



# Aurora College clicks together

*ET Staff*



In many ways it was time that Aurora College happened. While the NSW virtual selective school enables gifted students from remote parts of the state access to accelerated course work and subjects that aren't available at their local schools, Aurora College is also an expression of how much can be done with readily available software and gives more than one hint as to how education might be delivered in the future.

It is very early days yet, the first students logged on in February, but what has quickly become apparent is the ease with which Aurora College has got itself up and running, 160 students from far flung parts of the state have been accessing subjects from Aurora without any real issues reported once the switch was flicked, technologically speaking anyway.

Principal Chris Robertson says that the smoothness that characterised the school's launch was due to the robustness of the software Aurora selected and the NSW Department of Education's network.

As was envisaged, students log on according to a timetable and a class of around 15 is hosted using conferencing software. Subjects from Maths and Science to English are delivered in a way that isn't that different to a regular class, just virtual.

Aurora College emphasises collaboration, encouraging students to form friendships online and harness the technology to communicate among themselves and work on projects together. The friendships developed in the virtual space are reinforced with a twice-yearly residential school program so the students can meet face to face.

Its early success points to the comfort which students have with virtual environments and their willingness to collaborate and form relationships with others almost completely online.

"Most young people are great online communicators, we are seeking to create great online collaborators.

"Aurora is unique in its delivery of curriculum online in a synchronous way. It's very important that advanced students are part of a like-minded cohort and are able to communicate and exchange ideas, learning from each other," Robertson says.

The school was established in line with the NSW Education Department's Rural and Remote Education Blueprint. That document acknowledged that students in remote areas suffered a deficit in education opportunities as compared to those in metropolitan areas.

Key to addressing that deficit is Aurora's

focus on providing students with access to professionals working in their area of interest.

"We sought to make a connection between the classroom and the workplace, it's an area where rural and remote students are at a disadvantage in that accessing mentors is impeded by their location."

To enrol in Aurora College a student must attend a NSW government high school. Admission for Years 7-10 is via the NSW selective school test while Year 11-12 students are free to apply to any of the classes that Aurora offers.

"The Year 7-10 students are given a condensed and enriched curriculum, and for Year 11s and 12s our focus is providing courses that might not be available in their schools."

Aurora makes accelerated Maths, English and Science available to Year 7-10s and Agriculture, Chemistry, Economics and Physics and three levels of English and Maths (2 unit, extension 1 and 2) available to Years 11 and 12.

Aurora's teachers were recruited through expressions of interest. Their teaching loads at their existing schools were reduced so that they could teach an Aurora College class and all were required to undergo training and additional ongoing professional development.

The teachers were given training on the

various software packages but Aurora found students were able to get up to speed very quickly with minimal instruction.

An essential component has been the technology, which will be familiar to anyone in education, Microsoft Office 365, Adobe conferencing software, Edmodo and Moodle collaborative learning management systems.

Microsoft 365, in particular, provides several features that are vital to establishing a culture of collaboration at Aurora College.

Content-wise there is an ocean of resources and material available through Moodle and Edmodo as well as those packages' document management, assessment and general learning management system features.

Aurora College also has its own instance of the Equella digital repository where the college's collection of teaching and learning resources is housed. This, and other collections are accessed by students and staff through the Oliver digital school library. Aurora is one of the first schools in the state to use this system and among a number of standout uses is the access it provides to low cost or free ebooks and texts..

Aurora also encourages the use of the excellent Open University site, which hosts a plethora of content for students to explore.

"Planning and managing online collaboration is a big part of what we do, we require that our



*Taken at the official launch of the school: L-R Deputy Premier Troy Grant and Minister for Education, Adrian Piccoli at Dubbo College South Campus, Chris Robertson Principal and Ashwini Manorathan (a Year 10 student studying with Aurora).*

students work together, it helps with the sense of physical and intellectual isolation that some of our students have to contend with. It may well

be that Aurora is the first of other similar virtual schools," Chris Robertson says.

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