

Backhaul Blackspots Initiative

Needs of schools

The needs of schools and other education institutions need to be considered in setting of priorities for fixing blackspots.

Our experience through market research and other data is that poor bandwidth is one of the largest barriers to participation of students and teachers in digital education.

- This includes access to Internet content, communication tools and web conferencing, downloading of learning objects developed by school jurisdictions, etc.
- The current investment in the digital education revolution has the potential to further widen the digital divide between city and country (where technology access has the potential to close this gap), and thus to be inequitable for students in rural and remote areas, if bandwidth issues are not fixed. The gap between Indigenous students in remote areas and the wider school population is particularly acute.
- One of the key outcomes for the NBN has to be equity of access for connectivity and hence online services between the inner city and rural/remote regions. Whilst this will be a difficult challenge, it is obvious that from an education perspective that an increasing digital divide is that between students who have good broadband access in the city (whether this be from home or school) and rural and remote students who not only struggle with poor stability, lower bandwidth but higher prices. We know that the limiting broadband access to the Internet limits the kind of learning that can take place. A recent visit to the Open Access College in Adelaide verified the trying conditions under which distance and online education in Australia is operating under. It will be difficult to achieve such equity in a regional market that has variable demand and population density that doesn't drive down costs, even though the initiative says that a major outcome will be greater choice for the consumers in this area. Perhaps a subsidy needs to be considered here.

The business model

To encourage take-up and usage, models which are free from traffic costs should be encouraged. It is important that consideration be given to business models that encourage usage by education. Current business models that rely on charging based on the amount of traffic (download, upload) act as barriers for many users, including education.

Business models need to look at something other than the amount of data transmitted over the network if in fact increased usage is what is desired.

Mobile access

Another key issue for the NBN is that in the near future many of the connections people want to make to the internet will be from their mobile device that connects to hotspots at various locations. Again, we will see in inner cities, both an increased number of hotspots and peering arrangements which will enable people to connect to their provider through a third party provider.

So the concept that we will need fixed internet access from the home or work or school, will be important but so will the ability to connect whilst away from my place of work/study.

So once the fixed fibre is connected then we need to see services on the end which enable broadband wireless connections at a reasonable cost...it shouldn't be any more expensive than a fixed access point. The government may want to work with local councils on providing such infrastructure to their local community.