

Tech tips for term time

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Over the next month or so, high school and college students across the world will return to the classroom or begin higher education courses for the first time.

In the past they would have taken pens, paper and textbooks but today's backpacks are laden with laptops, smartphones and other electronic devices.

The choice facing students and their parents is often bewildering so I set out to sift through the options and identify some of my favourite devices for the next generation of scholars.

When my eldest children went to university a decade ago they took with them a desktop PC, printer and a cheap mobile phone. But today most students prefer a laptop for everyday use, and perhaps an all-in-one machine for the dorm along with a multi-function printer, copier and scanner. For communications they want Skype or another low-cost messaging service such as SightSpeed or ooVoo.

In terms of handsets, bragging rights go to those packing a latest-generation smartphone such as Apple's iPhone, BlackBerry's Curve, or HTC's Google Android-powered Magic. Alternatively, students want a text-centric handset with a full qwerty-keyboard such as Nokia's N97 or the Windows Mobile-powered Danger Sidekick.

For the dorm room, Dell, Hewlett-Packard and Sony all offer solid all-in-one machines that provide extensive multimedia features including the ability to hook them up to a video source and watch television programmes. Increasingly, however, students watch internet-based video rather than broadcast TV so a fast internet connection is more important than a PC-based TV tuner.

If they do want to tune into home-based video content, a SlingMedia SlingBox device will enable them to remotely watch a television in their parents' home without paying additional fees.

For most students, a laptop is their most important study and communications tool. The first decision is whether to choose a Microsoft or an Apple operating system. But check first whether the education institution has any particular technology requirements or offers a hardware discount scheme.

A survey of US students released this week by Retrevo, the online consumer electronics marketplace, indicates that just over a third of students buying laptops plan to purchase small, lightweight netbooks. Another 49 per cent are buying full-sized laptops.

"While Apple has done well historically in the education market, 2009 marks the dawn of the netbook," says Vipin Jain, Retrevo chief executive. "Students told us they wanted longer battery life, smaller size, and a lighter laptop. Almost 60 per cent of them plan on spending less than \$750 and only 18 per cent have a budget over \$1,000. Netbooks are affordable; some costing only \$170. In contrast, Apple laptops start at \$949. At a time when many people are experiencing economic hardship, having a new Apple laptop isn't a necessity."

Nevertheless, for those who can afford it, Apple's latest 13in MacBook Pro, which costs \$1,200 (£900 in the UK), is an attractive option – with its case made of a single piece of aluminium, a new integrated battery designed to last up to seven hours and a high-performance Nvidia graphics processor paired with an LED backlit display.

I also like the huge multi-touch and button-less glass trackpad – tapping on the trackpad is the equivalent to a button click – and the bundled software that includes the excellent iLife 09 suite. Apple is offering Mac buyers a \$10 upgrade to the Snow Leopard operating system, which is expected to become available next month.

If you prefer to go the Microsoft Windows route, Vista-based machines such as Dell's Studio 15 for \$600 (£450) or Hewlett-Packard's Pavilion dv6z which costs \$580 (£700), are good workhorses but you should factor in an upgrade to Windows 7 when it becomes available in late October. Some PC makers, including HP and Sony with its Vaio notebook, line are offering free upgrades.

If budgets are tight, consider one of the new batch of Windows XP-powered netbooks from Asus or Acer. I particularly like the Asus family of Eee PC netbooks but have also been impressed by Lenovo's S12 netbook, which costs from \$429 (due shortly in the UK) with a Via processor (\$499 with an Intel Atom N270 processor) and bridges the traditional laptop/netbook divide with a 12in screen, 160Gb hard drive and six-cell lithium-ion battery.

Other netbooks worth considering include Dell's Latitude 2100 (which Dell is also using to target the school education market), which costs \$420, and Toshiba's \$330 mini NB205.

Whatever Windows system you choose, make sure it is protected from internet-based virus attacks and malware with free security software such as Comodo Firewall Pro, and free anti-virus/anti spyware packages such as AVG Free or Avast . It is also a good idea to pack a portable drive with automatic back-up such as Seagate's \$70 (£85) FreeAgent Go .

While a printer is not essential, copying costs can quickly add up, so an all-in-one that combines printer, scanner and copier can make sense. HP's new Officejet 6500 series machines start at \$120 (£100) while Canon's PIXMA MX320 costs \$100 (£99.)

Other nice-to-have electronic gadgets for students include handheld scanners such as the \$129 (£110) Iris Pen Express 6 for selective note-taking from textbooks, and one of my personal favourites, the \$200 (£130) Livescribe Pulse Smartpen, which records an audio stream and links it to what you write on special dot-patterned student notepads – great for interpreting those early morning lecture notes.

Financial Times, London, Aug. 20th 2009, Business Life, online.