UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

Professor Attila Brungs
Deputy Vice-Chancellor &
Vice-President (Research)
City Campus
PO Box 123 Broadway
NSW   2007   Australia
T   +61 2 9514 1257
F   +61 2 9514 1772
attila.brungs@uts.edu.au
www.uts.edu.au

UTS CRICOS PROVIDER CODE 00099F

Mr Andrew McGowan
Inquiry Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Infrastructure and Communications

By email: ic.reps@aph.gov.au

11 March, 2011

Dear Mr McGowan,

Re: New Inquiry into the National Broadband Network

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Standing Committee's inquiry into the National Broadband Network. UTS is supportive of the Government's move to proceed with a high-speed, open access network and realises the long-term benefits of this initiative to Australian businesses and communities, as well as to research institutions such as ours.

In summary, the five main issues for UTS are:

1. The ubiquity of the network
2. The speed available for multi-media and content delivery
3. Affordability
4. Interconnectivity with the eResearch infrastructure Roadmap; and
5. Societal impact

UTS does not operate campuses in regional areas, nor do we offer distance education programs. However, the opportunities the NBN provides for extending our reach into remote and regional areas are recognised. Further, UTS research is conducted in collaboration with other research institutions and industry partners around the country, and decisions on who to partner with and what research opportunities are available would be enhanced through faster access and wider coverage. The Government is currently conducting a road mapping exercise of eResearch infrastructure requirements for Australia. It is critical that the NBN is integrated into this initiative. Finally, the infrastructure provided by the NBN has the potential to influence society in dramatic and unforeseen ways. To get the real benefit from the NBN, a program of activity to attempts to foreshadow and plan for such changes should be linked to the role out. These changes are beyond the obvious such as remote health etc

Addressing the specific terms of reference:

a) *The delivery of government services and programs*

The most significant contribution the NBN will make to this element is broader access to, and inclusion of, remote and regional areas that are currently under-serviced. This needs to be implemented at an affordable cost point for the end users. For UTS, this would enhance our ability to engage in research partnerships in these areas.

b) *Achieving health outcomes*

UTS would like to underscore the importance of the NBN initiative in facilitating tele-health strategies to improve chronic care and equity of access to care.

Health and healthcare continues to demand a considerable portion of Government budgets (state and federal). The NBN would significantly impact (and improve) government spending through improved access, integration and streamlining of processes. For example, being able to provide advice, prescriptions etc in real time to remote locations, being able to monitor health locally will be essential for an increasingly ageing population. Hospitals, doctors, carers, patients, and insurers will benefit from more direct access. Further, research and teaching institutions can improve support to and interaction with hospitals, generating more practical solutions and research outcomes for Australia.

c)   *Improving the educational resources and training available for teachers and students*

The provision of remote education tools and services via the NBN removes a number of disadvantages and barriers currently experienced in remote communities created by lack of access. If implemented at an affordable cost, the NBN will have a direct impact on tertiary education providers' ability to attract students from low socio-economic status (LSES) communities, and meet the ambitious targets set by the Government to increase LSES participation rates to 20% by 2020. The increased bandwidth available through the NBN will facilitate access to rich media teaching resources and enhanced pedagogical capabilities over distance and time.

d)   *The management of Australia's built and natural resources and environmental sustainability*

Enabling real-time connectivity and data-transfer with researchers and industry working in these areas will improve efficiencies and outcomes in research projects.

e)   *Impacting regional economic growth and employment opportunities*

The provision of Layer 2 infrastructure with flexible business models as described on page 5-6 of the NBN Co. Business Case Summary is likely to enable greater competition for business at both local and national levels, and may also generate opportunities for new business/services in regional areas. Employment opportunities at a local level may in the longer term be affected through increasing numbers of university graduates, previously unable to access tertiary education providers from regional areas.

UTS Shopfront is currently part of a research project working with the remote Central Darling region of NSW which contains disadvantaged and peripheral populations. The area will have a special focus for Shopfront's 'regional' university-community engagement over the next three years to support access to services and activities - including education, health, shopping, government, work, mobility, recreation and creativity – and development opportunities with the evolving information economy. Research* undertaken with the Far Western Regional Development Board and Regional Arts NSW, on artists in the in nearby Broken Hill, showed that while 92% of local artists use the internet in their work practice – mainly for doing research and information gathering – only 11% were using it for sales of work or services and enterprise development. The research recommended that there was a need for "greater access to quality advice, training and support on using new information technologies, e-commerce and developing information management systems to support administration, marketing and communications".

* Report available at http://www.shopfront.uts.edu.au/research/research-projects/completed/broken-hill.html

f)   *impacting business efficiencies and revenues, particularly for small and medium business, and Australia's export market;*

The NBN is likely to have a positive effect on business efficiencies and revenues through improved response rates to/from customers, business to business transactions, greater flexibility in freight/transport options, reduced need for staff travel, and use of multi-media facilities (e.g. video conferencing).

g)   *interaction with research and development and related innovation investments;*

Reiterating comments made previously (in particular the eResearch Road Map), the NBN will enable greater opportunities for research collaboration through access to remote communities and industry partners, a greater capacity and speed for data transfer, reduced costs for collaboration through multimedia opportunities and a reduced need to travel.

h)   facilitating community and social benefits; and

In late 2006, UTS Shopfront conducted a survey of the ICT needs of a small number of our community partners (Sydney-based community organisations working in disability, ageing, environment, Indigenous Australia, community development and the arts) to inform some planning we were doing at the time.

Their responses showed critical needs beyond provision of hardware and infrastructure for: (1) objective, sound ICT planning advice tailored to the requirements of the organisation; (2) ongoing skills development and training ('how do we embed knowledge in our organisation?'); and (3) ongoing maintenance and updating.

From UTS Shopfront's experience of working with disadvantaged communities and remote populations, it is clear that the provision of infrastructure alone will not bridge the 'digital divide' unless accompanied by ongoing program providing high quality advice and training.

i)   the optimal capacity and technological requirements of a network to deliver these outcomes.

There is of course a cost benefit trade off in relation to the delivery of the NBN. The role out plan should be flexible to allow the incorporation of new / alternative technologies which become available during the role out.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to provide feedback into this inquiry. Please contact my office on if you have any questions.

Yours sincerely,

Attila Brungs

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