



## To MOOC or not to MOOC?

### Description

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Apart from some diehard cynics, everyone seems to agree that MOOCs are going to shake old-school higher education to its foundations. Or failing that, they are going to be a great marketing tool for prominent universities found near the top of the QS Rankings.

So earlier this year, I decided to test the waters by taking a MOOC. Having last been a student some decades ago (apart from the odd recreational evening class), I also reckoned the experience would reintroduce me gently to the world of formal learning.

But how to choose between the thousands of MOOCs on offer? Having written about European science for most of my career, I am now increasingly embroiled in China, so the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology course on Science, Technology and Society in China (Part 1, Basic Concepts), run by Naubahar Sharif, more or less chose itself. It had the advantage that it only took three weeks, so it was no big loss if it was terrible, while also leading into another more detailed course in the autumn. And HKUST is Asia's top university, according to the QS University Rankings: Asia.

So how was it? Well, high-tech is not the word. The main content, three weekly batches of lectures, involves Sharif talking into a camera and showing some very unflashy PowerPoint. However, his style is good and he knows his stuff.

A worse problem is that the course has been badly misnamed. Week 1's nine lecture segments did not touch on China except peripherally, being more of a canter round the science studies field (Kuhn, Popper and the like). In week 2, all the content was about China, and things got very interesting. But there was a heavy tilt towards innovation and no mention of any sort of science that does not lead to application. Week 3 was all about innovation, and only one of the seven segments was about China. It was really a course on innovation systems, with an emphasis on China.

However, to point to another much-discussed virtue of MOOCs, there did seem to be a pretty fair mutual support system, with a lot of email chat between students based all over the world, and with highly variable knowledge of English.

I certainly enjoyed rejoining the learning world, and by the end was even answering the quiz questions correctly. This involved relearning the basic principle of reading the question properly before answering it.

I also learned a lot from the marking phase of the MOOC. This involves everyone marking three other students's assignments for each of the three weeks. Week 1 was about technological lockin, a subject on which I edited a big UK government report a few years ago. The range covered everything from McKinsey-level analyses of this complex issue to folk who had missed the concept completely.

Like other MOOCs, this one is no more than a taster for a real course, but a lot of thought has gone into it and it has clearly excited a lot of bright students. Will I show up for the next phase this autumn? I don't quite know, but I have the feeling that I just might.