



The laptop revolution

Australia is the latest country to be targeted by an international initiative that plans to help indigenous children learn. Beverley Head reports.

Australian universities are doing their bit to help a laptop-led revolution in remote Australia. The One Laptop Per Child project is an international not-for-profit which is handing over 1800 of its computers to children aged 6 to 12 who live in remote areas over the next six months.

Founded by Nicholas Negroponte and a group from Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab, OLPC developed the XO, a low-cost, robust laptop which, since 2007, it has been selling to governments in third world countries. The idea is to promote education and bridge the digital divide. The Australian offshoot of the program, chaired by former Compaq general manager Geoff Anson, will provide 1800 OLPC machines for free. In return, it hopes state and territory governments will see their educational value and opt to buy one laptop for every child in remote and very remote areas.

OLPC has had meetings with federal, state and territory governments and discussions are ongoing.

"There are 387,000 children in remote or very remote areas who could be helped by the solution we offer," says Anson.

The Australia based offshoot of OLPC has so far secured sponsorship from News Corporation and the Commonwealth Bank.

At present the machines cost \$255 each,

although Anson says the target is to have that fall to \$70 by 2010.

The laptops have been developed to survive harsh environments, with screens that can be read in bright sunlight. They can be powered by just two watts – if necessary supplied from a solar panel or hand-cranked generator. Running open source software and educational applications, the laptops can be connected to the internet if telecommunications services are available in the remote areas, wirelessly connect to one another, and are intended to teach young children to "learn how to learn".

This is where four Australian universities play their role. James Cook University, Charles Darwin, Batchelor Institute and Edith Cowan are working with Dr Barry Vercoe, a director of OLPC Australia and a professor at MIT. Vercoe is currently on sabbatical and in the country helping with the deployment of computers.

The OLPC laptops have been widely deployed in some countries, and Anson claims that both Uruguay and Peru have invested to the extent that there is now one laptop per child in both nations.

Anson says that the initiative does not conflict with the federal government's computers in schools program, which is targeted at high schools, as OLPC focuses on primary age students.

OLPC's initiatives in Australia are being tracked by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). "Tangible evidence and independent third party analysis will mean our power to influence will be much stronger," said Anson. He hopes initial results from the rollout of the first 1800 would be available later this year.

The first wave of machines will be provided to children in very remote schools with large indigenous student numbers including Rawa School, 160 km from Port Hedland, WA, and Shepherdson College on Elcoe Island which will receive 200 laptops, one for each child in Years 2 and 3. OLPC says attendance rates have increased dramatically in parts of the world where its computers have been widely taken up.

Vercoe says OLPC in Australia is not an indigenous program – rather a remote and very remote regions program which by its nature mainly encompasses indigenous kids. "The disadvantage lies in the disconnect, not race or colour. It's not the capacity but the opportunity that they're missing," he says. *ca*



Class mates of Rawa Community School capture images of themselves through one of the XO's unique applications

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