Ridley Melbourne is developing a world-class online degree program that will be available from Semester 1, 2015.

A key initiative in Ridley’s 2014-2018 five-year strategy is the development of world-class online study programs. The subject of online theological study brings out strong reactions from many people. Some think it’s a huge opportunity. The digital revolution, they say, needs to be embraced. Christians have always worked hard at finding new ways of communicating the good news of the gospel.

Others are fearful that online study will water down the experience of face-to-face teaching and learning. Won’t students simply be content to read the material and do their assignments on their own?

The Ridley Board and Faculty remain committed to the on-campus study experience. Improving our face-to-face teaching and formation receives our ongoing attention. But we are also committed to delivering online study that serves students well and does justice to our values of studying in community and the formation of godly character and ministry skills. We see great potential in bringing first-class Ridley training to people who are unable to attend our campus, such as those in regional and remote Australia.

There are actually several key ingredients to providing excellent online study. These include great lecturers and content, well-produced video, engaging instructional design and properly trained online tutors.

Of course, all of this costs considerable money. In round numbers Ridley is spending $1 million over the five years to produce the new Ridley Online. Half of this needed to be raised before we proceeded. I am delighted to report that by God’s grace we are close to meeting this target, thanks to generous donors who have partnered with us.

Currently I am in the midst of developing the materials for an online unit on the exegesis of the Greek text of 1 Corinthians. Working with our educational designer and our creative team of video and graphic designers has been a wonderful experience. Not only am I sure that the unit will be good educationally but thinking through the task of teaching online has also brought unintended benefits in relation to my approach to classroom teaching.

I am personally convinced that Ridley Online will bring great blessings to many people and that it will be a significant part of the College’s contribution to the cause of Christ for many years to come.

Rev Dr Brian Rosner
Principal
Growing as a Christian While Learning Online

Educational Designer, Diane Hockridge talks about the spiritual formation challenges and opportunities that online learning presents for students & their mentors.

**SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

Diane Hockridge  I  Educational Designer, Ridley Melbourne

Until recently, theological education in Australia has been primarily a campus-based experience. The physical gathering of students and teachers together provides fantastic opportunities to build a community of learners where Christ-like character can be modelled, and where students can be guided, mentored and encouraged in their spiritual formation.

Over the next five years Ridley plans to substantially expand the number of subjects and courses we make available online. As we do so, a question that commonly arises is “What about spiritual formation?”

As we develop our online courses and formation programs, there is a great deal of expertise in good practice we can draw on for helping students to learn at a distance and for developing learning communities. We should remember too that distance education also has strong biblical credentials, the apostle Paul was an excellent distance educator.

As we think about formation we are considering how we can help our students grow in Christ-like character and minister to others in these newer digital spaces and communities.

Our task is to work out how we can assist our students to both learn content and to grow spiritually, integrating their learning with life and ministry practice.

We are at a point in time where developments in web-based technologies and social media have already substantially changed the educational experience and expectations of learners and teachers. Our students and those they minister to are now communicating, accessing resources, and learning in many different ways, using an increasing array of technologies.

Our online courses won't be just a collection of individual subjects. We are developing a three-pronged approach to formation which will be embedded in the online program.

This will include:
- guided spiritual formation subjects;
- guided practical experience through learning in context with partner churches and ministry organisations;
- individual mentoring, which will provide space for seeking direction, for personal application and for critical reflection on learning and managing challenges of ministry.

When it comes to formation in theological education I think we need to be intentional and humble. Intentional because we don't want to assume that formation will just happen around the edges of what we do. Rather we seek to develop a clear strategy that intentionally addresses student formation in all that we do, whether on campus or online. And humble because we recognise that a person’s spiritual formation is a lifelong process, guided by God through his Word, his Spirit and his people, in a myriad of connections, encounters and experiences. An individual's formal theological education experience is just one element of this, which we at Ridley have an opportunity to contribute to.

Diane is completing a PhD in Education in which she is exploring learning design for formational learning in online theological education.
Creating a Unique Online Learning Experience

To offer students the very best in theological education, no matter where they are in the world, Ridley is drawing on a wide range of expertise.

Ridley Online provides world-class theological education, designed to offer you a unique online learning experience.

Ridley is a busy and exciting place, especially of late with a steady stream of leading international scholars visiting the College.

These scholars have come to Ridley to take part in the Ridley community, give public lectures and assist in the development of Ridley Online. “If Ridley is going to develop a world-class online degree program, then it needs the world’s best scholars”, says Ridley Vice-Principal, Tim Foster. “We want our students to be exposed to the teaching of the same leading academics who write the textbooks”, he says.

