

# U.S. Plans Global Network of Free Online Courses

Coursera, a California-based venture that has enrolled five million students in its free online courses, announced on Thursday a partnership with the United States government to create “learning hubs” around the world where students can go to get Internet access to free courses supplemented by weekly in-person class discussions with local teachers or facilitators.

The learning hubs represent a new stage in the evolution of massive open online courses, or MOOCs, and address two issues: the lack of reliable Internet access in some countries, and the growing conviction that students do better if they can discuss course materials, and meet at least occasionally with a teacher or facilitator.

“Our mission is education for everyone, and we’ve seen that when we can bring a community of learners together with a facilitator or teacher who can engage the students, it enhances the learning experience and increases the completion rate,” said Lila Ibrahim, the president of [Coursera](#). “It will vary with the location and the organization we’re working with, but we want to bring in some teacher or facilitator who can be the glue for the class.”

Early this year, using courses from Coursera and other online providers, the State Department ran a pilot program, asking embassies and consulates and others in places funded by the United States to open space where people could take free online courses in priority fields, including science and technology subjects, Americana and entrepreneurship.

“Some of them took it above and beyond, and decided to host facilitated discussions with the courses,” said Meghann Curtis, the State Department’s deputy assistant secretary for academic programs. “Over the summer, when we looked at the success stories, we identified facilitated discussions as something that seemed to work.”

Coursera is joining forces with the State Department’s MOOC Camp Initiative, now operating in 40 countries — about half using Coursera courses, and the other half

courses from such providers as [edX](#) and [Open Yale](#), whose courses are also available free on the Internet. But beyond having its courses used, Coursera is taking an active role in the project.

“We have a list of MOOCs from different providers that we suggest, but Coursera has had a unique interest in working with us to collect the data to understand the learning outcomes from facilitated discussions, and has given us additional materials to give out to the facilitators,” Ms. Curtis said.

The classes are small, some with only 15 students and none with the hundreds or thousands of students who enroll online.

In a pilot program in Bolivia, Korea and Indonesia, Ms. Ibrahim said, the completion rate for those in classes that met for discussion once a week — and provided access to career services, another part of the pilot — was 40 percent, compared with only 10 percent of those who worked online only.

For the State Department, Ms. Curtis said, the appeal of the MOOCs is that they can be used to reach students anywhere, exposing them to American universities and college-level discussion, and perhaps spurring a desire to study in the United States.

Instruction in the classes is in English, she said, and neither the facilitators nor the MOOC providers are getting paid. Many facilitators are foreign service officers, retired teachers, or those who had a Fulbright or other travel grant.

Both Coursera, the largest MOOC provider, and edX, the nonprofit Harvard-MIT venture that is the second largest, began two years ago by offering wholly online courses, but are now working with universities to offer blended, or hybrid, courses. Both are also working with a growing number of overseas partners, including universities in Australia, Switzerland, China and elsewhere, sometimes with courses offered in languages other than English.

In October edX announced that it would be working with the French higher education minister to offer online courses in France, and that its platform had also

been chosen to power China's new online learning portal, Xuetaangx. EdX is also working with the International Monetary Fund to offer training.

Coursera, which now has 100 university partners, has developed a network of translators who are making the materials in some courses available in Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Kazakh, Portuguese, Russian, Turkish and Ukrainian.

Increasingly, though, American MOOC providers are facing competition from a growing crop of foreign MOOC providers, such as Germany's Iversity and Brazil's Veduca.

Along with the State Department, Coursera's partners for the learning hubs include the University of Trinidad and Tobago, Overcoming Faith Academy Kenya, Digital October, Bluebells School International and Lady Sriram College, Learning Links Foundation and Tapthetech.org.