Universal Access Starts at School

A new computer lab is just the beginning of a nationwide ICT roll-out

By Dan McGarry

WHEN THE GOVERNMENT OF Vanuatu published its national ICT policy back in December of 2013, it identified education as an area of particular focus.

Beginning this year, schools will be leveraged to help make access to broadband internet a reality for people throughout the country.

The Universal Access Policy, which was formalised shortly after the National ICT policy itself, states that by the beginning of 2018, 98% of the population of Vanuatu will have access to broadband internet. For the purposes of this policy, 'broadband' means internet speeds of up to 21 megabits per second (Mbps) for downloads, and half as much for uploads.

A delegation led by Education Minister Daniel Toara and comprising Directors General, Directors, and political advisors as well as the Government Chief Information Officer and representatives from the Telecommunications Regulator, travelled to Luganville Friday to inaugurate a new computer lab at Sarakata Centre School.

This computer lab is one of 15 operating hours, the centre gets the most bang for the buck out of its investment, and income generated from local business owners and other users helps to keep the centre alive. In addition to this, the Tablets for Students project, a companion project to the CLICC undertaking, will reach an additional 7 schools across the country.

Among the latter is one of the most remote locations in the world for an ICT and internet broadband project. Veni School in Mataipeivu village is located roughly 8 kilometres from the road running down to Tassiriki in South Santo.

Community members demonstrated their commitment to the project by spending one day each week to carry cement, timber and metal roofing on their backs, fording a fast-running river three times in the process. 'One man, one bag' was the mantra while the work continued.

As a result, the new schoolhouse is the only building, besides the local church, to be made of non-traditional materials.
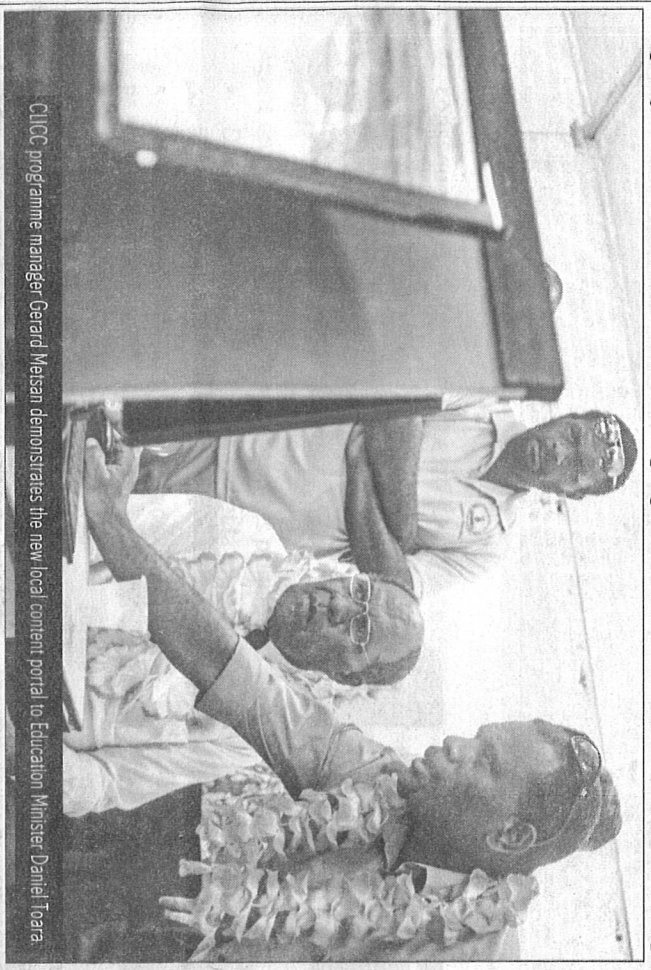
Both CLICC and TFS programmes feature small, low-power server computers that provide hundreds of gigabytes of specially selected learning materials for Pacific project took its inspiration from lessons learned during the installation of a community-based computer centre in Sarakata School was host to 278 students this year, and lies in the midst of a populous but relatively low-income community. The potential impact is therefore thought to be significant.

Equally important, the school has managed to sustain a smaller computer lab for some years—evidence that the TRR's confidence in this site was not misplaced.

By opening the student working at the school for her entire career, first as a teacher and more recently as principal. She says that she is grateful for the lab. "Children used to sit three or even four to a single chair before. Now we have enough to run classes for all our upper years."

Susan Balesa has been general public outside of normal computer lab to the general

Minister Daniel Toara was also glad to be present at the opening. During his official address, he let slip that, coincidentally, he was once Sarakata's school administrator.

This computer lab is one of 15 to be opened over the coming months. Primary and secondary schools across all six provinces will benefit from Islands students. In addition, the servers contain local content systems that can be used to generate, share and view locally generated content, and content from other schools.

