

'Million-student campus not far off, UNSW VC predicts'

Ian Jacobs says visits by hundreds of thousands of international and lifelong learners on short courses will transform campus life.

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Universities might welcome as many as 1 million students to their campus in a typical year, with hundreds of thousands of older learners taking courses lasting just one or two weeks, a vice-chancellor has predicted.

Ian Jacobs, president and vice-chancellor of the University of New South Wales, told a symposium on the future of teaching organised by King's College London that higher education institutions would be far busier by 2035, when hybrid "online-offline" courses would be embraced by lifelong learners.

UNSW's Sydney campus now has about 55,000 students, but Professor Jacobs said that he expected as many as 1 million students to be visiting the university in a single year within a few decades.

The UK-born medical academic, who took charge at UNSW in February 2015 after serving as a dean at the University of Manchester and at University College London, predicted that young, full-time undergraduates would be joined on campus by older learners taking courses "in short one- or two-week bursts", with further learning taking place via new online offerings for professionals.

UNSW will invest A\$77 million (£44.6 million) over the next five years to create about 660 online-only and blended learning courses, he said.

Speaking to *Times Higher Education* afterwards, Professor Jacobs said that he expected an "incredible development of digital technology that will make high-quality learning possible".

"We will impart a lot of information online, but you will not be able to learn wholly online," he said. "Students will want a high-quality campus experience, perhaps involving bursts of learning condensed into a few weeks."

Reflecting on his time as a student, Professor Jacobs said that certain tutorials and seminars stood out as outstanding learning experiences and these, he believed, could be replicated as one- or two-week offerings for a mass market.

"If you could scale this, you could compress these things – and find plenty of other things – that could work well as a campus experience," he said.

"You might just have about 30,000 extra students from Australia, but another 200,000 or so students from other countries visiting to update their knowledge," he speculated.

While attracting new cohorts of students would create massive opportunities for students, it was not simply an idealistic vision of lifelong learning, insisted Professor Jacobs, a leading researcher in women's health and cancer.

This type of new learning was essential because workers of the future will need to update their skills and subject understanding regularly, he said.

Professor Jacobs claimed that a doubling of knowledge in medical science was now occurring roughly every 10 weeks, whereas such a doubling took place only every three and a half years in 2010, and every 25 years in 1950.

“Given the rate at which knowledge is expanding, and how jobs are changing, I believe that student numbers can be expanded in this way,” he said.

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Professor Ian Jacobs is the President and Vice-Chancellor of UNSW Sydney.