

TEDICORE

TEDICORE Submission to the

Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy

Request for Submissions on Regulatory Issues about the National Broadband Network

Background

TEDICORE (Telecommunications and Disability Consumer Representation) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy request for submissions on regulatory issues relating to the National Broadband Network.

TEDICORE is the voice of Australia's peak organisations of people with disabilities on telecommunications and is supported by the Commonwealth through the DBCDE "Grants to Fund Telecommunications Consumer Representations" program. TEDICORE is administered by the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations. It represents the interests of people with a disability in relation to telecommunications issues and promotes equity and accessibility. TEDICORE has ongoing input from its Project Advisory Body (PAB) with members from a number of the peak disability bodies - Australian Association of the Deaf, Deafness Forum of Australia, Physical Disability Council of Australia, Women With Disabilities Australia, Communications Rights Australia and Blind Citizens Australia.

People with disabilities live in all areas of Australia. All use, or aspire to use, communications as part of their everyday lives. They require the same access to the full range of telecommunications services as the non-disabled. TEDICORE provides advice to government and the communications industry on the development of standards and codes, policies and programs which will maximise the equity of access to telecommunications for all Australians.

Discussion

TEDICORE commends the Government in its initiative to roll out the National Broadband Network (NBN) in order to achieve a greater penetration of high-speed broadband in Australia. We further strongly support the Government's approach in its Request for Proposals and in particular:

- that the NBN should support high quality voice, data and video services including symmetric applications such as high-definition video-conferencing
- enable uniform and affordable retail prices to consumers, no matter where they live.

High quality voice, data and video services including symmetric applications such as high-definition video-conferencing

The Government has an opportunity to ensure that all sectors of the community including people with disabilities may use communications equitably.

For people who are Deaf and users of AUSLAN (Australian Sign Language) as their first language, it means that, with symmetric broadband, they can conduct a conversation via videophone in the same manner that people who use speech take for granted. People with hearing impairments often lip-read to reinforce the message received and thus need excellent video and audio synchronisation. This needs to be taken into account with any video-conferencing application.

Furthermore, there is an opportunity to offer Text over IP, based on international standards, to facilitate vastly improved text-based communications for people who are Deaf, hearing or speech impaired. To achieve this, it is necessary to ensure that any new networks are configured in such a way as to accommodate Text over IP protocols. This is outlined in Appendix One of the attached TEDICORE Submission to the Departmental USO Review.

Uniform and affordable retail prices to consumers, no matter where they live

TEDICORE initiated the phrase *Availability, Affordability and Accessibility* to emphasise the need to ensure that people with disabilities should have communications services that are available to them no matter where they live and that they should be able to afford to use these services. Naturally, any product or service needs to have features that ensure that it is accessible to people regardless whether they are blind, Deaf, have a hearing or speech impairment or a physical disability.

With the added cost of disability for many people, it is increasingly difficult to be able to afford a broadband connection. Therefore, TEDICORE recommends that a Communications Allowance be introduced to cover these costs. This is outlined in more detail in TEDICORE's Submission to the Departmental USO Review.

Regulatory and legal aspects

TEDICORE has referred to its submission to the Departmental USO Review where broadband applications are discussed in detail. Therefore the whole submission is attached for reference. While Universal Service Obligations is only one aspect of regulatory considerations, it is seen by TEDICORE as an essential part of any discussion in the roll-out of major infrastructure such as the National Broadband Network. This is an opportunity for Australia to be seen internationally in the future as a leader not only in technological development but also as a nation that ensures that social inclusion is an important and vital part of any broadband strategy.

To achieve this, end-users and in particular people with disabilities should be given the chance to partake of this advanced network and its many applications. A robust Universal Services Obligation (that may operate very differently from today's model) going beyond fixed line telephony services is one way to achieve this.

As well, TEDICORE wishes to highlight that the Australian Government is close to signing the

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 4 outlines the General Obligations of signatories to the Convention with Paragraph (g) specifically noting the promotion of the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) *"suitable for persons with disabilities, giving priority to technologies at an affordable cost"*.

Therefore, in the roll-out of the NBN, the Government should consider both its national and international obligations to ensure that all Australians, including people with disabilities, will benefit from the new high-speed broadband network.

International aspects

A significant improvement to infrastructure such as a high-speed broadband cannot be isolated to Australian conditions alone. The Internet is global and is affected by international developments. This recognition is reflected in the gathering of Ministers of Communications including Senator Stephen Conroy to the OECD Ministerial Meeting on the Future of the Internet Economy in June 2008.

Technical, business and civil society forums contributed to the Meeting.

The Civil Society input to the 2008 OECD Ministerial Meeting on the Future of the Internet Economy included the statement:

"Inclusive Digital Society. The Internet should be accessible to all. OECD member countries should ensure that all residents have the means to access the Internet and should provide public Internet access, training and support. Particular attention should be paid to rural, remote and aboriginal populations, as well as the disability community."

Furthermore, the OECD Seoul Ministerial Declaration itself included in part that to:

"Ensure that the Internet Economy is truly global, through policies that:

Recognise the potential of the Internet and related technologies to provide enhanced services to people with disabilities..."

This Declaration was adopted by 39 countries (including Australia).

Conclusion

We consider that a high-speed broadband network is essential infrastructure in today's Internet economy.

However, there are many challenges by quickly-changing technologies to the current regulatory structures. There needs to be new regulatory measures in place that not only promote competition but provide strong consumer safeguards. Universal Service Obligations is a familiar structure but it needs to be re-assessed to meet the future requirements for consumer safeguards. These safeguards will be needed more than ever as consumers and particularly people with disabilities are faced with the complex plethora of products and services provided through a chain of suppliers.

TEDICORE urges the Government to consider carefully how this might be best achieved and looks forward to further discussions about this important issue.

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