

10 things you must know before you enrol in an online course



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Last updated: 01 July 2018.

10 THINGS YOU MUST KNOW WHEN BUYING AN ONLINE COURSE

Not all online courses are the same!

Nearly everyone these days is offering an online course, and why not, it's a great way to build your own or your business' income. With modern technology it's so easy to create, host and sell online courses, with no investment in physical resources. While this is great for the consumer it also makes picking the right course for you a bit more difficult.

I've worked in online education since the days when you had to hand code websites, that's over 20 years. I've worked for universities, TAFE and private educators. I've developed courses, written courses, worked as an instructional designer, taught courses and more. I've seen a lot of fads and trends come and go. I'm going to share with you today some of the things I have discovered over the years. This will help you see through the marketing and hype to what is really on offer and to help you decide if it is right for you.

The 10 'must knows' include:

1. Content
2. Assessments
3. Price
4. Refund policies
5. Delivery method
6. Tutor support
7. Accreditation/or not – does it matter?
8. Marketing methodologies to make you buy
9. Business/personality
10. Why do you want to study?

CONTENT

How is the content provided?

There are a wide range of how course content can be provided online. Common methods include:

- Written notes – These may be either in PDF format or embedded as text into the LMS (learning management system) pages. PDF is great because you can download it and save to your local device as well as print easily. Most modern LMS have a function for printing embedded text as well.
- PowerPoint – can be converted to online delivery easily. PowerPoint is not always the best delivery method for online learning. It was originally developed as an aide to presentation.
- Video – Video is a very popular delivery technique. Its great for communicating complex ideas, showing how-to-dos and demonstrating examples. Many online video courses can be little more than a PowerPoint display with someone reading. While this may be frustrating for some students, for those with low literacy levels it can be very effective.
- Audio – Many online university courses will provide an audio recording of a live lecture. Makes sense for them to do so. Can be a great delivery method if you spend long hours driving! Great for students with low literacy however if notes are not supplied they may struggle to make their own.
- Many courses will provide a mixture of embedded videos and audio if they make sense. This is ideal use of technology; however, transcripts are not always provided so if you want printed notes that information may not be included.

You need to consider what style best suits you. Think about your literacy (and numeracy if relevant) as it will have a large impact on what best suits. If you have low literacy, you may be better with a video / audio course that you can watch or listen to. Many students with high literacy get frustrated with video courses and prefer to read written notes. Remember that an audio transcript will not read the same as written notes, the English used is quite different.

Is the content brief, or in-depth?

Will the provider provide you with a free sample?

Any decent provider should happily provide with a free sample or access to a small section of the course, so you try before you buy. If they can't or won't ensure that they will provide with a full refund guarantee after enrolment if you decide that its not the right course for you.

Who wrote the content?

You are entitled to ask who wrote the content. The response will vary considerably depending upon the organization. Course creation can vary from a single subject matter expert (SME) to a whole team including instructional designers, subject matter experts, graphic designers and multimedia who create multiple courses.

So, don't be surprised if you get a bland reply of 'industry experts'. In large intuitions such as TAFE's this is understandable. Smaller intuitions should be able to give you more information and, in some cases, can put you directly in touch with the author.

However, purchasing content from another organization for resale is a very common practice in education. This is because content creation is a very costly and time-consuming process. There isn't anything particularly wrong with this, it just means they may not be in touch with the course creator(s).

ASSESSMENTS

Assessment is a tricky business, and not all students want to be assessed. However, I can honestly say, most learning occurs when you try to apply it. So carefully consider what type of assessment is offered. This isn't so you can avoid having to do any assignments. You really want to be doing them, it's how you are going to learn and learn what you don't know or may have missed.

Who reviews it?

Many MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses) are offered for free, this is manageable in part because they don't pay for tutors to mark your assignments, instead they open it up to peer review. Not surprisingly their completion rate is approximately 2%. If completing your course is important to you I would suggest paying extra for the tutor feedback and support on your assignments. After you've put all that work in it really helps to have a quality tutor give you guidance and feedback.

The personal interaction which comes with this type of tutor support can really make or break the quality of any online course. Despite our technological advances, we are still social creatures.

