OpenLearning launches into competitive MOOCs market

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With online learning, teachers no longer have to be everywhere all the time says online learning start-up OpenLearning. Credit: Ingo Bernhardt

A start-up that allows universities to offer massive open online courses (MOOCs) has opened for business, signing on more than 1,000 students to a 12-week computer science and engineering course from the University of New South Wales.

But experts say its decision to offer private industry-focused courses, automated marking, and "wisdom of crowds approach" could limit uptake by major universities.

OpenLearning was built by UNSW graduates Richard Buckland and Adam Brimo, who call it "a combination of Facebook and Wikipedia for learning".

The Australian company will be emulating Facebook and Google and taking on Coursera and Blackboard with a platform that allows students to earn points by "liking" or voting down discussion posts and get feedback on assignments through automated marking systems.

"YouTube and even more recent online education developments like Coursera don't really replace the classroom or the university experience," said Professor Buckland, whose lectures have received more than 2 million views on YouTube.

"They are great at delivering content but not so great at providing the other things that students get from attending a course face to face at university – community, learning from peers, tutorials, practical work, and motivation to study and progress."

OpenLearning allows universities to offer open online courses via its platform for free, and in cases where the university wishes to make the course private and charge for it, the fees range between $5 and $10 per student per course.

OpenLearning co-founder Adam Brimo said the company wanted to make learning as fun and enjoyable as possible.

"So that students feel it's more of an adventure or a social networking thing or a game, rather than a university course, but all the while you're learning something."

OpenLearning's platform also includes a wiki feature, where students and course supervisors can collaborate to build detailed study notes.

"What we've seen in the courses we've run so far are students getting together and in many cases they are teaching themselves," Mr Brimo said.

He added that in this environment teachers played more of a facilitation role.

"You need excellent teachers because they need to think about the structure and the end goal but they don't need to be everywhere all the time."

Phillip Dawson, lecturer in learning and teaching at Monash University said while peer learning was a positive thing, there were risks associated with becoming dependent on students engaging in peer collaborative learning online.

"If the community dwindles and dies the enthusiastic students who can't find someone to collaborate with become disenchanted.

"It comes down to the teacher's skills at getting collaboration going and nurturing that community."

Dr Lawson also said while automated assessment was suited to objective fact courses like computer science, it might not be applicable to humanities or other creative disciplines. He added that in these types of courses where right or wrong answers were less well-defined, "[wisdom of crowds](link)" learning could see the crowd all being wrong.

Mr Brimo said OpenLearning's platform meant the more students that were enrolled in a course, the better the learning environment.

He said the time students are currently spending on open [learning](link) rivalled the time they spent on Facebook.

"As more courses are put on OpenLearning we think people will just stick around and take on more courses."

But in order to rival Facebook, OpenLearning will need critical mass, which means it is working with all course providers, from large universities to small community groups.

"Given that the site can potentially host anything from university style courses to private industry-focussed courses, it is possible that universities would need to exercise some caution in how their brand is portrayed and how much control they would have over the environment," said David Glance, director of University of Western Australia's Centre for Software Practice.

UWA recently announced it would offer free online courses next year, using Stanford's Class2Go platform.

Dr Lawson said retention had been a major issue with existing open online courses, with 80-90% dropout rates in some cases.

"I would hate to see people get a bad taste of university because there's just too many students in there to get personal attention."

Mr Brimo said universities were forward thinking and understood the role of online courses to marketing and attracting students.

In the case of UNSW he said the university was hoping that through doing the [computer science](link) course people who might not have known what a computer degree or job was like would have a better understanding of it.

He said offering a course online was also an opportunity for universities to deliver potential students a "try before you buy" experience.

"If they can give overseas students a taste of what a course will be like at their university that could be a huge advantage."