

Online course host Coursera to ID students using typing style

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Verifying student identity, including during online tests, has always been a major stumbling block for Massive Open Online Courses. Credit: University of Maryland <http://www.flickr.com/photos/umdnews>

Online course host Coursera will verify the identities of participating students using web cams and technology that can fingerprint an individual's unique typing style under a [pilot project](#) announced this week that aims to crack down on cheating.

Coursera is emerging as a key player in the world of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which aim to provide a web-based education to vast numbers of [students](#). High profile institutions like Princeton

University and the University of Melbourne are among the [33 educators that have already signed](#) with Coursera.

In a [press release](#), Coursera said it would charge between \$30 and \$100 for 'verified certificates'—meaning documentation showing a student completed a course that featured the new identity check system.

"This new option, called Signature Track, is available on a course-by-course basis and aims to verify the identity of the students doing the work. Though it does not include credit toward a degree program, Signature Track provides students with a more meaningful certificate that proves their success in a rigorous online university course," the firm said.

Verifying student identity aims to stop cheating by ensuring that the person doing a test behind a computer is who they say they are.

Coursera said five courses will be part of the pilot, in which students will verify their identity by:

- Taking two photographs with their web cam: one of themselves and another of an acceptable photo ID document.
- Creating a biometric profile of their unique typing patterns by typing a short phrase.

When a student submits work in the course, they authenticate their identity by typing the same short phrase, which is then matched to their recorded samples.

Students who cannot afford to pay for verified certificates can apply for [financial assistance](#), the firm said. Unverified certificates will feature a disclaimer saying Coursera cannot confirm that the bearers of the certificate did the work.

"We created Signature Track to allow students to verify their identity and show that they did the work, and thus provide a more valuable credential, without detracting from the experience of our free courses," said Coursera co-founder Andrew Ng.

Dr Andrew Norton, Higher Education Program Director at the Grattan Institute said the web cam identity check is a big improvement from Coursera's perspective.

"Western Governors University in the US is already using this method, though I think to really work, the web cam needs to be on through an entire exam period," he said.

"For routine assignments, what Coursera is proposing in keyboard pattern testing is slightly more rigorous than for existing online courses, which usually require only a logon and password."

However, Dr Norton said no higher education provider, online or on-campus, has completely solved the problem of cheating on assignments.

"That's why exams with ID checking and supervision remain essential, and why the web cam is important for the credibility of Coursera's student assessment," he said.

Dr David Glance, Director of the University of Western Australia's Centre for Software Practice, said that "whilst this is an interesting way to deal with the issue of identification and authentication, it still suffers from the flaw that it is ultimately not verifiable."

"I can have someone else just do all of the assessments and they can type the phrase and associate it with my ID – or have someone sitting next to me and I just type the phrase," he said.

"This makes it next to useless if you are going to rely on this form of verification. The only way that you can be confident that someone took an assessment is to conduct the assessment in an invigilated environment after formal identification of the person attending the course," said Dr Glance.

"Having said this, we face similar problems with largely taking on trust that students attending universities are actually the ones doing the assessments during a course."

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