Also consider the tutor qualifications. These should be publicly available and should be relevant to the course.

Type of Assessments

Common type of assessment includes the following:

Multiple choice questions are common place because they are easy to write and product. They are handy for a quick gauge of how much you've retained. Many schools will use them for you to self-assess yourself, and as part of an exam. This type of assessment does not encourage you to do research or to find your own understanding of a subject.

Written assessment tasks usually involve short answer type questions up to written essays. This gives you an opportunity to do some research to define your answers and also hopefully an opportunity to focus your studies on a particular area of interest to you.

Scenarios/Problem Based Learning is a more project style of assessment. Generally, you will be given a problem or scenario that mimics the real world in providing a situation you may realistically encounter. You will be asked to work through the problem step-by-step and produce a short report at the end.

Practical tasks – a good online course will still direct you to undertake practical tasks.

Quantity of Assessment

I must be honest with you, I am a lazy student. Very lazy. I liked doing university subjects which only had two assessment tasks, I would start them the night before and work till dawn and submit, and generally do ok. But did this help my learning? Not really. If you're like me, you're best doing a course which has assessment tasks for every topic. This will make you engage with ALL the content not just the content which is relevant to the topic.

If you're not like me and are a motivated student, this type of frequent assessment will work for you as well.

Some courses will only have quizzes for you to test your knowledge and this is ok if that's all you are after.

Also are the assignments marked by your tutor properly, it can be very disheartening to put a lot of work into an assignment and just get a tick and flick result. You should at least get some proper feedback and guidance on where you've gone wrong or can improve.

PRICE

Last year I enrolled in an online course, it cost me well over \$2,000 AUD and to be honest I'm still feeling a small amount of resentment for paying that much, mainly because there was no interaction with the principle of the business whose name was used in their promotions. Instead all interaction was with her mother who ran the school but used her daughter's name to promote it. Did I feel a bit ripped off? Yes.

My point is that price is not always an indicator of quality (well, to be exact an indicator of educational quality and outcomes). It doesn't hurt to consider exactly what you are paying for. Legitimate course costs include accreditation (government accreditation is very expensive in Australia), tutoring costs, administrative staff, server costs, software, course development, marketing etc.

You will find that course costs online vary dramatically, from super budget courses on Udemy for \$10 to expensive personality driven courses such as I mentioned earlier. It's not always relevant to the services offered. Take your time and consider what is going to work best for you, compare costs and consider why they are priced differently.

Funding and Subsidies

Many online courses in Australia are valid for government funding/subsidies Universities, TAFEs and RTOs, these are usually for Nationally Accredited Courses from Cert IIIs up to higher degrees.

Currently if you are an Australian Citizen, there are some great government subsidies for Cert IIIs.

VET Student Loans are often available for longer vocational courses – please be aware that you will have to pay this money back so consider your options very carefully. The same applies for HECS-HELP loans for University students.

If the course you want to do is not nationally accredited, and you are unemployed it is possible that your Job Network provider can pay for the course if you can show that it is the best course for your circumstance.

Payment Plans

Courses can be expensive, if you are self-funding ask about flexible payment options. Alternatively, if you can afford it, frequently a discount will be given for upfront payment.

Generally, payment plans do end up costing more in the long run. Colleges accrue considerable administrative costs running payment plans and chasing up missed payments, so they do tend to charge more to cover these costs.

REFUND POLICIES

Together with price, are refund policies. You will find a wide variation in refund policies. Some common refunds offered in the online course marketplace are:

- Full refund if you have not accessed the materials
- Full refund within a specified time.
- Full refund but only after you have completed one or two assessments.
- Partial refunds offered – e.g. keeping an admin fee
- Partial refund offered if you have accessed the materials but decided you don't like it.

Some of these can be a catch 22, if you can't access the materials how will you know if you don't like the course, or what happens if you get sick and can't finish the course? If a time frame is specified, make sure you are clear on how long this is, and what the policies are on course access.

Always make sure there is a refund policy available, it should be upfront and easily accessible. If you don't understand the terms, do ask prior to handing over your money!

DELIVERY METHOD

Online is not just online... What are the options?

