The big conversation

Ten years can lead to huge amounts of change in any field – see how far technology has come in the past 10 years. The rise of the smart phone has led to almost everyone in the developed world having a computer in their pocket, more powerful than that aboard the Apollo 11 spacecraft. Will these pocket computers be the future of education?

With the pace of technological advancement, and the embracive stance of universities, could the future of education change to that of a decentralised 'learn-when-you-want' type of learning? With faster internet and increasingly powerful machines reaching every home, will the university campus become a thing condemned to history? Could learning be conducted at home? Online learning sites such as FutureLearn, 'The Great Courses' and lynda.com have shot into the limelight in the past few years with search results skyrocketing (see figures 1-2). These websites offer a range of courses that can be academic or hobby orientated at a fraction of the price.

If the campus were to become obsolete, an unlikely scenario but a possible one all the same, where would Birmingham stand? Perhaps university campuses would become 'resource centres' and a place exclusively for research, only being used for occasional exams. Other possibilities might include hiring out the grand buildings for public event use.

The University of Birmingham already uses of Panopto, recording lectures and storing them online, but could this be expanded to include video recording of the lecture for broadcast around the world. These lectures could also form a revenue stream for the university, select modules or entire courses could be sold in a similar way to that of The Great Courses or lynda.com. Pushing that idea to the extreme, the university could make said courses free to access and operate in a similar way to FutureLearn, completely forgoing fees (highly unlikely as tuition fees are rising and staff, facilities and the like still cost considerable sums of money).

With all things considered, and looking back over the past few years, unfortunately I believe little will change. The increase of technology has assisted the teacher in the classroom, not removed them. Courses are still being taught in a somewhat similar style to that of decades ago: a sizeable class, one knowledgeable teacher, and the resources needed to convey those ideas to the pupils, albeit with slight changes.
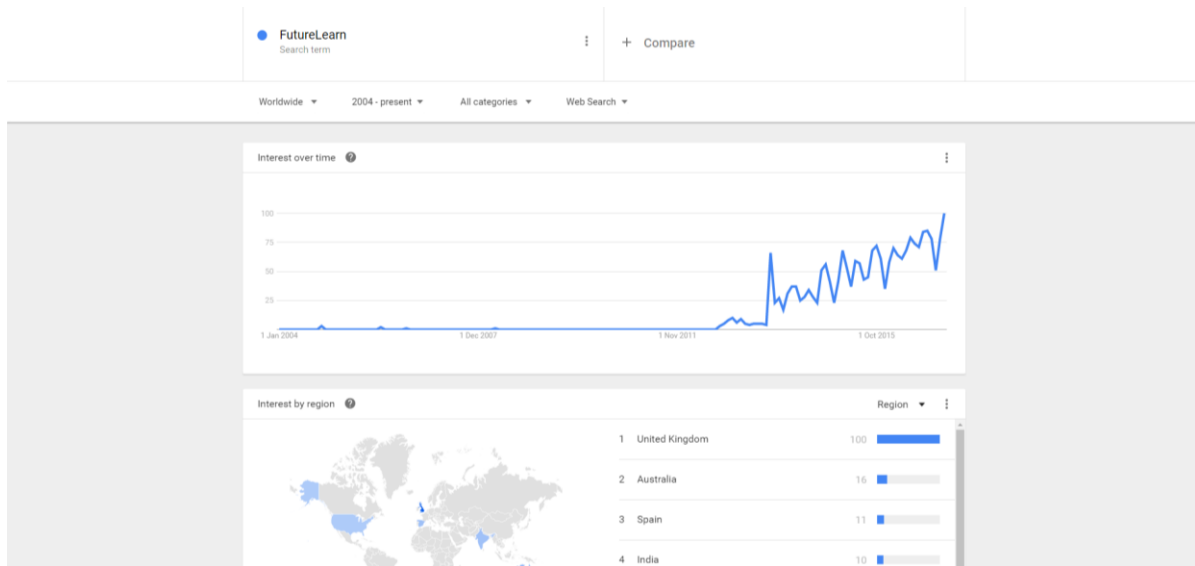
Figure 1: Google searches for "FutureLearn" with a heat map of the origin of the search
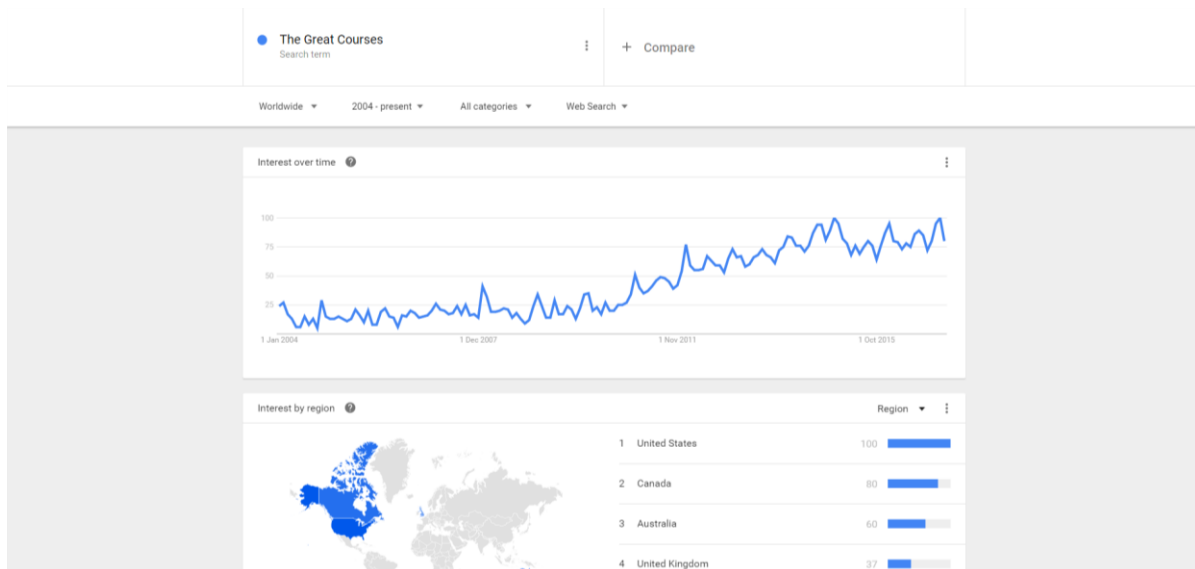

Figure 2: Google searches for "The Great Courses" with a heat map of the origin of the search