



TECHNOLOGY | Remote communities to profit from world-first laptop computer distribution plan

What a difference a keystroke makes



FOR the children, the “green machines” are a funky new toy on which they can do puzzles and take photos of each other.

Little do they realise the importance of the lime green laptop computers and the significance they could potentially play in their collective futures.

Children from Garrthalala and the “nearby” community of Gangan, about 80km away in East Arnhem Land, were the first in the world to receive the 1.5 XO laptops this week as part of the One Laptop Per Child program.

The project, which is supported by News Ltd, the Commonwealth Bank and Telstra’s Ideas For Good initiative, aims to ensure every disadvantaged and indigenous child living in remote regional communities has their own laptop.

So far, more than 1500 laptops have been delivered to children in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, but the children in the Yirrkala Homelands Schools, where teachers are flown in by light plane, were the first to receive the new version, which is faster and has four times as much storage.

The hardy computers have been specially designed for children in remote communities around the world, including Peru, Uruguay and Rwanda.

They are water-resistant,

have carry handles and special screens so they can be used in direct sunlight.

This means that if they want to, the children can take it down to their local waterhole and read a book on it.

“In a lot of the places in other countries, this computer was designed for the kids to go to school outside,” said Crighton Nichols, education and research manager for One Laptop Per Child.

“These machines are designed to be dropped and thrown around.

“They’re really robust.

“When you look at them they look a bit like a Fisher Price toy.”

The laptops include programs in which you can learn to type, a calculator and memory games.

Characters from the local language, Yongul, have also been installed so children can write correctly.

Many of the children have never seen a camera so instead of having a camera icon to take photos, the computer has an eye.

“When it comes to computer literacy, kids in remote communities are really being left behind – that means they’re going to have fewer educational and employment opportunities when they get older,” Mr Nichols said. “This makes it easier for them to make the transition to normal computers.”

The Garrthalala and Gangan communities are made up of fewer than 70 people each, about half of them children.

Guruwa Burarrwanga, 11, couldn’t have been more thrilled to collect her laptop.

“I’m going to play games and also type some stories,” she said.

Twelve teaching students from the University of Western Sydney who had been trained how to use the new computers were also spread out in communities across Arnhem Land this week to pass on the knowledge.

“They’re pretty different from regular laptops or PCs,” said 27-year-old primary school teaching student Jeremy Watts.

“They’re made with children in mind.”

Teacher Serge Alexeyeff, originally from Brunswick in Melbourne, said the laptops gave his students the opportunity to learn skills without knowing they were doing so.

“They haven’t had much exposure to computers but they figured out how to open them up quicker than I did,” he said.

For senior teacher Multhara Mununggurr, there is a word “yambuma” in her language, Gumatj, which means a pathway to a new world.

That’s what the new laptops are to her.



PORTABLE: Garrthalala Homeland School students carry their laptops down to the water's edge.

Pictures: STEPHEN COOPER



ENTHUSIASTIC: Langarrakarra tests out one of the robust laptops



OPEN: All set to study hard



MANY THANKS: Langarrakarra and Yambirwuy receive their innovative lime green computers