

Open University

The Online Advantage

Open Universities, Australia's leading online higher education service, is experiencing an enrolment explosion, recording a 88% jump in student registrations since 2004 – including 89% growth in postgraduate enrolments in 2006.

Chief executive officer, Stuart Hamilton, says it is the most significant growth recorded by Open Universities Australia since its establishment in 1993 as Open Learning. More than 17,400 Australians are studying online through Open Universities, a consortium of seven leading Australian Universities: Curtin, Griffith, Macquarie, Monash, RMIT, Swinburne and UniSA, and seven other providers, with student numbers projected to hit 20,000 by the end of 2006.

Four key factors

Hamilton puts the remarkable growth down to four key factors: success of a re-branding campaign; meeting a need for credible, flexible, accessible and quality education in Australia; employer demand for highly qualified workers; and the expanding range of professional courses offered online, such as the continuing addition of new postgraduate degrees.

“The key challenge was to position the new brand as the quality tertiary educational option for busy working people. We achieved this by prominently featuring our seven shareholder universities in our advertisements, providing the quality reassurance that our consumer research showed we needed.”

The main reasons Australians are flocking to online education can be summed up in four words, credibility, flexibility, accessibility and quality, says Hamilton. “There are no entry requirements to start studying through Open Universities and people can graduate with a degree from a leading Australian university.

Importantly, the flexibility of online learning means students can fit their study around their busy lives, be it a current job or family situation. On-line students can even choose to participate in the applicable university's graduation ceremony.”

Employer demand

Dr Ann Deden, general manager of Academic Products and Services says the increase is fuelled by employer demand for highly-skilled workers; and time-poor professionals recognizing the advantage further qualifications provide.

“At a time when competition for jobs and promotion is fierce, more and more professionals are turning to online education to top up their qualifications, preferring to study at a time and place that suits them.”

The continuing addition of new postgraduate degrees is likely to keep enrolment numbers rising, especially now that Open Universities and RMIT University have joined forces to offer an online Master of Business Administration for the first time, starting February 2007.

So what does the future hold for Open Universities Australia?

“The particular market we serve is very large, and growing. It's a virtual university environment in every sense and because we aren't restricted by walls or the number of available seats in the lecture theater, there is little to inhibit this growth trend, provided Australia keeps up with the broadband race,” says Hamilton.

Alex Cochran, Merchandise Manager for Dick Smith Electronics (pictured), an Australasian electronics retailer, completed a Master of Marketing at Monash University, through Open Universities, in October 2006.



Studying has helped Alex keep pace with the rapidly changing discipline of marketing. “With the explosion of communications and globalization of products, marketing is now dramatically different from 10 years ago. My degree has enabled me to do my job better.”

While business travel can play havoc when studying on-campus, studying online meant Alex's extensive travels interstate and overseas didn't interfere. “I could log on anywhere in the world and study by my own timetable.”

Thanks to the advent of technology, he found his online study experience so much more efficient, compared to his days as a part-time undergraduate on campus. “All the resources are now available online, including electronic databases of abstracts, so I didn't have to get to a library and go searching.

I found this far superior and time efficient.” It was the exposure to such a broad range of students from all over the world that stands out for Alex. “Online study gave me the opportunity to collaborate with others from London to India. I didn't experience this as a part-time student on-campus.”

Photographer:
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