

# A CLASSROOM NOT AS WE KNOW IT



● Students from the Diploma of Business (Enterprise) enjoy the deinstitutionalised setting of the Terrain – one of VU's new learning spaces of the future.

Oversized beanbags replace chairs, writable walls and floors turn entire rooms into a giant canvas to unleash ideas, and screens with high-definition immersive video open classrooms to the world. Welcome to VU's Learning Spaces of the Future.

## ANN MARIE ANGEBRANDT

**W**HEN THE STUDENTS in Victoria University's Diploma of Business (Enterprise) walk into their classroom, there are no desks, chairs or paper. In fact, their newly built 'learning space' at Footscray Nicholson Campus looks like it belongs more in a funky youth centre than at a university.

The multi-platform Terrain room, with its oversized black beanbags, low tables, interactive screens and colourful cylinder-shaped chairs is one of a growing number of VU's rejuvenated physical spaces that have transformed dreary classrooms, libraries and lecture theatres into creative and technology-rich environments.

The 20 students in this new diploma-into-degree program are among the first at the University to be

involved not just in an innovative environment, but also in a whole new approach to learning. Dubbed the 'Learning Spaces of the Future' project, the approach involves less teacher talk, more online learning through videos, WebCT, and discussion boards, and plenty of collaboration with classmates.

Amanda Achterberg, Associate Dean, Learning Teaching and Students says the new approach gives students more responsibility for their own learning. It also develops skills in problem-solving, teamwork, critical thinking, curiosity and leadership – all essential for a 21st century student heading to the modern workplace.

"We're creating an environment for participation and collaboration that emphasises process rather than product," Achterberg says. "Today more than ever, the physical environment is an important component of the way students learn and interact."

Students in the trial project say they're enjoying the deinstitutionalised setting of the Terrain for their course.

"It's relaxing and more social than any classroom I've ever been in," says 18-year-old Katherine Delia. "It feels just like home."

The emphasis on 'blended delivery' – a combination of face-to-face and technology-based teaching – allows students to interact remotely from anywhere, and will be a major feature once the national broadband system is rolled out. VU will soon trial the approach in other selected courses at its campuses at Footscray Park, Melton and Werribee, aiming it especially at students whose learning styles work best outside traditional classroom walls.

In addition to adding more high-tech aspects to its next generation of teaching spaces, ideas such as using whiteboard paint on classroom walls, desks and even floors are also aimed at encouraging creativity in students and educators.

VU Innovation Architect David Cummings says rejuvenating the University's physical spaces started several years ago with the transformation of campus libraries into 'learning commons' – integrated neighbourhoods of services that include career advice, learning and IT support, and academic resources all built in a relaxed, lounge-like setting to encourage informal learning.

"We know students of today have very different learning styles and we want to provide them with spaces that are more convivial and conducive to learning," Cummings says.

The University has started on a program to build dozens of other student-centred classrooms and lecture theatres across all campuses. Some that have already been built include:

- Brightly coloured professional development suites with video conferencing that allow business students at Footscray Park and City Flinders Campuses to work in a simulated office environment directly with clients.
- Collaborative teaching spaces with multiple projectors, video-conferencing systems and technology-embedded desks at Footscray Park that can transmit and project student work onto multiple presentation screens.
- A nursing lab at St Albans Campus that contains state-of-the-art technology including live video streaming to simulate the conditions of a real hospital. 