Over 60 teachers and administrators have been trained in the use of these systems. They will collaborate together using this system in what is known as a community of practice in order to learn from one another, and to provide support and encouragement. The department of Education will likewise be able to keep track of school-level activity using these portal servers.
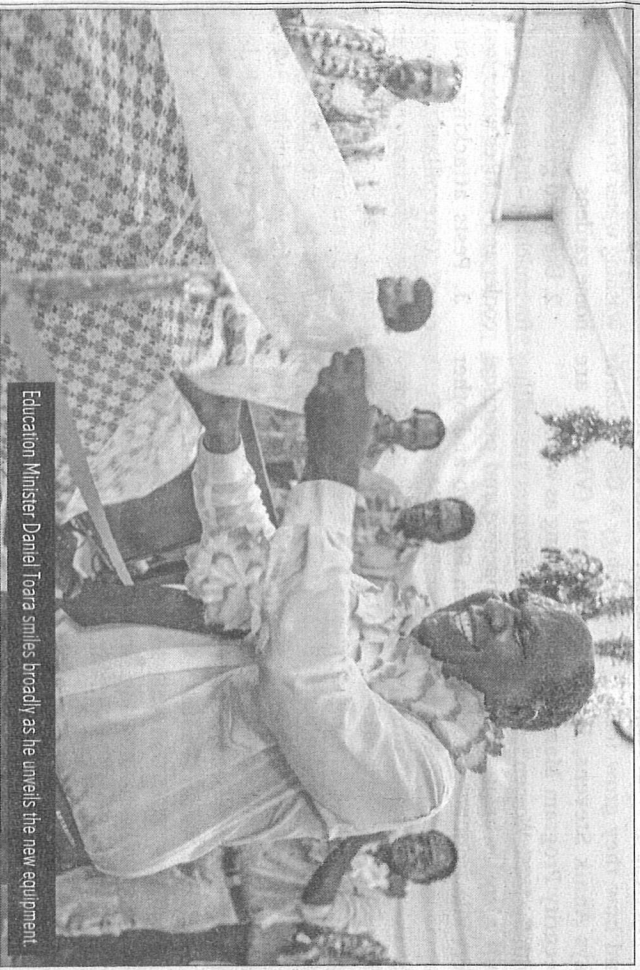
In all, over 300 applications were received when the CLICC and TFS programmes were announced.

This is compelling evidence of the insatiable demand for the technology and tools needed to improve the lives of our youngest generation.
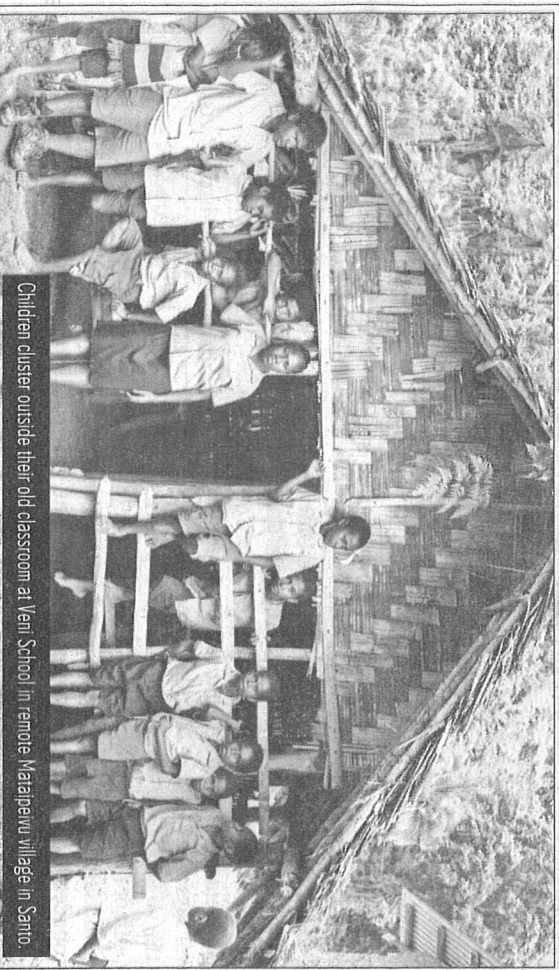
The CLICC and TFS programmes are part of the Universal Access Policy implementation, and are administered by the Telecommunications and Radiocommunications Regulator, or TRR.

Children cluster outside their old classroom at Veni School in remote Mataipevu village in Santo.

Education Minister Daniel Toara smiles broadly as he unveils the new equipment.

CLICC programme manager Gerard Metsan demonstrates the new local content portal to Education Minister Daniel Toara.