# RURAL CAMPUSES CONNECTION PROJECT

# EVALUATION REPORT

# (Restructured)

HIGHER EDUCATION SOUTH AFRICA

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# 1 Executive Summary

## 1.1 Project Overview

The objective of the Rural Campuses Connection Project (RCCP) was to provide access circuits to connect rural university campuses to the South African National Research Network (SANReN). HESA received a grant of R28 million from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) for the project in 2010, and appointed the Tertiary Education and Research Network of South Africa (TENET) to implement the project.

At the time of the evaluation (October/November 2014) the Rural Campuses Connection Project (RCCP) had been successfully implemented, with a few sites that required final installation and commissioning. Of the 22 installation sites on the programme, installation had been completed at 19 sites with the remaining site scheduled to be completed by end 2014.

Indications were that the project would be completed within budget, although the final end date would be later than planned due primarily to:

- Re-prioritisation and re-planning required as a result of the allocation of R28 million being substantially less than the original request of R120 million;
- Delays in resolving the co-payment / cost sharing initiatives with the beneficiary universities;
- Synchronisation with the timelines of the SANReN backbone extension project;
- The time required to obtain wireless spectrum licences from ICASA;
- The time required by the identified universities to approve the required contracts; and
- Challenges associated with overall decision making resulting from infrequent Steering Committee meetings.

## 1.2 Main Findings

There is evidence that the technical capacity of the connectivity installed at the various sites increased exponentially through this project.

Average bandwidth uptake on rural campuses around 2010/11 was sitting at approximately 6-8 MBits per second. Through the RCCP, this grew exponentially to on average 350 – 400 MBits per second in 2014. The RCCP created a paradigm shift in the institutions in which it was implemented.

Through the RCCP funding from the Department of Higher Education and Training new opportunities were created for the selected non-metropolitan universities. It was a worthwhile investment that will continue to yield positive results well into the future if properly supported and maintained.

To best realise its benefits, consideration should be given to the further roll-out of the RCCP to additional institutions. In the view of the evaluators, the universities would benefit from a further roll-out / upscaling of the project to ensure that the provision of broadband services 'assists in strengthening the teaching and learning processes, creating equitable access to online educational resources and strengthening administrative resources with the aim of improving the quality of education.'

It also emerged through the evaluation that because the connectivity had been so fundamentally improved it was difficult to relate the before and after RCCP. So there was significant evidence of the value of the RCCP connectivity.

Although there were significant delays experienced in the initial stages of the Project, through various interventions, ultimately the RCCP is an invaluable project which was delivered within budget.

As an early evaluation impact review, it was found that although there had been steady progress in the uptake of the benefits brought about through increased internet connectivity, these benefits had not yet been fully utilised. The ability to take up and fully utilise the capacity appeared to be a challenge. Some institutions fared better than others in this regard. The technical connection is the first step and taking it from the front door further into the institutions is then important in order to realise the potential benefits of the improved connectivity. In this regard the institutions faced various challenges ranging from poaching of the key core IT skills to support for satellite institutions. It is likely that if the universities are provided with the relevant support, these benefits can be realised in time.

The observations in the evaluation were that in the majority of institutions, administration sections were generally the first recipients of the increased roll-out benefit. General connectivity was then extended to laboratories and libraries. This spread is dependent on the available internal campus connectivity (wireless and / or cable) infrastructure.

Among the participants interviewed, the Information Technology and Chief Financial Officer Executives had a sense of TENET's role, and were able to comment on the capital and ongoing maintenance and operation costs requirement. In the majority of instances (80%) the respondents indicated that they understood the ongoing maintenance and operation costs requirement and budget provisions had been made to pay for these post the project closure.

Among the academic staff and in the student affairs group, there was poor or no awareness of the RCCP. The student group was the most ignorant of the RCCP opportunity. A factor that may have contributed to this was that data collection took place during the exam period and that made data gathering difficult in this group although meaningful data was collected.

Although possible cost savings realised through the implementation of the RCCP fell outside the scope, mandate and brief of the evaluation, certain institutions reported significant cost savings. This is an area that could be considered in any further implementation reviews so as to quantify and make best use of the efficiency gains and cost savings.

Overall, the governance of the project suffered from infrequent Steering Committee meetings, largely due to the composition of the Steering Committee, the seniority of members and the resulting constraints on the availability of Steering Committee members. The evaluation found that the introduction of a Technical Committee to deal with detailed operational and project matters, within the framework of Steering Committee guidelines, unlocked implementation progress.

## 1.3 Consolidated Recommendations

### Table 1: Consolidated Recommendations

| Summary of and Rationale for the Evaluation Recommendations | | |
|---|---|---|
| Item | Observations | Recommendations / Opportunities |
| 1. | Delays in the implementation process | • Dedicated Project Manager from inception of any new project. |
| 2. | Communication between various stakeholders | • Development of an effective communication strategy as part of the project implementation process. |
| 3. | Request for greater alignment with the institutional implementation team | • Pre-implementation feasibility review and planning process in any further RCCP projects thereby leveraging synergies and resources optimally.<br>• Continued use of project mandates which arise from joint review and proposed solutions. |
| 4. | Standard approach to implementation process | • Pre-feasibility assessment with beneficiary universities. |
| 5. | Beneficiary institutions lack a co-ordinating structure that focuses on effectively utilising the bandwidth and the associated benefits; Slow uptake in internet usage in various institutions | • Creation of an institutional internal project team structure that 'champions' the implementation and uptake of the additional capacity within the universities. It is recommended that the team be multi-disciplinary representing areas of research, teaching and learning, community development, administrative functions, library services and student affairs as well as the implementation team. |
| 6. | The lack of Steering Committee meetings deprived the project of leadership | • Appoint Chairperson to Steering Committee.<br>• Appoint appropriate Steering Committee alternate members who have the requisite decision making power. |
| 7. | Further inclusion of key stakeholders in the Steering Committee | • Extend participation in the Steering Committee to the Department of Science and Technology to ensure alignment in roll-out initiatives that will affect the relevant institutions in a manner that leverages off joint resources, planning and cost optimisation; and the Department of Communications / ICASA in its role as a key enabler to deliver a timely solution; alternatively<br>• Invite participation from these entities in select decision making forums (example: sessions that deal with project initiation / evaluation). |
| 8. | Although there is tracking of uptake by TENET, there appears to be no joint institutional / TENET process to evaluate elements impacting uptake | • See recommendation 5 above. |
| 9. | Although a review or analysis of any cost savings brought about as a result of the RCCP was not a requirement in the roll-out of the RCCP, it could be considered a key element to adequately monitor cost savings within the universities | • Inclusion of a cost benefit analysis in recipient institutions to ensure that the financial benefits for the institutions are realised.<br>• See recommendation 5 above. |
| 10. | Opportunity to leverage off other similar stakeholder initiatives | • Factor into the planning process the viability of connecting additional educational institutions in surrounding areas to the network, for example include TVET Colleges and Community Colleges. |