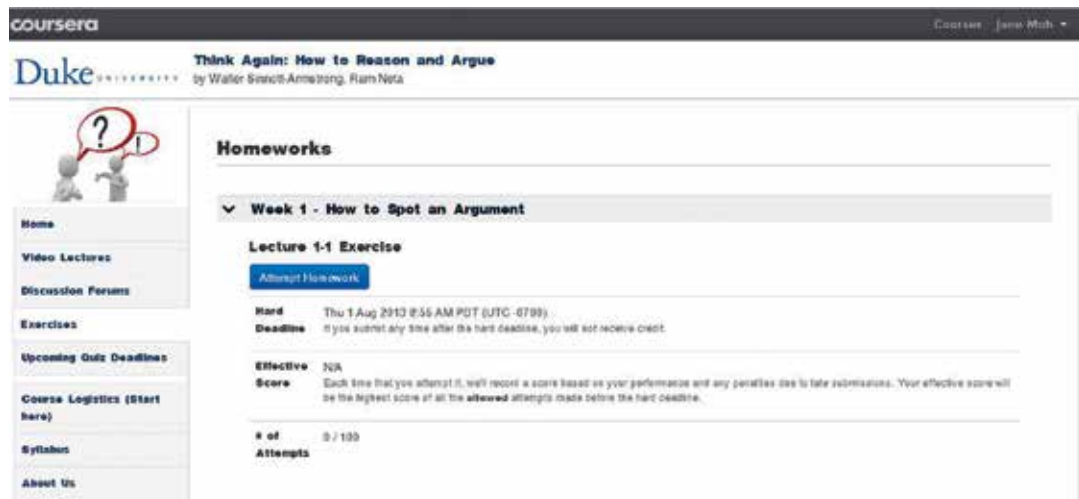
“Based on my experience, students are usually required to grade and provide feedback to three to five of their peers’ work for every assignment they submit. Then, a mean score for the particular assignment is generated from all the scores received from peer reviewers,” he explains.

“According to Falchikov and Goldfinch’s 2000 study, peer assessments actually closely resemble teacher assessments even though we often

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Interactive discussion forum for students, professors, and teaching assistants of MOOC from Coursera



Description of homework and exercises after a lecture from Coursera



# Getting feedback from peers

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suspect there are individual differences.” MOOCs can include blog posts, tweets, papers or other ways to gauge students’ performance.

A plus point of enrolling in a MOOC is the network that a student builds up when engaging in discussion with others.

Tham, a scholar of digital pedagogy, had completed two MOOCs (E-Learning and Digital Cultures and First-Year Composition 2.0). Through observing the interactions among the students and instructors during course delivery, he learned not just the course itself but also from the interesting conversations with people inside and outside the courses. “I have learned ways to teach writing at the college level I have never considered before,” he says.

MOOC arises from the confluence of several important trends and they raise important questions, such as why the courses are free and who funded them. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation plays a vital role in sustaining the MOOC movement. In 2012, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported the foundation gave more than US\$9 million in grants to support the developments of MOOCs.

Some MOOCs are developed and offered by individual universities, such as Harvard, Yale, Duke, and Stanford, that deliver them mostly through internal grants and funds.

## Leveraging on MOOC

MOOCs are widely utilised by students from North America and United Kingdom. Asian countries like Singapore, Hong Kong and India have a growing number of students enrolled in MOOCs.

Tham urges Malaysian students and working professionals to leverage on MOOC. “There are courses

“For teachers, MOOCs are a great place to observe how different subjects are taught by other institutions.”



Statement of Accomplishment issued to participants who complete a MOOC



A screenshot of a video lecture by Duke University Professor Walter Sinnott-Armstrong from Coursera

## MOOC facts

Statistics released by Tucker Balch of Georgia Institute of Technology concerning students who enrolled in his offering of Computational Investing: Part 1 this year:

- Top countries of residence of students who completed the course (in order): United States, United Kingdom, India
- Age distribution, for those who completed the course (in order): about 27 years, about 23 years, and about 35 years old; average 35 years old
- Age distribution, for those who did not complete the course (in order): about 23 years, about 27 years, and about 35 years old; average 34 years old
- Completed the course (by gender): 94% male, 6% female
- Completion rate for this course: 25,589 enrolled; 61% watched a video, 27% took a quiz, 1,165 completed the course (4.5% of those who enrolled)

## Who should give MOOC a try?

- For self-starters who are passionate about learning and those who have not had the opportunity to access higher education, MOOC is a great way to get there, for free
- To those who dream of attending prestigious universities and learning from A-list professors, MOOC can give you a taste of that.

## Courses recommended to readers

- Introduction to Computational Arts by State University of New York
- Social Psychology by Wesleyan University
- 9/11 and Its Aftermath – Part 1 by Duke University
- Social and Economic Networks: Models and Analysis by Stanford University
- Introduction to Public Speaking by University of Washington
- Critical Thinking in Global Challenges by The University of Edinburgh
- Berklee Free Guitar Chords Lesson by Berklee College of Music
- Writing II: Rhetorical Composing by The Ohio State University
- Think Again: How to Reason and Argue by Duke University
- English Composition I: Achieving Expertise by Duke University
- Introduction to Sustainability: University of Illinois
- Online Games: Literature, New Media and Narrative by Vanderbilt University

with remedial or developmental nature that can help to prepare students who are going to attend or are already attending college and university. Students and professionals can take advantage of this offering and enhance their proficiency in various areas such as languages, sciences, computer skills and even communication competencies.

“Big players like Yahoo! have begun to utilise these opportunities to leverage training and development in the workplace setting.”

MOOC is a step towards lifelong networked learning as it encourages students to work independently in their own space and create authentic networks that they can easily maintain after the course ends.

Tham advises MOOC participants to always keep an open mind and be flexible. He says: “One may run into some cultural references that he or she is not familiar with since the MOOC community is international. Try to be sensitive with the way you address controversial topics as they might be received differently by the diverse student population on MOOCs.

“For teachers, MOOCs are a great place to observe how different subjects are taught by other institutions. Be careful with fair use and copyright issues if you decide to use the materials from these MOOCs in your own curriculum.”

While one may not be able to contact the instructional team directly in MOOC, discussion forums are usually set up for questions and to generate conversations. An individual can learn a lot by such exchanges with others on these forums.

“I have not come across any study that does a meta-analysis comparing online and face-to-face instructional quality of the same course by the same teacher. It would definitely be interesting to look at similarities and differences between the two. In a face-to-face setting, one has the advantage, compared with online setting, to experience non-verbal cues that may be hindered by computer-mediated processes. But needless to say, MOOC gives more flexibility to students who are busy with their daily routine and other responsibilities,” Tham says.

However, given the fact that there is no supervision and students do not have to pay, many who sign up for MOOC do not stay the course.

According to *Educause Review* (2013), the Coursera co-founders have reported that in classes that require peer-graded assignments, only 15% to 20% of students turn in their assignments. Of those who turn in their work, 45% would successfully complete the course and earn a Statement of Accomplishment.