

# Open Courseware Will Alter the Mission and Purpose of Universities

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Can it really be only 10 years since Wikipedia was launched? Back then, the user-generated online encyclopedia boasted a grand total of 19 articles published exclusively in English. It now contains more than 16 million articles (and counting) written in 262 languages and it routinely attracts between 10 and 15 billion page views per month. Compare this with the scraps that fall from Wikipedia's table to *Encyclopedia Britannica* which, after a three-hundred year start and a peerless reputation for quality, currently contains only around 120,000 articles and receives a paltry 100,00 page views per month, even in its new online incarnation.

What has happened to *Encyclopedia Britannica* is a dress rehearsal for what will happen to universities unless they radically and speedily redefine their methods and purpose. Like *Encyclopedia Britannica*, universities are aggregators of knowledge and, like *Britannica*, they are the creation of paid experts. Wikipedia, in contrast, owes its explosive growth to precisely the opposite formula – it is both free and created by anyone and everyone who cares to contribute. The reflex response of subject experts when confronted with such facts is to pour scorn upon the accuracy and reliability of user-generated repositories like *Wikipedia*. But the available evidence simply does not bear this out. In a study published in 2003 by IBM researchers and replicated in 2005 by the journal *Nature*, *Wikipedia* and *Britannica* were found to contain very similar error rates.

A juggernaut resembling *Wikipedia* is now coming at universities in the form of The Open Course Ware (OCW) movement. The idea of open courseware began in the late 1990s when universities were first getting into online learning and hoping to make money out of it. The then President of MIT, Charles Vest, set up a committee to look at how to exploit the internet but after several years' work, the committee concluded that the on-campus experience is intrinsic to university education and that genuine learning occurs best in real time and face-to-face. The report suggested that because such learning would be impossible to replicate online, MIT should abandon its pipe dream. Sometime following publication of the MIT report, however, one of its committee members came up with the wild idea that if MIT were not to sell its course content, it should just give it away.

In 2005, the process of translating MIT open courseware into languages other than English began in earnest, led by a consortium of partners from Japan, China and Universia.net, which reaches Spanish and Portuguese speaking universities. Under the OCW charter, member institutions must commit to publishing, under the institution's name, materials from at least 10 courses in a format that meets prescribed content and quality criteria. While OCW's rise has been slower than *Wikipedia*'s, it is gathering momentum. Beginning with 1 university and 50 courses less than 10 years ago, the OCW consortium today has over 200 member institutions with a course search index that contains around 4,000 courses from 44 sources in 7 languages, and Chinese universities have an additional and even larger OCW program of their own.

Meanwhile, Australian universities continue to pursue a proprietorial approach to education and our academics regard courseware as their intellectual property, as if the information we possess were not more accessible, engaging and, dare I say it, more up-to-date online. As surely as night follows day, the proprietorial view translates into the old-style lecture, with professors and lecturers broadcasting learned pronouncements. This is the stand-and-deliver approach to education and even if the method is embroidered with practicals and interactive tutorials, it is still teacher-focused, one-way, and one-size-fits-all. Another fixture of this old-style learning is the view that students learn best quietly and in private. Sharing notes in an exam hall or collaborating on essays and assignments is forbidden. But such methods are the very antithesis of what has made *Wikipedia* such a tearaway success and what OCW is also beginning to embrace.

To the extent that universities and their agents have simply migrated old fashioned teaching methods into cyberspace, they are living on borrowed time. In the new OCW world, universities will need to reinvent themselves fundamentally and we could start by dispensing altogether with the term 'lecturer'. Why would we continue using a term that actively encourages academics to harangue their students when information is no longer the student's problem. Moreover, with the recent arrival of Web 2.0 technologies and the imminent arrival of the National Broadband Network, social interaction is no longer constrained by space and time. I could have presented similar statistics on the rise of social networking sites to demonstrate that the interchange conducted on campuses can now just as easily be conducted in cyberspace.

Universities that continue to regard user-generated knowledge as inferior to that of experts and treat technology as an adjunct to genuine learning will find it increasingly difficult to compete with the new virtual institutions that offer open courseware without the capital-intensive overheads that campus-based, proprietorial education imposes.

The question for universities will soon become: What is the role of bricks and mortar in a world where students can now live and move and have their being in a network cloud? Could it be that our campuses will be left with only one of their former roles in society – that of meeting places for drinking beer and hanging out with friends? And if you find all of this rather preposterous, then how do you explain what *Wikipedia* has done to *Encyclopedia Britannica*?

The strategy for this university campus at least will be to provide students with a reason to attend other than to acquire information. Our future does indeed lie with places to hang out (otherwise known as 'informal learning spaces') and the regeneration of our residential college system, which provides students with life experiences that form them as people, not merely *inform* them as students.