Online delivery

Online course delivery has been a thing for over 20 years now, and in that time, not that much has changed other than better computer processes and faster internet mean that video and clickable interaction has become a much bigger component. These two things do not necessary guarantee a better educational outcome. Online courses are housed in what is called an LMS (Learning Management System). There are literally hundreds of different LMS's available, some are better than others, but a lot depends upon how the school has set it up. When you enroll, an account is made for you on the LMS and you will be given a login. When you login here are some things to look for:

- Are support contact details easily found – if you have problems is it easy to access support?
- Can you access your tutor – if you don't already have your tutor's contact details, can you find them easily once you have logged in?
- Can you access your materials easily – sounds silly but is it easy to navigate your way around? Are your course materials presented in a logical order? Do you know where you are in your course?
- Can you download any of the materials? PDF's, transcripts of videos etc. should be downloadable so you have your own local copy to access later, or just because you'd prefer to read it that way.
- Are policies / procedures easy to locate?
- Can you chat with other students – if your course has a set start date this works well, if however, your course accepts enrolments year-round, often there may not be enough overlap to have an effective forum or chat environment.

I know all this sounds basic, but it's important that you can work through your course seamlessly and without having to make sense of the environment. Anything else will just distract you from your studies.

Physical materials

If your course is a particularly practical subject some schools may send out physical materials that you need, or they may require you to buy them at cost from them. Check to make sure that if there are physical materials required that they are included in the course price, or that

you can shop around and buy them yourself at the price you think is best. You should not be restricted to buying materials only from the course provider (especially at a high costs).

Correspondence

This is old school distance education, where you are sent out the printed hard copy material. You print or handwrite your assignments and post them in by snail mail and wait for the response to come back the same way. Pros – great if you have dreadful internet, or for other reasons can't access it all. Not everyone has a computer or wants to type our assignments. Cons – slow. Many schools will charge extra to cover the costs of postage particularly if assignments are sent via express post to speed up the process.

TUTOR SUPPORT

Do you know who your tutor is? Are they qualified? Are they enthusiastic about their subject and sharing their knowledge?

In my experience this is one of the most important aspects of any course, but particularly an online/distance education course. Without it most students (but not all) will not complete their course.

Check to see what support options are provided by the school.

Can you freely contact your tutor with questions about the material/assignments? Some colleges place time limits on how often you can do this, other place no limit. If you call will it be your tutor you speak with?

What type of contact, can you ring and talk to your tutor, or is it by skype or only by email? Any are ok, however think about what works for you, for example if you work full time, email support may be best if it's difficult for you to make calls during the day, or if you have low literacy phone support would be more suitable.

WHEN IS ACCREDITATION IMPORTANT?

According to Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) accreditation is formal confirmation that the course:

- is nationally recognised
- meets an established industry, enterprise, educational, legislative or community need
- provides appropriate competency outcomes and a satisfactory basis for assessment
- meets national quality assurance requirements
- is aligned appropriately to the AQF where it leads to a qualification.

ASQA also stipulates that a course does not have to be accredited to meet an industry, enterprise, educational, legislative or community need.

The accreditation body will be different depending where in the world you are, what industry your course is related to and how many organisations provide accreditation in that sector. Certain courses should however be accredited, and these usually pertain to the medical and legal industries.

Non-Government Accreditation Bodies

Not everything can be a nationally accredited course, there just isn't the scope. The system was tending that way several years ago but has since been tightened up. So, if you want a course in Tarot Reading, it's no longer available as a nationally accredited course. To fill this gap there are many non-government accreditation systems around.

These serve two purposes:

1. To give student an assurance of quality and reputability.
2. To provide students (graduates) with an avenue of membership and access to indemnity insurance. This is obviously not going to apply to many students who just want to pick up a few skills, but for others this is a very important aspect. Many fields in Australia are

not government regulated (such as nutrition and counselling) so this type of accreditation becomes an important pathway for practitioners.

When to choose an accredited course

- When you want to achieve a qualification under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).
- When you are seeking employment or a career that requires a nationally recognised qualification.
- When it is a requirement that you must hold an accredited course qualification to work in a specific industry.

