

Ponte Vedra Beach, on the outskirts of Jacksonville in Florida, is the home of the Tournament Players Club golf course, and a retirement community for those fleeing cold winters. In March, it hosted the 25th International Conference on College Teaching and Learning.

The meeting focused on the impact of rapid technological developments on higher education. Sessions covered topics as varied as brain research and ways to put critical thinking at the heart of instruction, with workshops on recruitment and retention strategies for women and minorities in the sciences.

But a lot of attention was on the future of higher education, especially that of institutions that depend on public funding and see their main mission as teaching.

These institutions include [Florida State College at Jacksonville](#) (FSCJ), which has more than 55,000 students (about 24,000 full-time equivalents). Most are pursuing two-year associate degrees or vocational certificates, with others taking bachelor's degrees and a good number enrolled in high school completion and remedial programmes. With 400-plus full-time academic faculty and some 800 part-time staff, the college has an annual operating budget of \$140 million (£83 million).

The college's main mission is "high quality, affordable and relevant degree, career and community education". It is part of the state and national infrastructure that makes attending college a realistic aspiration for most young Americans. But it depends on tuition fees and state funding, which is not a good place to be at the moment. Since 2007, Florida's support for higher education has fallen by more than 40 per cent per student, which has led to higher tuition fees, particularly for out-of-state and non-US students.

Short-term solutions to reduced revenues include deferring estate maintenance, increasing building occupancy, eliminating undersubscribed courses and recruiting more adult learners into low-cost, higher-fee enrichment programmes. But also on the horizon is the threat posed by online courses with high brand-name recognition.

Some are run by for-profit providers, including the University of Phoenix, whose Jacksonville campus offers online and in-person classes. But the long-term viability of FSCJ and other regional and community teaching institutions is also at risk from the rise of massive open online courses provided by platforms such as Coursera, which are mostly free to users. Moocs can absorb demand for enrichment and extension courses from older adults and meet vocationally specific needs of those currently employed but needing to upgrade or recertify qualifications – traditionally good sources of fee income for local colleges.

So what does FSCJ have to offer that a Mooc does not? Its academic staff argue that their strengths lie in face-to-face interactions between instructors and students, and between students. They see their comparative advantage as "curated" classrooms and seminars where ideas and concepts are presented logically and sequentially to be tested. The Socratic method and the tailoring of materials for learners of all abilities and interests are more valuable and virtuous, they say, than the asynchronous delivery of a common, inflexible programme. But only time will tell what types of provision will survive.