



OLPC Australia uses education to help remote communities

Australia's Indigenous cultures and communities to benefit from education initiative

Charitable organisation One Laptop per Child (OLPC) Australia, has formally launched the first deployments of laptops to children in remote Australia and announced plans for the next deployments to be carried out in the Northern Territory and Queensland.

The launch ceremony was held today at Shepherdson College on Elcho Island, Northern Territory (NT), one of the first three schools to be involved in the program designed to help primary school-aged children in remote communities open a window to the world. The other two schools are Rawa Community School in Western Australia (WA) and Newcastle Waters in NT.

OLPC was established by visionary Nicholas Negroponte and others at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US, as a means to help disadvantaged primary school children by giving them access to similar resources and information available to children in metropolitan areas in first-world countries, said Rangan Srikhanta, executive director, OLPC Australia.

In Australia this means helping children in remote communities cross the digital divide by giving them laptops that are not only fully loaded with educational and entertaining programs to help them learn, but that can also be connected to the Internet so they can share their experiences with the rest of the world and, likewise, learn from others.

OLPC Australia is also hopeful the devices and supporting programs will help the children preserve and sustain their local culture, language and way of life in the face of globalisation.

The program will enable the children to share information on their way of life with the rest of the world and enrich their own lives with what they learn from others, Srikhanta said.

Since March, executives and volunteers from OLPC Australia and partner Commonwealth Bank (CBA) have been deploying the charity's rugged, low-powered XO laptops to the students, as well as training teachers and installing servers to ensure the schools can fully use, and benefit from, the purpose-built educational tools.

Bryan Hughes, principal of Shepherdson College, said "As a remote, Indigenous primary school, we face many unique challenges from getting the kids to even come to school. OLPC's program has lifted attendance and added a valuable teaching tool. It is making life easier for the teachers, and more enjoyable for the students."

The launch ceremony was attended by members of the school and local community, the NT Department of Education and Training (DET), CBA, and OLPC Australia. Manuel Dhurrkay, the lead singer of Australian band Saltwater, performed with the children during the ceremony. One of the traditional landowners opened the proceedings. Other speakers included Gary Barnes, chief executive of the NT DET, and Michael Harte, CBA's group executive, enterprise services and chief information officer, and a director of OLPC Australia.

CBA's Michael Harte said, "OLPC has given our people the opportunity to be directly involved in a standout program. The initiative is an important way for us to provide support to remote Indigenous children so they can participate to their full potential in education opportunities.

In addition to providing technical resources to help with the deployment and ongoing maintenance of the laptops, CBA is also funding a study of the initial deployments with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). Key learnings from the study will be used to build on the achievements of the initial deployments.

We are committed to ensuring the sustainability of this initiative and to having a long-term impact on the education opportunities of these children, said Harte.

The Shepherdson College ceremony also included classroom tours and demonstrations by the students of some of the 30 programs which have been specifically written for primary school-aged children and are pre-loaded on to the XO laptops.

Children in remote areas don't lack the capacity to learn, only the opportunity, Srikhanta said. Today marks the beginning of a comprehensive, carefully designed education program which we will next take to Queensland and other schools in the Northern Territory.

In the next six months OLPC Australia plans to roll out another 5,000 XO laptops with the ultimate aim of distributing up to 400,000 laptops to all the primary school-aged children living in remote Australia.

To enable this rollout OLPC Australia is working with the teacher training departments within James Cook University, The Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Charles Darwin University and Edith Cowan University to develop training workshops that will equip staff with XO curriculum integration skills.

To ensure the success of the program we need teachers who know how to use the devices and integrate them in to the curriculum, communities which

want to help their children and want to play an active role in sustaining their own culture, and state and federal governments who have the foresight to enable us deliver on the promises of the program, Srikhanta said.

We also need the strategic and financial support of the Australian business community. The Commonwealth Bank, Nortel and News Limited are already supporting us but we need much more if this program is to achieve its full potential.

Today marks the beginning of National Reconciliation Week when many organisations will be asked to consider just how they are supporting reconciliation efforts. OLPC Australia can provide these companies with a program that is real, sustainable, and can deliver on-going benefits to Australias Indigenous people.

About One Laptop per Child Australia

One Laptop per Child Australia (<http://www.laptop.org.au>) is a non-profit organisation which aims to improve the lives of children living in rural and remote Australia the great majority of which are in indigenous communities by providing them with a purpose-built educational tool, the XO laptop. When children have access to this type of tool they become engaged in their own education; they learn, share, create, and collaborate. Using the device they become connected to each other, to the world and to a brighter future.

The Australian organisation is supported by the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, News Limited, Nortel and Watterson Marketing Communications. It is associated with the US-based OLPC organisation created by Nicholas Negroponte, and others from the MIT Media Lab. That organisation was established to design, manufacture and distribute laptop computers that are sufficiently inexpensive to provide every child in the world access to knowledge and modern forms of education.

The XO laptops have been deployed at Rawa Community School in Western Australia and at Shepherdson College and Newcastle Waters in the Northern Territory. The Australian operation has also helped to deploy XO laptops in Niue, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Nauru, Kiribati, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Tuvalu. For more information please visit <http://www.laptop.org.au>.

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