When a non-accredited course is suitable

- When you want to improve or develop your vocational skill set.
- When you are looking to increase your knowledge and expertise in a selected area.
- When you have a business or personal problem that requires solving through further education.
- When you have an interest in a specific area and would like to learn more about it and there are no nationally accredited courses offered.

Accreditation is expensive and unless the provider of your online course applies, receives and maintains accreditation with every organisation around the world they will never achieve complete accreditation everywhere.

So, to answer your question, unless you are completing the online course to become a surgeon or a lawyer chances are your course does not need to be accredited. You are far better off determining if your online course and provider are reputable and provide a quality training experience. This can be achieved by:

- Reputation – testimonials and reviews from other students.
- Visibility – location, number of employees, online presence and international presence.
- Course specifications – length of the course, cost, content and assessments.
- Resources provided – access to tutors, networks and peer support groups.
- Success rates – statistical information showing completion and success rates for previous students.

It is always a good idea to check with your employer, an industry expert or the course provider to determine if the course will give you the skills or certification you require.

MARKETING METHODOLOGIES TO MAKE YOU BUY

Schools need to sell courses, do to this they use marketing. There is nothing wrong with this, but buyer beware. Educate yourself so you don't fall prey to some of these compelling techniques.

- The pretend time frame. Most online courses can accept enrolments year-round (not all), some less-scrupulous schools will generate a fake sense of urgency by claiming that there is only so much time till enrolment ends. It's rare you'd miss out, they don't want to miss out on your money. Having said that, there are many institutions that do have valid enrolment cut-off dates, usually these include Universities and TAFEs, some RTOs may need to work to timeframes as well.
- The pretend enrolment quota. Some schools will pretend they can only take so many students and that places are filling fast. If it's an online course, one tutor can handle many students, so it's not likely to be true.
- Fake or highly selective testimonials. The online marketplace is fast becoming over-saturated with testimonials. Healthy skepticism should be applied. Be aware that the education industry is not immune to fake testimonials. Any good school should collect student feedback at completion of the course and they should be happy to make these available to you, warts n all.
- Fake awards – I have seen this, but only rarely. If a college is claiming awards, or award-winning staff, ask to see what awards they have won.
- Dodgy star ratings. There is nothing to stop a business from writing its own reviews for each of the courses on page. One very well-known online course provider even states "Instead of using a simple lifetime average, **** calculates a course's star rating by considering a number of different factors such as the number of ratings, the age of ratings, and the likelihood of fraudulent ratings." So, they make up the number of stars themselves? Sounds like it. Check to see if the reviews are verified as belonging to real students. If the English and tone is all too repetitive, ask the college for the original feedback forms where possible, or proof of authenticity if it all seems too good to be true.

PERSONALITY DRIVEN COURSES

Often single subject/topic colleges will market based on the personality, experience and expertise of their director. There is nothing wrong with this and it is a very effective marketing strategy to help establish trust and authority to encourage you to enroll. Be sure to check first that you will be able to engage with the person being promoted as the expert and that it's not just a marketing gimmick. Email them and see who replies, this will usually tell you a lot about how it operates.

Often this type of marketing involves a blog and giving away free samples for which you need to give away your name and email address (just like this e-book), what may follow could be a barrage of emails attempting to go keep you engaged in order to convert you to a sale. Again, this can be ok, as many will try to provide you with quality material, but all marketing emails should have an unsubscribe option. Consider if you want to enroll into a school that does not give you this option.

WHY DO YOU WANT TO STUDY?

Last but not least, consider carefully why do you want to study? What do you hope to achieve? Clarity on your side will help you make sure that you end up with the right course.

Making the Decision

You are about to make a significant time and financial investment. Explore your response to these questions before making the decision to purchase any online course.

- Why are you considering THIS course?
- Do you require a new skill set?
- Do you want to solve a business problem?
- Are you just looking to have a little fun?
- What other time commitments do you have that could impact your learning each week?
- What dollar amount are you willing to invest to get the right course to meet your need?
- Have you read the course introductions, and does it match your learning goals?

Return on Investment

Whether you are a business owner, manager or employee you need to consider your return on investment (ROI). What will you get out of this online course, when will you see the benefits and what will that mean for your bottom line? You need to consider the following when selecting your online course:

- How you will measure your ROI; by sales volume, performance reviews, pay increase, revenue increments or getting that dream job.
- You need to insert the course into your business or personal goals. Set deadlines!
- Determine when will you see the benefits from completing this course; Immediately, within a month, by mid-year or in a years' time.

