Digital Initiatives

The department of Broadband Communications and the Digital Economy has issued draft program guidelines for two initiatives announced as part of the National Digital Economy Strategy #au20. The draft guidelines place an emphasis on local community involvement, but effectiveness could be improved by greater collaboration.[1]

The Digital Initiatives

As part of its *National Digital Economy Strategy #au20* the Government has announced two programs to be focussed on the 40 early release sites for the NBN to encourage use of the NBN by both households and businesses.

These programs are in support of the first two goals in the strategy that seek to place Australian in a "top 5" for household and business use.

The *Digital Hubs Program* is focussed on providing digital literacy skills to residents, while the *Digital Enterprises Program* will provide training and consultancy services so organisations can "better understand how they can maximise the opportunities from greater digital engagement."

The draft program guidelines emphasise that the programs will be happening in the same release sites, that each will require access to equipped training facilities and that each is to welcome co-funding but is not to be driven by a commercial venture.

The two drafts are considered here under four headings; economies of scale, economies of scope, future initiatives and ongoing development.

Economies of Scale

While both programs rightly emphasise the benefits of truly local ownership of the hub or enterprise program, the reality is that much of the content required will be the same in the 40 different locations.

This has been recognised in the case of the hubs where the draft specifies that the course material will be provided by DBCDE. It is not as directly recognised in the case of the enterprise program, though a great deal of reference is made to www.digitalbusiness.gov.au. This site, unfortunately, provides a fair degree of advice on how to utilise digital technologies, but very little on why.

A greater balance between the localised delivery and the achievement of scale efficiencies could be achieved by some explicit rules about content sharing and a collaborative approach between sites.

Economies of Scope

Both programs require access to NBN connected facilities with suitable equipment to deliver training programs. All the first release areas are actually relatively small, certainly in relation to the areas normally covered by entities like Community Colleges.

The program guidelines could do more to encourage the sharing of resources between the two programs. Many Community Colleges already provide this kind of training for both residential and business users.

Future Initiatives

The forty early release sites that will benefit from the programs are a very small section of the population. It will be impractical to invest in similar programs in every future release site.

However, as already noted existing bodies like Community Colleges and seniors computer clubs provide similar services. The role provided by the funded centres could be expected to occur naturally in later sites if the resource material and experience from the program was made freely available to these bodies.

The program guidelines could productively include requirements about material being made available in such a collaborative manner.

Ongoing Development

Little attention is given in the guidelines to important question of what technical standards will be taught in the sessions. The guidelines do attempt to ensure that the training is not controlled by a specific commercial entity, but does little to talk about standards otherwise.

Will they assume that all computers are PCs running Windows? Will they also cover Mac or Unix operating systems?

Similar questions emerge about applications software. Will they be taught assuming specific word processing or web authoring tools?

If a component of the objective of the DE Strategy is higher utilisation of services the Government might want to address what its attitude is to open source software. The guidelines could require that specific open source packages be included in the training so that residents and businesses are made aware of less expensive options for their online activity.

Conclusion

No comment is made here about the strategy as a whole. What is suggested are four simple areas in which the programs could be subject to further analysis to obtain better outcomes.

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[1] Submission made by DigEcon Research on its own behalf. This work was not commissioned by any other entity. Drafted by David Havyatt August 2011.

About DigEcon Research

Purpose

DigEcon Research is a stand alone research body. Ultimately, its pursuit is policy research, the focus of which is the meaning and significance of the Digital Economy. This policy research encompasses both economic and social research.

Researching the significance of the Digital Economy

The concept generally referred to as the Digital Economy is frequently discussed but there is little shared meaning in the term. A key definitional issue is whether the Digital Economy is something yet to happen or in which we are now embedded.

DigEcon Research focuses on the analysis of social and economic change rather than an analysis of a notionally static "Digital Economy". Analysis of the change as it occurs should highlight those areas where there is genuine policy choice rather than merely a need to adapt policy to changes that have already occurred.

Before Thomas Kuhn popularised the idea of "paradigms" J.K.Galbraith railed against the "conventional wisdom". There is no denying that what Kuhn called "normal science" or the repeated application of existing theory to new problems results in most practical developments. It is equally true that the application of existing theory to problems they were not designed for results in, at best, vacuous solutions and, at worst, wildly dangerous outcomes.

The Digital Economy challenges the fundamental concepts of neo-classical economics. It also challenges most of the precepts of how societies are organised. In this context policy research needs to focus on what is different, not on what is the same. The Digital Economy is not just a matter of means of production but about the fundamental structures of social organisation.

Work program

This research is designed both to inform policy makers and to assist those who would seek to influence policy makers or to make business decisions. DigEcon Research however does not provide strategy recommendations nor undertake policy advocacy on behalf of any party.

A key element of the research will relate to the direct regulation of the converging industries of telecommunications, media, consumer electronics and information technology. However, the agenda encompasses the wider economic and social policy issues.

The scope of the research agenda will ultimately depend upon the researchers who wish to participate in what is more an idea than an entity.

In the crowded Australian research field there are a number of "bodies" that share some of the objectives of DigEcon Research. DigEcon Research aspires to contribute to the work of these and any other researchers in the field.

Digital Initiatives – Additional Submission

The department of Broadband Communications and the Digital Economy has issued draft program guidelines for two initiatives announced as part of the National Digital Economy Strategy #au20. The draft guidelines for the Digital Hubs program refer to curricula material being made available by DBCDE.[1]

The Submission

Amy earlier submission on the draft program guidelines focussed on four areas in which efficiency and effectiveness of the guidelines should be considered; economies of scale, economies of scope, future initiatives and ongoing development.

In this submission I wish to refer to a fifth area, leverage, in relation to the Digital Hubs program.

Leverage

That much of the content required will be the same in the 40 different locations has been recognised in the case of the hubs where the draft specifies that the course material will be provided by DBCDE.

The draft is otherwise silent on how this material is to be generated.

The kind of programs being considered here already exist either in the curricula of many Community Colleges or in a more developed form in the ForwardIT (http://www.informationeconomy.sa.gov.au/forwardit) program developed in South Australia. The most productive use of Government resources will build on these existing resources.

In particular the national curriculum should be informed by the framework developed in SA which identified the reasons individuals might want to go online as the basis for designing their training. (Note the difference between this approach and the comment previously made about www.digitalbusiness.gov.au which explained how but not why to take a business online).

Conclusion

This comment is made as an addition to the earlier comments to assist in assuring the maximum effectiveness and efficiency of the program, which might at times vary from a standard Government "program funding" approach.

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