UniSA is throwing open the online doors to fresh ideas

BERNARD LANE

"THE best analogy is that it's a private social network, you're invited like members of a club," says David Lloyd, University of South Australia vice-chancellor.

"UniJam is different from the familiar strategic plan sweatshop or talkfest. On May 29-30, there will be online forums, chat sessions and polls to generate ideas about the university's future. Lloyd says it's an exercise in "collaborative innovation" and will be thrown open to 35,000 students, 6000 staff and thousands of others with a stake in the university, including business and alums.

Which means a tsunami of information and opinions. "There's clever computing behind (uniJam) — it sifts through the ideas and trends in the conversation and pulls out the key points," Lloyd says.

He says it is the first time a university anywhere in the world has used jam technology for planning. Developed by IBM, the technology has been adopted by NATO, the EU and Nokia.

"It's crowd-sourcing, brainstorming," Lloyd says. "This is all out in the open — everyone gets to see what everyone else says."

Topics to provoke discussion include what it's like being a student, how it could be made better, ideal spaces and buildings on campus, the content of courses and how it's delivered, and the qualities to be expected of a graduate. Lloyd says it's a genuine attempt to find new ideas and make changes.

"When IBM did an innovation jam, they came up with new internal business," he says. Lloyd is especially keen to listen to what employers have to say about how the curriculum can keep up with industry needs.

Luke Pearce, a first-year physiotherapy student at UniSA, is one of the "jambassadors" paid to generate ideas and share the plight of students signing up for the event.

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DAVID LLOYD

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA VICE-CHANCELLOR

"He says he is by nature keen to be involved whenever he has a chance," he says. Lloyd is especially keen to listen to what employers have to say about how the curriculum can keep up with industry needs.

We set to change face of study

THE first uniJam is timely because the online environment may be changing the very nature of universities, says internet pioneer Vint Cerf.

In a video posted on the UniSA website, Google's chief Internet evangelist sets out some of the scenarios worth discussing at the Adelaide-hosted uniJam event.

One possibility, he says, is an "inversion" of classroom practice.

"Instead of coming into the class to hear a lecture and take notes (students) will watch the lectures possibly more than once, and when they come into a classroom they are there to do problem-solving and to learn from each other," says Cerf.

As well, he says uniJam is an opportunity to consider what the technology of massive online courses will do to university economics. "In the normal university classroom environment there is a limit to the number of students who can participate," he says.

"As we think about courses that are attended by hundreds of thousands of students, it's possible that the cost per student could drop pretty dramatically."

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