

The cost of online courses

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Although Covid-19 forced many institutions and schools to change the method of delivery of lessons and courses, online learning had been growing in popularity. In December 2019, [Inside Higher Ed](#) revealed that approximately 35% of all tertiary students in 2018 were enrolled in at least one online course.



And why not? It's more convenient, flexible and accessible for people wanting to upskill themselves. So, why aren't online courses much cheaper?

Online learning vs remote learning

Firstly, we need to distinguish between online and remote learning. Although these terms are often used synonymously in the media, they're not the same thing. Most schools and tertiary institutions turned to Zoom, Skype and similar tools to deliver classes due to country lockdowns, but they didn't suddenly re-create and re-conceptualise their course materials. In many cases, lectures continued by live or pre-recorded videos and students were emailed handouts. This is remote learning. In other words, the internet and its various tools were used as a backup to help facilitate learning of an in-class course.

Courses that are designed to be online – online learning – require a different conceptualisation and approach. A good online course won't be made of hundreds of pages of notes to read and sharing of the lecturer's slides. It also won't be a regular lecture. Instead, online courses typically use a variety of interactive videos, discussions, collaborations, automated quizzes and assignments. Learning also tends to be asynchronous – i.e. not in real time – unlike traditional learning.

How does that explain the cost?

Imagine you're renovating your house. When you install cupboards, carpets/tiles, a bath, etc., you can either re-use/keep the ones that were in the house or replace them. Your budget and needs as well as time influence your option.

Reusing things is obviously cheaper, but not necessarily ideal. It's also less time-consuming as you don't need to shop around for the best deal or the right size and colour. Sure, you might not like that neon green bedroom carpet or the pink bath set, but it does the job. A fresh coat of paint might help it to look better.

Replacing things is more expensive, but it gives you the option of choosing what you want everything to look like. You can make the space work better for you, add that jacuzzi tub you want, or re-design the overall appearance. Of course, this takes time and money.

It's the same for courses.

The remote learning that many people are doing as a temporary measure may have a fresh coat of paint, but the cupboards and carpets of the traditional classroom have been resized for a new room in most instances. In contrast, courses that are designed to run online have been fitted with carefully chosen features to help learners make the necessary connections between course concepts. They don't provide just a list of reading material and tasks to do – that's like showing you where the hardware store is and telling you to build your own house.

So, a higher price means a better course?

The price is influenced by the quality. It's easy to slap content onto a website or into an email, but that doesn't make it a course. Online courses that have been properly conceptualised, designed and developed cost more.

Courses offered by universities have rigorous academic quality measures for all programmes – whether online or face-to-face. This means you're getting the same quality you can expect from a traditional face-to-face course with the convenience of studying from anywhere in the world. It doesn't always mean that you'll have live sessions with a facilitator, but online courses are designed to support this when they're asynchronous.

Remote learning may continue for a while still, but online learning is here to stay. If you're signing up for an online course, don't compromise on the quality in favour of price.

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