

Wednesday, 30 April 2008

Mr. Phillip Costa,
Chair – Standing Committee on Broadband in Rural and Regional Communities
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

INVITATION TO COMMENT

Southern Cross University welcomes the opportunity to comment on broadband in rural and regional communities.

SCU along with other NSW regional universities now benefits from having access to gigabit connectivity between campuses and to the internet as part of the Australian Research and Education Network (AREN). The AREN funded from the Systemic Infrastructure Initiative (SII), as part of the Government's *Backing Australia's Ability* programme stands as an exemplar in achieving broadband connectivity for Higher Education in rural and regional areas.

SCU provides the following comment to address specific key issues that the Committee would like further information on:

1. Strategies for addressing the lack of availability of services in certain areas including the choice of technology;

SCU recognises that a variety of technology options may be required to meet the diverse geographical challenges that remote regional and rural areas present. These challenges need to be assessed and the most appropriate and cost effective technology adopted. Technologies such as two way satellite may continue to be the only option in some circumstances for the foreseeable future. In the main however the goal of achieving fibre to the node (FTTN) or fibre to the kerb (FTTK) should be the ultimate goal for providing broadband connectivity to the user.

SCU believes it is of utmost importance to ensure collaboration at all levels of government to achieve the benefits of access to a cost effective, high capacity broadband for all Australians. SCU notes and supports the comment made by the NSW Department of Commerce and NSW Department of State and Regional Development in their submission to the *National Broadband Network*.

http://www.dbcde.gov.au/communications_for_business/funding_programs_and_support/national_broadband_network/submissions/NSW_Department_of_Commerce_and_NSW_Department_of_State_and_Regional_Development.pdf

A coordinated approach with open communication channels that leverage all opportunities presented at the Federal, State or Local government level is required to minimise the delay in rolling out infrastructure and services to all Australians, particularly those in rural and regional areas.

Should the State Government be providing services directly to the public or should it provide subsidies to certain groups in the community to make broadband affordable?

SCU supports the concept of separation between network ownership and service provision in support of consumer choice and competition. As an example the following publication by the Allen Consulting Group *A Competitive Model for National Broadband Upgrade* provides possible options for the development of a FTTN network.

<http://www.allenconsult.com.au/publications/download.php?id=305&type=pdf&file=1>

In respect to subsidies, again it is important for all Australians to have the option of affordable broadband connectivity at a cost that is comparable regardless of location. Subsidies should be considered where this is a barrier for the uptake of technology, especially in the context of education and geographically remote locations.

2. The appropriate role for State government in promoting and increasing the use of broadband;

SCU believes that the State government should play an active role in suggesting and providing incentives for development and investment in the expansion of service availability. There are many opportunities to do this particularly in conjunction with Local Government planning processes.

Other promotional opportunities could include educational programmes for the adoption of technology for both new and existing businesses as well as increased functionality and services provided through government portal sites.

As outlined in recommendation from the Broadband Advisory Group to the Government http://archive.dcita.gov.au/2007/12/bag_report/chap5

Recommendation 7 - Demand Aggregation

All tiers of government should cooperate to develop demand aggregation strategies to stimulate broadband investment and provision of services in key sectors, such as health

and education and also in regional areas. Demand brokers could be used to assist rural and regional communities and sectors to develop broadband services.

In respect to this recommendation the report notes the importance of any demand aggregation strategies to promote competition.

3. State and local government planning in delivery of broadband services in particular areas;

State and local government can play a key role to ensure all new developments include right of way to infrastructure in support of broadband initiatives. Again SCU supports comment made by the NSW Department of Commerce and NSW Department of State and Regional Development in their submission to the *National Broadband Network* regarding Interconnection Points that will allow for the integration with local and regional broadband initiatives, especially where new telecommunications infrastructure has been established or is planned.

4. the importance of broadband services for education, health and business activities and to retain regional and rural population levels;

Broadband services are an essential component for the future of education, health and business activities. Access to high capacity networks increases and improves communication and collaboration, and provides essential electronic resources, entertainment and government and industry services. Ensuring access to the connected world is increasingly important to all Australians to provide equitable opportunities.

As an example, SCU now benefits from the ability to utilise rich media content and video conference technology in the delivery of its programmes and interactions with students. This was something our metropolitan counterparts were able to adopt much earlier. Likewise students in metropolitan areas enjoy a more competitive marketplace with access to significantly higher bandwidth than regional students.

SCU's ability to deliver rich multimedia content is only half of the equation, our students need access to affordable, fast and reliable broadband to participate and take full advantage of this content and flexible delivery options. SCU is particularly concerned that our future way of teaching is incredibly dependant on our students having appropriate fast broadband access. Where broadband is available to students at home or work, particularly distance education students, it improves the learning experience significantly by providing real time access to and interactions with fellow students and teaching staff.

In the case of staff it can increase the potential for staff to pursue more flexible work arrangements. Again it is of fundamental importance to research and researchers alike and will play a key role in retaining quality staff in regional locations.

An article on the DCITA archive site *Broadband: What broadband can contribute to regional Australia* provides what is still very relevant today in respect to the importance of broadband services.

http://archive.dcita.gov.au/2003/09/broadband_resource_kit/regional

5. The actual level of service required in the future to maximise the benefits to these communities.

While connection speeds of 12Mbps are now mentioned as desirable, the increasing level of Internet bandwidth demand is expected to grow significantly. This is due to both increased uptake and the sophistication of sites on the Internet. Examples include the virtualisation of software combined with the uptake of other emerging technologies such as virtual worlds, social networking sites, government and industry e-commerce services and educational online delivery.

The higher bandwidth rates offered by fibre will be essential to future proof performance and sustainability of the network, and therefore 12Mbps is considered adequate initially but to be an absolute minimum baseline moving forward.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'P' followed by the name 'Clark'.

Paul Clark