

FEATURE

Online study is a click-fix

Technology provides new learning options, writes **Sue White**.

Remember when university study meant yawning your way through a lecture that was inconveniently scheduled at 8am on a Monday, or 4pm on a Friday? Those days are gone.

Today's training is delivered anywhere, any time, as universities, workplaces and registered training organisations (RTOs) now offer online training in everything from make-up diplomas to master's degrees.

While it's not surprising that students in regional areas would be interested in online training (just one reason RTOs were so keen on the NBN rollout), the take-up of online study is also coming from those who, theoretically, could attend a class in person.

"I'm living in Melbourne, but I'm studying my bachelor of health science online through Deakin University's Dandenong Learning Hub," a student and business owner Kim Watson, says.

"I'm self-employed [Watson works as a fitness trainer and health coach], and this way I can learn in my own time."

Watson downloads lectures, interacts with other students in an online classroom, and occasionally "attends" time-specific online tutorials.

"The tutor runs the session but everyone contributes," she says. "There are even emoticons you can use - if you feel puzzled there's a face that looks a bit confused."

It's all part of the new world of training, a field those inside the industry say is evolving rapidly.

"In the past few years we've particularly seen a shift in thinking,"



Screen test ... **Melissa Luke (left) tutors a beauty therapy course online.**

says the director of Ideas Lab, Bruce Dixon, who consults with training providers, schools and companies on technology in education.

It also seems boundaries of what, where and how we study are being pushed with increasing frequency at home and abroad. In the US, for instance, Stanford University and MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) are experimenting with MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses; Stanford's free MOOC on artificial intelligence attracted more than 150,000 applicants), and organisations such as Skillshare are working hard at turning everyone into an educator by giving community education an online face.

In Australia, Open Universities Australia has achieved year-on-year growth of between 28 per cent and 36 per cent annually since 2005 (except for a smaller boost in 2008), and behind the scenes, developers of online training environments are busier than ever.

The general manager of CADRE design, David Hegarty, says the

business of developing e-learning for everyone from universities to government, pharma, mining and finance is growing.

"The market has also matured. We used to see mainly demand for simple compliance courses; now we have clients wanting to address key values and behaviours across their whole organisation," Hegarty says.

The result is more courses, along with more-sophisticated learning design.

"Any content developed for government or large corporates is required to meet [WCAG 2] accessibility standards," he says. "For us, this has meant moving away from using Flash, and developing similar interactivity in an HTML environment instead."

But while technology has changed, people haven't.

Many training providers understand that a high proportion of students still want to connect in person. Enter blended delivery: a course presented mostly online, with the occasional face-to-face session.

"It's very popular at the moment," Dixon says.

CADRE's Hegarty agrees.

"The definition of 'blended learning' has evolved from being just the combination of face-to-face training and e-learning. Now it can include peer-to-peer, social media and virtual classrooms as well as traditional online and face-to-face," he says.

It's something Mellissa Luke, from the Australian National College of Beauty (ANCB), knows well.

The online distance-education tutor teaches a diploma of beauty therapy in blended delivery (mostly online, with one six-day face-to-face intensive with each study block).

It's proven hugely popular.

"I always knew there was demand for the industry to offer flexible study, but we have been very surprised by the growth this year," Luke says.

More than 350 students took up the online option in 2012, and 2013 numbers are similarly strong.

For Luke, the key is ensuring content is interactive and instructional. "At the start of every study block, students receive a kit in the mail - it could be a waxing kit or a facial kit," she says.

"They then learn by watching the videos of our treatments online, using notes we've provided, and a friend or family member as their model."

The college also uses technology to best effect when giving feedback.

"We incorporate webcams and Skype," Luke says.

"If a student is struggling with a practical component, I can watch them do the treatment and correct them, or they can watch me."

Even exam-day tension might be a thing of the past.

"Students can come to the college for practical assessment, or video themselves and upload it to a [secure] YouTube site," Luke says.