DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

**Standing Committee on Broadband in Rural and regional Communities
Stephen N Wilson,
Chief Information Officer of the Department of Education and Training
Friday 23 April 2010**

Answers to Questions taken on notice by Stephen Wilson from Geoff Provest, MP during his appearance before the committee on Friday 23 April 2010.

Question 1 (p. 27 of Friday 23 April 2010 transcript) Mr Geoff Provest:

TAFE NSW has installed interactive distance learning facilities for 15 remote, mostly Aboriginal, communities. There are plans to install two further facilities. As indigenous communities traditionally have a low access or adoption of technology, what has been the success of those facilities? What has been the feedback from the communities? Are you planning more access into remote communities?

Answer:

Interactive Distance Learning satellite dishes, video-conferencing and computing facilities are installed in a variety of off-campus locations including Land Council buildings, community facilities and primary schools. The Department currently has sites that include Weilmoringle, Enngonia, Wanaaring, Warren, Peak Hill, Ivanhoe, Goodooga, Grawin, Tibooburra, and Menindee.

Since 2006, 84 Aboriginal people from small remote communities have enrolled in Interactive Distance Learning courses. The uptake of the technology in the remote Aboriginal communities exceeded expectations, with feedback from the communities indicating high levels of satisfaction with the range of courses offered, the teachers and the ability to learn with people from other communities. Increased subject offerings were made possible by combining small enrolment numbers in isolated small communities to create viable class sizes..Local Aboriginal Community Education Facilitators have been recruited and employed in some remote Aboriginal communities to support students' learning.

There is continued demand from further remote Aboriginal communities to deliver interactive VET courses via satellite and video-conferencing. Two new remote communities have requested installation of Interactive Distance Learning facilities, at White Cliffs and Louth. Students have also noted they would like improved video facilities so the teacher can also see them and ideally be able to undertake any course offered by TAFE.

A plan to upgrade the existing Interactive Distance Learning network with new software and infrastructure has been developed. Western Institute has submitted an Expression of Interest to the Federal Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy seeking funding from Round 2 of the Digital Regions initiative.

In addition there are other initiatives such as North Coast institute e-hub partnership providing basic information skills to remote aboriginal communities and New England Institute's Memorandum of understanding with local Aboriginal Land Council that provides their communities with the capability to access campus video-conferencing facilities.

Question 2 (p. 27 and 28 of Friday 23 April 2010 transcript) Mr Geoff Provest:

Asked questions concerning community access to schools fibre connection and wireless systems outside school hours providing greater access for communities and which could become an income stream – Mr Provest mentioned that it could work like hotels.

Answer:

Stephen Wilson reported to the hearing that the wireless network that we put in school is intended to work within a single room and although it can be picked up in close proximity it does not have a large range. In addition there would be regulatory and legal matters that would have to be addressed. After 4pm the network is used to push information out and refresh servers and in some regions to perform backup of school data.

The Department's Legal Services Directorate has confirmed Mr Wilson's statement that there are significant regulatory and legal factors that must be considered before access to a school connectivity could be considered. Initial discussions with the Commonwealth Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, and the Australian Communications and Media Authority have indicated that neither office has dealt with enquiries of this nature before.

It is likely that the New South Wales Department of Education and Training on behalf of the relevant remote school, would be classed as a carriage service provider in accordance with the definition of section 87(i) of the *Telecommunications Act 1997 (Commonwealth)* "the Act". This would have unknown impacts on costs of licensing and the Department's current Telstra contract and would change the department from a retail consumer of broadband to a wholesaler of the service.

This would raise a number of operational, regulatory and legal challenges:
- the Department would need to obtain a carrier license to supply carriage services
- exemption may provided under section 89 of the Act for a supplier (like hotels) of a carriage service who manages a business or other activity carried out at particular premises
- If the Department was not able to gain an exemption under section 89 or 95, they would need to comply with a number of other legislative provisions and regulatory codes including but not limited to *the Telecommunications (Interception and Access) Act 1979, the Trade Practices Act 1974, the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman scheme* (part 6) and *the Telecommunications Numbering Plan 1997* imposed by Australian Communications and Media Authority.
- All current contracts and license agreements would need to be reviewed and potentially renegotiated as user base will change. The financial impact of this review is unknown.
- On a practical level and taking into account the costs of this service is centrally managed, consideration would need to be given to the method of charging members of the community to access the Department's broadband facilities and there would be significant cost in creating accounts and managing this charge for internet usage.

Principals currently control access to their schools and community groups often use facilities such as school halls without supervision after hours. Granting access on site to members of the public after hours to computing equipment held in libraries or classrooms would require more supervision and would generate additional facility access costs. Providing access to the network from outside the site is not a viable option due to the limited range of the current solution.