Ensuring a good fit

You should access all the free advice and courses the provider has to offer. This will give you a clear idea of how you respond to their style and delivery mode.

If you love the free stuff then there is a high probability you will enjoy and learn from the online course you have chosen to purchase.

SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETING YOUR ONLINE COURSE

When it comes to online learning we all start out with the best of intentions, as will you. Then your boss asks you to do more overtime, your child wants to start a new sport, your family needs more quality time and your pets need exercise and attention. Add all that to your other weekly commitments and suddenly, your online course gets pushed to the bottom of your to-do list. Well here are some helpful insights into how you can make sure this doesn't become your story:

Environment

Make sure you have a dedicated space where you can go to study and complete your online learning in peace. Ensure other household members know this is your space and it is not to be used for art and craft, researching car parts or set up as a Barbie condo. Keep your work space tidy and organised and ensure you have the equipment you need to complete your course such as; computer, internet connection, stationary, and a filing system.

Requirements

Find out all the online course requirements before you begin. Know exactly when your assessments are due and when each topic should be completed so you can complete the course in an optimal timeframe.

Expectations

What are the online course providers expectations?

Find out exactly what the provider expects from you and when. Determine the level of output that you need to achieve to pass your assessments and receive the certificate of completion. You can do this by carefully reading the course introduction and instructions.

What are your own expectations?

Set some personal goals for your online study, decide when you want to complete each topic or section of the online course. Determine the level of effort you want to put into your learning, do you just want to learn a few things and complete the course at the minimal level or do you want to excel and explore every learning opportunity that is presented as you progress through the online course.

What expectations do you have for your employer, family or other household members?

Stipulate what you expect from your support people at the beginning. They need to know if your study means they will have extra chores, more school pickups, or need to cook dinner every Wednesday and your boss will want to know if you are going to need time off for study and assessments. If you set these expectations at the start then you can work as a team to ensure you succeed in achieving your learning goals.

Connections

Make these early. Contact your designated tutor and introduce yourself. Let them know what you need from them to complete your online course. Join any peer or community groups and start discussions early, participate as much as you can and share ideas and suggestions for successful completion.

Time management

Create a virtual diary, use a paper diary or even use your smartphone calendar, whatever works best for you. Enter in all your assessment due dates, webinar times and any other key information that you need to ensure you meet deadlines. You need to plan out your study routine giving yourself plenty of time to complete the online learning, investigate other resources and produce quality assessments. Set aside a block of time each day or week when you must study. This will keep you focused and help you manage your workload.

Assistance

Ask for help! If you are falling behind, contact your tutor and ask for suggestions about how to get back on track. If you are struggling with the online course content, ask for explanations or other resources to help you understand. Use your peers and networks, there is a wealth of knowledge in a combined student network – access it.

Motivation

Do whatever you can to stay motivated. If you get bored, overwhelmed or lack concentration you limit your chance of successfully completing your online course.

Tips for staying motivated:

- Create an inspiring poster or quote and put it in your study area.
- Write a brief list of the reasons you started the course and display it on your desk as a reminder.
- Eat well and stay hydrated, this will help with your concentration.
- Set small study goals and give yourself a reward or break when you achieve each one.
- Don't set your expectations too high, you will have your good days and bad days, this is normal.

ABOUT CAREERLINE COURSES

Established in 2011, we offer over 400 courses, each designed to solve problems and increase your skill level.

We have qualified tutors who specialise in the course content and are available to you as a resource, mentor and motivator.

Our courses are designed with you in mind. We don't waste time designing courses to tick government boxes, we prepare our courses so they provide real life information based on real life business situations.

Our focus is to provide you with an enjoyable, challenging and rewarding learning experience. To us that means making sure you invest in a product and service that is right for you and that you will be committed to completing.

We have a high success rate with our students because we ensure a good fit right from the start, we support you, we mentor you and we help you to achieve your learning goals.

You can read more about us and our courses here:

<https://www.careerlinecourses.com.au>

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