

# REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW—ISSUES PAPER 2011–12

## Response by Dr. Caroline Rannersberger

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Please find following my responses to each question. I relate my responses to my professional needs as an online educator, and as a visual artist. In the field of education I work remotely with two different universities. Furthermore, as a visual artist, I work with a range of galleries across Australia, and am in the process of setting up my own website. The purpose of my submission is to request improved internet and mobile phone access, neither of which function with reasonable standards.

## THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

**Question 1.** How is the use of telecommunications services; and information and communication technology (ICT) evolving in different industry sectors and what is the impact of these changes in regional Australia?

Online education is growing rapidly, and I have recently been employed to develop a range of pilot courses with the University of New South Wales to offer to post graduate students in the field of academic support. I have also found, as an online tutor through Charles Darwin University that the majority of students in certain areas, prefer to study online.

**Question 2.** What is needed to extend and accelerate the role of telecommunications services and ICT in delivering benefits to regional economies?

Mobile phone/wireless access improved in remote areas. The area where I currently live (just 50 km direct from Hobart) is poorly serviced.

**Question 3.** The committee would like to hear from businesses and organisations about their participation in, experiences of, and expectations about, the digital economy. Examples could relate to specific sectors such as agriculture, mining, manufacturing or retail; business-to-business activities; productivity; teleworking; and the development of new knowledge-based industries.

The digital economy has meant that as an online educator I could be recruited irrespective of where I live; there is no commuting and limited business related travel time; I have greater workplace flexibility; my employers have cost savings as no office is required. As a visual artist I can market my work and sell online, rather than relying wholly on galleries to promote my work at considerable cost. In return, I expect that minimum standards of internet and phone access will be available to purchase at a reasonable cost.

**Question 4.** The NBN will help the range of online government services to continue to expand. The committee is interested in views and experiences about engaging with government services online, whether local, state or federal.

My access to Government services is limited, however in relation to business and education, I work almost exclusively online. This has proved to be extremely efficient in the past, when I had ADSL. At the moment it can be almost impossible due to downtime with the mobile phone/wireless connectivity.

**Question 5.** What are some examples of what you want to see happen to encourage greater participation in the digital economy by people living and working in regional Australia?

Mobile phone/wireless broadband facilities at reasonable standards in the short-term, advancing to the same standards as ADSL/NBN rollout over time. In other words, a level playing field for all Australians so that students and their staff (such as myself) in remote regions are not discriminated against.

Subsidies for users working in the field of education and remote service delivery of programs.

Guarantee for a minimum service provision of phone/internet speeds and connectivity.

Compensation for higher costs associated with mobile/wireless technology when no other option is available.

**Question 6.** What are the main barriers to regional communities increasing their use of information and communications technologies and do you have any ideas for ways in which regional communities could progressively overcome these barriers?

The fiscal constraints perceived by Telcos. Regional areas often represent low density and therefore less usage. This means there is less incentive for the Telco to spend money when the likely return is lower than in more high density areas. I suggest that Government pay a subsidy to the Telco to create a level playing field for all digital economy 'participants'. Alternatively, legislation is put in place to ensure Telcos do not unfairly discriminate against regional areas.

## REGIONAL HEALTH AND EDUCATION OUTCOMES

**Question 7.** Do you have ideas for ways in which high-speed broadband could enhance the delivery of education and healthcare outcomes in regional communities?

There is a fast pace of growth in online education, particularly in remote areas, such as Darwin, where I worked as an educator for around 10 years. Clearly, funding is an issue, and as this site shows, there is an incentive to grow online offerings:<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-12-09/20111209-charles-darwin-uni-2420m-grant/3722524>.

As mentioned, I am an online educator. High speed broadband enables students to easily submit papers and to complete courses online, irrespective of their location. This lowers the need for university 'spaces', and opens up the unlimited space for virtual education, thus generating greater economic potential. Communication can occur flexibly, both in terms of time and location. Realtime communication can occur on a global basis, and blogs are also an excellent means of student/staff communication. I am currently developing an online course for the University of New South Wales. I find that such forms of education have been very well received by my students.

**Question 8.** The committee would like to hear from individuals and organisations about their participation in, experiences of, and expectations about, online health and education service delivery.

I am in the process of developing an online course for the University of New South Wales. I work from Bruny Island, Tasmania, and log in on a daily basis to the remote server at the university. Through their online education tools (Moodle), I have created a pilot course for students to assist with academic literacy, which I am now monitoring. Most, but not all of my students are international post graduate students. I also teach academic literacy online through Charles Darwin University. I have been doing so for several years. This has been my main source of income, apart from my visual arts practice. I am happy to provide further information on this as required.

## DEVELOPMENTS IN THE TERRESTRIAL AND SATELLITE MOBILE PHONE SECTOR

**Question 13.** Have you been able to readily obtain information to improve your mobile phone coverage, such as using an external antenna or choosing particular phones that are better suited to rural or remote coverage?

Telstra has provided a great deal of advice, however no solutions. In fact advice from Telstra is often in direct conflict to previous advice, depending on who I have spoken to. In short, Telstra has attempted to assist by sending a standard antenna, but this has not particularly improved the situation. They tell me the issue is the mobile phone tower, and that it needs upgrading, however this is a cost issue, and not a priority. They recommend I buy a 'yagi' antenna for \$1000, but will not guarantee it will work. They have agreed to provide some extra gigabyte usage, as the best solution at the moment is tethering via my iphone. The mobile broadband they recommended does not function reliably. The solutions they have attempted to implement have caused further problems, rather than any solutions. The blue tick phone was one such debacle.

**Question 14.** Are you aware of emerging technologies or initiatives that could be used to improve mobile phone coverage in regional Australia?

No, this is a key area of interest for me, as this would enhance my ability to carry out my work, which is currently severely impacted due to the lack of service. I request that I be informed of any opportunities in this area.

**Question 15.** What have been your experiences with satellite mobile phones?

I made enquiries, as I felt this might be a solution to my problem. I was told however, after being told it was impossible, that it was in fact possible, but just extremely expensive. Telstra had apparently allocated its quota, and was now charging very high fees. They also told me the speeds were inferior. I gave up.

## CONSUMER ISSUES

**Question 19:** Are there specific cybersafety challenges that arise from the way that communications technologies are being used by regional, rural or remote communities?

I am not aware of any.

**Question 20:** How can education and awareness of the risks of using mobile devices, such as smartphones, be improved for consumers in regional areas?

Secondary school/university twitter, facebook / social networking

## OTHER ISSUES

**Question 21.** Are there any other issues relating to telecommunications services in regional Australia that you would like to bring to the committee's attention?

There needs to be a legislated minimum service provision guarantee for broadband and mobile phone access so that employment opportunities can be realised. Compensation is not sufficient. In my case my work is severely affected by the lack of adequate telecommunications provision.

Sellers of hardware solutions must advise potential buyers/users (such as myself), of any issues which might impact of the efficacy of the hardware being sold.