Of course, some of these academics are on the Ridley faculty, including Michael Bird, Brian Rosner and Andy Abernethy (who is now at Wheaton). International guests have included Craig Blomberg (Denver Seminary, Colorado), Darrell Bock (Dallas Theological Seminary), Mariam Kamell (Regent College, Vancouver), and former Ridley Principal Graham Cole (Beeson Divinity School). Next year we have John Walton and Lynn Cohick (Wheaton College, Illinois) scheduled.

These scholars have been working with Ridley faculty and our Educational Designer, Diane Hockridge, to develop engaging learning activities which capitalise on the opportunities of online study.

Diane Hockridge says, “The online environment is completely different to the classroom. It is no use recording a lecture in a classroom and putting it online.”

All this is delivered on a customised online learning platform that is interesting and simple to navigate and gives easy access to all these learning tools.

However, development is only half the task. The quality of the delivery and support of the lessons are also important. Material is delivered by theologically qualified tutors, usually Ridley faculty, who have been trained in online learning. Tutors facilitate online forums and provide feedback as well as monitoring student progress and marking assessment.

Lessons are presented on a customised learning platform that is simple to navigate with easy access to learning tools.

There are a variety of activities & quality multimedia presentations so the learning experience is clear, interesting and engaging.

Your Christian character is developed through a mentoring program that includes guided reflection which is integrated into your ministry setting.

The program also seeks to capitalise on the student’s own ministry context. Many assessments require the student to apply their learning to their ministry situation ensuring their learning remains grounded. Guided Spiritual Formation provides a framework for spiritual growth through mentoring and pastoral experience, while Field Education uses the student’s ministry context to build key practical ministry skills.

One student taking a pilot program this semester commented on the new program, “I have done online subjects at [two other colleges]. This is so far by far the best experience, because you have the best online system. You can’t beat video, awesome enriched transcripts, and the wonderful forums.”

We have a long way to go, but are off to a good start.

www.ridley.edu.au/online
Bundaberg is a rural town in Queensland, north of the Sunshine Coast. One of our distance students, Rob Edwards, is finishing up his Graduate Diploma of Divinity there. Rob is a fulltime anaesthetist with a family of 4 (soon to be 5) and has a heart for ministry in his local church.

Says Rob, of his decision to study online, “I preached occasionally at my church and wanted more knowledge, so that I could preach with more confidence”. This posed a challenge however, as he did not want to leave his church or home to study. “Ministry training usually takes you out of regional centres”, says Rob “I wanted to develop my ministry without leaving the place that I serve”.

That is when Rob discovered Ridley Online. “The experience has been brilliant,” he says. “I can do it whenever - at night, at home”. He enjoys the exchange of studying online. “Most interaction is with the students. The lecturers are there, but they let the students speak”.

One of Rob’s favourite aspects of studying online is the forums. “The online forum structure facilitates discussion really effectively,” he says. “At the end of each week, I have to prepare a seminar on the topic we have been learning about. You are not allowed to see what other seminars students have prepared until you have posted yours. Then you can respond to others”.

Andrew Malone, Dean of Online Learning at Ridley says that “forums not only encourage students to interact with and learn from each other, they also blossom into extended, extra-curricular conversation about life and ministry. They have proven so crucial to education and formation that they are one of the essential ingredients we are including as we design and deliver the new generation of Ridley Online classes.”

Rob has found the forum experience helpful in fine-tuning his beliefs as a Christian. “I approach everything sceptically,” he says, “I want to know how it stacks up. Being in an online environment where you are pushed to consider your understanding is one I love”.

Rob noticed this particularly in Ridley’s approach to students. “Ridley has an open philosophy on training” he says, “People come from a number of different backgrounds and this exposed me to different viewpoints. It has forced me to evaluate my own understanding, which means that in some areas my theology tightened, but in others it broadened”.

Despite studying in Bundaberg Rob never felt too far from Ridley’s facilities, particularly the Leon Morris Library. “As a distance student the library was a great resource”, says Rob. “I borrowed a number of books for my assignments. I found what I wanted on the online catalogue and sent through my request for next day delivery. It was so easy and so quick, probably easier than going to the library”.

As he finishes his last diploma subject, Rob already knows how useful his studies have been – and will be, in future. “I plan to continue to preach fairly regularly at my church and run a Bible study,” says Rob. “I enjoy studying but after this semester I think it’s time for a break. My children have never known me not to study!”