

## **How Fine is Online?**

**By**

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Though flexible, electronic study does not match the in-person experience, writes David Wilson.

Old-school university attendance can be a drag. Every morning, you stuff your backpack with books and schlep across town to listen to a mumbling grouch who dates back to the dinosaurs and would rather be doing research. Who needs it?

In our thin-air age of Twitter and text messages, it might make more sense to embrace the charms of internet-based distance learning. "Study online in your own time, anywhere in the world," urge government promotions for the digital learning group Open Universities Australia.

Studying online at your own pace gets easier every year, as ever more universities keen to exploit the e-learning craze concoct online degree programs.

Choosing and committing to one may be less of a leap in the dark than you might think. For one thing, online degrees have been around since the 1990s. For another, many prospective students already run their social lives through Facebook, which was founded by and initially limited to Harvard University students. Distance learning appears to be a logical extension of this.

Education analyst Mick Mortlock, who helped pioneer distance learning at Intel during the '80s, is far from evangelical, however. "The quality of most online education is mediocre. I call it spoonware - it is too dull and not the right tool," Mortlock says.

Demolishing the idea that online education is cutting-edge, he splits the material that you can expect to encounter on a distance degree into four categories. The first robotically presents a series of pages of content, then poses a question. Give the wrong answer and it just sends you back.

The second, fractionally better, learning strategy is interactive text. "Basically, a book has been turned into a computer presentation," he says.

The third is effectively a video that boasts great production values but little content to sustain engagement. Mortlock condemns it as "educational television".

Interactive simulations - the fourth approach - are the "best of the breed", according to Mortlock, who points to a University of Virginia simulation of a frog dissection, which packs the graphic immediacy of a CSI episode.

Otherwise, the picture he paints is discouraging. Distance learning appears irredeemably clunky - a less-inspiring path to knowledge than traditional bricks-and-mortar college attendance.

Organisational psychologist Christopher Shen is also sharply critical about the virtual path. Research shows that people learn and remember material more effectively in a traditional lecture setting rather than through a computer, Shen says.

When glued to a computer, he adds, students are less attuned to sights and sounds of their surroundings, whereas during a lecture, they notice more external data.

Oddly, the physical distractions work in their favour because the information and surroundings are stored together in human memory. The "broader array of cues" enables material to be retrieved far more easily than in distance learning's sterile sphere.

Distance learning has some virtues, however, according to Shen. One is that students control when they read or hear material. "This sense of choice improves engagement," he says.

Better yet, students may naturally choose a time during which they have heightened alertness - an opportunity a lecture timetable denies.

Scott Johnson, the editor of [UniversitiesAndColleges.org](http://UniversitiesAndColleges.org) - a web publication that weighs up the value of online learning - highlights more benefits. For a start, Johnson says, distance learning removes the need to relocate - a blessing to would-be undergraduates stranded in "semi-remote" places where any available campus-based training programs offer scant choice.

Johnson also praises the flexibility distance learning confers. Spared the need to uproot and commute to disruptive campus classes, a student can stay in full-time employment and have more of a family life.

"Learning online opens up many more options," he says.

But he, too, has several reservations. Doubt surrounds the credibility and prestige of an online degree, he says, adding that the authority it exerts varies sharply between professions. In prestigious fields like investment banking and law, which only recruit from top academic institutions, an online degree holds little sway, according to Johnson.

That said, aptitude counts more than prestige in fields such as health care, nursing, information technology and other vocational disciplines. "These employers are more concerned with finding people with the right set of skills than the right pedigree," he says.

"In general, an online degree won't help launch anyone to the upper levels of the corporate world but it can help people with little or no education or job prospects start stable careers with a very respectable salary."

So online degrees clearly serve a purpose and have some job market heft - even if their methodology needs work.

Only when each student can learn as well from a computer as an expert, Mortlock argues, will online education have arrived. That day may be far into the future.

Lists of uni courses at [mycareer .com.au/educationcentre](http://mycareer.com.au/educationcentre)

## OPEN TO ALL POSSIBILITIES

The website for Open Universities Australia ([www.open.edu.au](http://www.open.edu.au)) is irritatingly "sticky"; once you land on the home page it is hard to escape. But OUA claims to open the door to a respected university qualification. An OUA graduate emerges with a degree from a top Australian university "identical to one gained on-campus". OUA

offers fee help and, a la TAFE, offers "bridging units", too.

If, in keeping with the ground-breaking spirit of online degrees, you want to look further afield, try Penn State World Campus ([worldcampus.psu.edu](http://worldcampus.psu.edu)). Penn has offered online degrees since 1998. Today, it offers more than 60 undergraduate, graduate and professional certificate programs; almost 10,000 students from 62 countries are enrolled.

For more options visit [UniversitiesAndColleges.org](http://UniversitiesAndColleges.org), which is equipped with an easy-to-use "quick degree finder".

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