

More top universities to offer free online courses

February 21 2013, by Terence Chea

More of the world's elite universities are joining the rush to offer "massive open online courses," but it's still uncertain whether so-called MOOCs will help more students earn college degrees.

Coursera and edX, two of the leading MOOC providers, on Thursday announced major expansions that will roughly double the number of universities offering free online courses through their websites.

The U.S.-based edX, which was founded in May by Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said it will add six new institutions, including five outside the U.S., which will offer at least 25 additional courses.

U.S.-based Coursera said it will add 29 institutions, including 16 outside the United States. Over the next several months, the schools will offer 90 new courses, including some taught in French, Spanish, Italian and Chinese.

"Having courses taught in other languages will enable more [students](#) to take our classes," said Andrew Ng, a Stanford University professor who co-founded Coursera last April.

MOOCs have attracted millions of students and captured the public imagination over the past year, allowing people from all walks of life to learn from leading scholars at elite universities—free of charge.

Coursera currently offers 220 courses from 33 institutions and has almost 2.8 million registered users who have signed up for nearly 10 million courses. Only a fraction of enrollees actually complete the courses, in part because it's easy and free to sign up.

The 29 new Coursera partners include Chinese University of Hong Kong, Technical University of Denmark, National Autonomous University of Mexico as well as the universities of Copenhagen, Geneva and Tokyo.

EdX, which currently offers 25 courses from six universities and has 700,000 registered users, will add six new members: Australian National University, Delft University of Technology, Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne, McGill University, Rice University and the University of Toronto.

Delft University in the Netherlands will be the first edX partner to provide courses as "open content," which means that other universities are free to incorporate the materials in their offerings, said Agarwal.

"People can reuse it and remix it," Agarwal said.

But the question remains: Can these large-scale, highly automated classes help increase college completion rates or lower the cost of earning a degree?

So far, only a small number of institutions are offering degree credit for MOOCs, but that could change if more colleges determine the digital classes meet their academic standards.

Earlier this month, the American Council on Education said it will recommend credit for five Coursera courses. The association is evaluating more MOOCs for possible credit recommendations, which

many schools use to decide whether to grant credit for nontraditional courses.

Critics say online-only [courses](#) have unacceptably high dropout rates and aren't well-suited for struggling students who need more face-to-face interaction and mentoring to succeed.

EdX's Agarwal said colleges should use MOOCs to improve, rather than replace, campus-based education by combining online lessons with classroom instruction.

San Jose State University students who recently took a "blended" version of an edX engineering class performed significantly better than students who took the classroom-based course, he added.

"I really believe the blended model is really a key approach to improving campus education," said edX President Anant Agarwal.

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