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Back to school

Technology is changing traditional tertiary education models, and Online Education Services is at the forefront of the industry.

IMAGES JOSEPH FEIL

Since 2011, Online Education Services (OES) has been changing the face of tertiary education. The company presents a fresh approach to traditional education by offering courses that can be taken solely online. Just five years after launching its first offering, OES now has more than 8,000 students enrolled in its 20 undergraduate and postgraduate university courses, and five TAFE diplomas.

According to the CEO of OES, Denice Pitt, the company provides access to tertiary education for people who would otherwise not have the opportunity.

She says, "The student population we work with is skewed towards women; 70 per cent are female, in fact. Approximately 25 per cent live in regional or remote areas, and 24 per cent are from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

"It's a very different market than what you would typically see on campus. The students we work with are mostly older, have work and family commitments, and choose online because they are unwilling or unable to study on campus."

OES works with a vast demographic of students with an average age of 32—much older than the traditional school-leaver aged students found on campus. Given these students are generally older, online education has become a catalyst to advance careers or pursue new career paths. >>



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“Many of the students we work with, are studying because they want a career change or career advancement,” Denice explains, “or they’re at home with children and realise that what they did before is no longer going to fit in with their life. For example, they might start studying a Bachelor of Education to become a primary school teacher to allow increased flexibility for their lifestyle.

“We also hear a lot from students who say they started their career young, in a job they are no longer interested in, and we are able to give them the opportunity to get the skills they need to move into another area.

“One student who recently studied with us always had aspirations to study at university but became pregnant very

young and was not able to pursue her goal. After having five children, she decided it was time to get her degree, and turned to online education because it fit in with her busy life. Not only did she finish her bachelors degree, she has gone on to complete a Masters of Criminology.

“We have many students who are not in the workforce but are determined and capable, and online education is a way they can achieve their educational and career ambitions.”

Part of the reason online education is succeeding as a viable mode of study is due to significant advances in technology, which have made the experience of learning online more connected and social than ever before. Denice says any feelings of isolation

among online students have been significantly reduced because technological advances have created engaging online environments.

“Four years ago, when we looked at where the industry was, it was ready for change. Technology has evolved so quickly. A great example is the iPhone; it was only released to market in 2007 and now it’s a huge part of our lives and it keeps people connected.

“Distance education has been around for a long time,” she continues, “and people sometimes mix up distance education with online education, yet it’s a distinctly different model. We are redesigning on-campus materials for an online classroom where students and teachers collaborate. All the curriculum is constructed specifically to engage online

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- Denice Pitt

learners. Distance education can be more isolating; students are typically sent out an education pack, and so miss out on interaction with peers.

“I think the timing, with advances in technology, has enabled students to feel a social connection through the use of social media and other online tools.”

Having a background in the telecommunications industry, Denice has always been attracted to industries where technology and change has been at the fore. “I am drawn to industries experiencing growth or rapid change,” she explains. “I was in telecommunications just as the industry was being deregulated, so we had the chance to do it differently. Optus was in start-up mode during that ground-breaking time, which was instrumental in driving a lot of my passion for service.

“I am not a status quo sort of person and I wanted to change industries so started looking to get involved in a turnaround business or start-up to bring those skills that are meaningful to a company. The timing was perfect, as OES was a start-up in an industry that was experiencing significant disruption, and the board at the time were confident that we were aligned.”

Moving forward, OES is looking to expand its reach further, especially internationally. Education is considered a major ‘export’ earner for Australia and that is how OES is evolving. “The Government has some great ambitions



for Australian education,” says Denice. “There is a lot of momentum and support to make sure Australian institutions are taken into the Asian market and that we play a big role with accessibility and reach. The online environment really is perfect for that, and far more viable than universities building campuses across Asia.

“Up until very recently, we were only taking Australian citizens as students, as per our client requirements,” Denice explains. “Now we have made it available so that, from this year, we can take offshore enrolments. We are looking towards parts of Asia in particular and will be pushing forward in that market in the future. Australian education has a high reputation for quality, and we want to deliver that Australian quality to the Asian market.”

Denice believes that, not only is OES a great business model for online education but it’s a positive step forward for the Australian tertiary sector as a whole. OES provides opportunities for those who were previously unable to access higher education for many different reasons, and is therefore changing the lives and futures of many.

“We are an entirely student-centric organisation. We don’t assume we know what students want; we actually ask them how we can improve their study experience, and therefore we get to hear their stories.

“Some of the students that study with us talk about how they first thought they were too old, or not capable, and after studying online now have the confidence to know that they can succeed. It reminds us that we are providing valuable opportunities to these students.

“It’s so motivating to know that you can make a difference to someone’s life, and I’m absolutely passionate about what we do and the impact we can have on the lives of others. You spend a lot of time at work and so you have to passionately believe in what you do, and know that your business is making a difference. If you don’t have that, regardless of what your business is—it must make for a very long day! Most of us have to work and like to work—it’s a necessity. So for me it’s important to do the best I can to get the most stimulation, and give the grey matter a work out while doing it.” ■