



WA teens get pro tools to probe space

REBECCA LE MAY • AAP • JUNE 10, 2013 7:11PM

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HIGH school students in Western Australia are getting credit at the renowned Harvard University for observations they make about astronomical objects under a ground-breaking education program.

Paul Luckas, who manages the SPIRIT program at the University of Western Australia (UWA), made attendees to a recent corporate briefing wish they were back at high school when he described the kind of cutting edge research the teens were undertaking.

They not only have access to the same tools used by professional astronomers - accessing robotic telescopes via the Internet - but can submit data and images they've collected to tertiary institutions and have notable results published in journals.

Some students had taken stunning photos of nebulae, while others had tracked the position, shape and speed of asteroids.

"We've had students actually contribute publishable results," Mr Lukas told an AmCham briefing.

"We've had groups of students come in and do minor planet astrometry, which is a field where students measure the position of asteroids very accurately and then submit results to the Minor Planet Centre at Harvard University and get credit for their observations.

"So we have students in high school getting their names in peer review publications along with professional academics, which is really quite exciting."

Mr Luckas said the program got young people switched on to astronomy, with a view to them servicing the growing radio-astronomy scene in the radio-quiet Mid-West region of WA, where the Square Kilometre Array (a radio telescope in development in Australia and South Africa) is gaining momentum through precursor projects.

The SPIRIT program is a collaboration between UWA, the International Centre for Radio Astronomy Research and the WA Department of Education's SPICE program.