

# New generation wired for study

Tech-savvy students are seeking new ways to learn — and universities are responding to the challenge, reports **Benjamin Preiss.**

**C**OURTNEY Stead is a regular visitor to RMIT's Swanston Library but she has little interest in borrowing books. Three weeks into the first semester, the first year criminal justice student has yet to borrow a volume — and has not even learnt how to do it.

On a midweek afternoon Ms Stead and a small group of students have reserved a library study room to work on an assignment. They sit around a computer that is connected to a flat-panel TV while searching for pictures on newspaper websites that they will paste into a multimedia project.

Laptops, USB sticks and mobile phones are scattered across the table.

At the end of the session one of the students books the room again using her mobile phone.

Digital and wireless technologies are second nature for these tech-savvy students and universities are fast responding to their needs. Lecturers now answer students' questions in class via SMS. Students can download their lectures before going to class. TAFE's are developing computer games as educational tools.

Ms Stead, 21, who hopes to become a federal police officer, takes her iPad to university so she can download course material. "The slideshows for our lectures get uploaded before each lecture," she says. "We can read through them beforehand."

During peak times it is standing room only on the bustling fifth floor of the Swanston Library, but few students will leave with books.

Instead they huddle around laptops, tap into the wireless internet and study in groups.

RMIT's chief librarian, Craig Anderson, has seen a dramatic shift in how students use the library in the eight years he has worked there. He says about 50 per cent of students who visit the library come to borrow books. About a year ago the library moved its academic journals to a closed storage site in Bundoora, which the

students can access through an online database. Other Victorian universities have followed suit.

"The journals are hardly even missed," Mr Anderson says.

Mr Anderson, who is working on a PhD about online education, says young undergraduate students have grown up with technology and expect easy access to lectures and study materials online. He says early concerns that studying via the internet would compromise the university experience or diminish students' quality of education have failed to materialise.

Students who study online, he says, generally report high levels of satisfaction with their courses compared with students who study on campus. "It can be higher in some cases."

## 4 Social networking is all about making connections and bringing people together. 7

**GILLY SALMON, pro-vice chancellor, Swinburne University**  
learning transformation, Swinburne University

Ms Stead says she understands the lectures better when she downloads the class notes first. However, studying entirely online offers little appeal. "I definitely prefer the face-to-face time," she says.

Fellow student of criminal justice Catherine Johnstone, 40, says few undergraduate students have the discipline to study without attending lectures. She believes accessing online course material can enhance the campus experience, but cannot replace it.

Ms Johnstone completed a Bachelor of Arts at Western Australia's University of Notre Dame and watched many students struggle when they tried to study solely online. "When it came to preparing for essays and exams, they had to do all of the work on their own on the side," she says. "They wouldn't get the scores. They needed to re-sit exams."

Monash University deputy vice-chancellor Adam Shoemaker believes posting course materials online encourages students to attend lectures. "Rather than seeing e-learning as a negative feature



Libraries such as RMIT's (above) are being transformed for tech-savvy users such as Courtney Stead (below, right). Stefan Schutt and Dale Linegar (below, left) deploy video game-style technology at VU. PICTURES: EDDIE JIM

universities such as Harvard and Stanford.

Posting lectures online can help students to keep up rather than dropping out because they have fallen behind.

"That's the biggest challenge we face in first year — dealing with students' paid work commitments in semester," he says.

Dr Hoxley says he will not change his lecture style despite his huge new audience. But he acknowledges that iTunes U presents challenges to lecturers. "The cultural context is really important, even for physics," he says. "If we're colloquial that might be really useful for some students but it might be alienating for others."

Victoria University, meanwhile, is using digital tools inspired by consumer technology. It is deploying video game-style technology in its Certificate II in construction pre-apprenticeship course to entice students who typically resist studying.

The three-dimensional program, TradeSim, simulates a construction site. The students have to identify workplace hazards using the computer program.

VU research fellow Stefan Schutt says many pre-apprenticeship students may struggle with written work but respond well to the three-dimensional program.

"A lot of them are gamers at home so they can relate to it a lot more easily," he says.

"They've actually worked through their smokes and lunch breaks, which is unheard of for young guys."

RMIT's Craig Anderson agrees that digital tools are helping to attract students to university campuses.

Online study has opened up tertiary education to a set of students for whom a degree was previously impossible.

"The big expansion in higher education now is to non-traditional groups. People that didn't go to university before," he says. "They're working full-time jobs, they have families. They can study at their own time, at their own pace. That can lead to higher satisfaction."

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Professor Shoemaker says using web tools has helped to raise student satisfaction levels and average marks have also increased.

Monash University offers some courses solely online, but Professor Shoemaker says this is more appropriate for students completing masters degrees.

Meanwhile Swinburne University is spruiking the benefits of online study. This year it launched a new online degree program, which is a joint venture with internet job search company SEEK.

The university will offer degrees online in business, marketing, communications, psychology, information systems and public relations. Gilly Salmon, Swinburne University's pro-vice chancellor

of learning transformation, believes undergraduates still need to come to campus. But online education makes university degrees attainable for full-time workers and parents who lack the time to study on

campus. "It's a whole range of choices that people haven't had before," she says.

Social media can help online students and staff to build strong relationships, she says.

"If you're in a face-to-face situation there's a limited amount of time and you're competing for attention," she says. "Social networking is all about making connections and bringing people together."

Consumer technology is also helping universities to reach an international audience. La Trobe University was among the first to allow web users to download lectures free on Apple's iTunes store.

La Trobe physics lecturer David Hoxley's classes feature prominently on the iTunes store. His lectures sit alongside others from renowned

