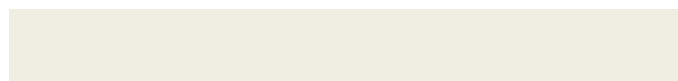
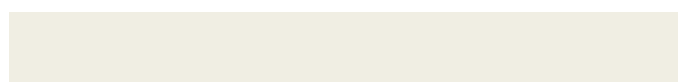


# Internet services at Student Residences

## It's a jumble out there!

By **NEIL THOMPSON**, Managing Director, AccessPlus



### We have recently done some research at 2 levels:

1. The various models at residences for provision of internet services to their residents, to identify what is out there
2. Residents themselves, to hear about their needs and expectations

This paper addresses some of the core issues raised.

#### 1. Residence-level/ management-level research

It is unquestionable that residents everywhere need access to internet services for their courses and for their lifestyle. There is increasing evidence that your residents will have made their residential decision partially if not wholly on the quality and affordability of the available internet services.

So it was not surprising to find that internet services were available at every residence.

The main models ranged from:

- No managed services provided at all – residents make their own arrangements
- Residence provides its own internally managed system
- University provided intranet and internet
- Residences club together to provide managed services
- Full outsourcing to independent providers
- A combination of these

The business model is critical for everyone. Most residents understand that the service is never free and never completely unrestricted or unlimited. The challenge is to provide sufficient quality and affordability to make residents happy.

The cost of national and local networks is high now and not likely to reduce in the foreseeable future. The ever increasing demands means that infrastructure costs at the national and local levels to meet the demands will remain high. The difference will be in availability of better quality services rather than reduction in cost.

For accommodation owners and managers the basic formula for success is 'bums in beds'. Occupied beds = income (fees or rent). Losing income at any time is problematical; losing income in the current climate can be very uncomfortable and lead to compromised services, reduced rents and even closures.

The **business model** is of increasing concern and there are rafts of **financial considerations** that will have cost v benefit analysts excited for months. How can the cost be recovered? What are the benefits? Is it recoverable in terms of fees, rent or direct revenue generation? The answers are as diverse as the locations, we found. I gave a paper at ACCUHO last year on the results and a summary is on our website.

Internet services may represent a cost factor for some but they are on the other hand a profit centre for others (equipment suppliers, engineers, ISPs). Owners of residents will want a return on their investment – maybe all residences, public and private will in future. If the return expectation is more widely spread then there are consequences. A higher cost to the residents is one. Lower quality services is potentially another.

Having less income expectations in the chain is more likely to result in cheaper services to residents and higher quality services. In turn this means higher marketability of the residency, more assured occupancy rates and better rents.

If owners share income they will have a higher responsibility to users. It is an inevitable consequence – duty of disclosure, liability and accountability in the face of new regulation.

One issue often raised is the **wired v wireless** considerations. There is a clear trend from a consumer perspective to the ease and mobility of wireless. Sometimes for good reasons residences are totally wireless (heritage buildings for one). Some have a combination of wired and wireless.

Most successful services however run on a structured data cabled network. Responses from IT departments and communications specialists invariably go down the cabled road. 'If you have a cable then use it' and 'if you can cable then do it' is the mantra.

So yes it's a jumble out there! These are just a few of the regular points that are raised.

How will you know when you need to address the issue of internet services in your residence? There will be simple indicators:

- Complaints from residents
- Complaints from parents of residents
- Increasing administrative and direct costs to provide the service
- Drop in occupancy rates

Keep an eye on these.

## 2. Resident-level research – more specifically, what residents want from internet services and how they use the internet

Firstly they tell us the service must be **reliable**. This is even more important than speed. Residents do not cope well with outages for any reason. They are not interested in the cause – only in the remedy.

Good communication helps. Residents want to be told about planned outages and want information about unexpected

outages. This is not always easy considering few published notices are actually read!

A bit more on this issue:

- There is no universal method of making contact with all residents. You can try email, sms, msn, facebook, twitter, notices on the notice board, notices under doors, informing management and staff and residential assistants, room telephone, mobile, on site representative of the provider, notices on log in pages... and still you will not reach everybody! Many are reluctant to call helpdesk services for a variety of reasons (perceived cost, language difficulties). Residents who leave adequate contact details when they created accounts - especially mobile phone numbers (not international numbers please!) are the best informed.
- Residents expect some form of compensation if the service is out for any extended period.

**Speed** is next on the order of importance. If the service is available and reliable then the next issue is definitely speed.

- From a provider perspective higher speed = higher cost. The cost of major links in Australia from major providers are both expensive and inflexible.
- Notwithstanding this the residents are entitled to 'acceptable broadband speed'. This short phrase can raise much angst and argument but it is independently defined at around 512/128kbps. Take some of the advertising you see with a pinch of salt!

**Data allowances** – same as speed.

- Take the advertised massive offerings of downloads or unlimited downloads with the same pinch of salt. Data in Australia costs money (not everywhere in the world) and has to be recovered.
- Most residents fall within the envelope of reasonable use. If there is an allowance many will stay within it. We have many students who stay within a 500MB/month range. Others cannot contain their use within 20GB! This is all changing over time and experience and packages must be competitive in the eyes of the resident. If they are not then the simplest indicator is resident complaint to management.

**Support** – residents like the helpdesk other direct methods of resolving their immediate issues.

- They like to talk to someone, sometimes complain and sometimes vent!
- A high percentage of calls we know as PEBKAC - Problem Exists Between Keyboard And Chair!
- Their issues are rarely insurmountable - around 95% are resolved on first contact. Most issues are procedural – connection and accounting. →

# Internet services at Student Residences

- Most residents are not blessed with computer management skills and expect help. Helpdesk access is of high importance as many students are a long way from their own personal support networks.

**Price** – Price is usually raised as an issue only if for any reason the system is unreliable or slow.

- Most accept that it is a chargeable service and willingly pay. Residents know if prices are good value.
- The expectation is that they should have some free sites including free access to the University intranet for on campus residencies.
- Some use alternate services such as 3G in conjunction with or perhaps instead of the in room service. The availability of alternatives is shaping up as a good article topic for next time

**User-friendliness** – the system must be easy to use.

Note that 50% didn't read any material provided (published instructions, FAQs). You must have an easy to incredibly easy account creation process. It also needs easy to incredibly easy payment methods. In one campus the cash payment option includes a map leading to a nearby bank and bus timetables!

**Mobility (and ubiquity?)** is a huge issue and the strong trend is notebooks (laptops) that can connect to both wired and wireless networks wherever they are at Uni or elsewhere. The service must firstly be available in their rooms as well as common areas, computer labs and libraries.

Other highly rated issues:

- Specials – residents are consumers and like to get a deal. Provision of specials is good for residents and providers. It can enhance relationships between provider and residents which I suggest is an essential element for a service provider in residencies.
- Usage information – ability to know where they are in their time and or data plan is important.
- Security – they want to be confident that no one can steal their data or access their system and information
- Free sites – they want access to sites such as banks so they can make on line payments, university intranet and some core research sites

How do students use the internet?

- The highest rating was Facebook. Next MSN. Next Uni intranet for research and course related issues.

- After that it was Blog sites, Bittorrent, You Tube
- Then news and email...

Knowing this gives us a good lead on how to best communicate with residents.

What more would they like from a managed service

- More free to access sites
- Speed options
- Local servers (gaming, file mirroring, VoIP, online noticeboards)
- VoIP bundled with accounts

I would rate **reliability** as the most important issues overall. Outages for any reason are not well received. The residents appreciate explanations and communication but are only concerned to know when services will be restored. Reliability is a core expectation as it acceptable speed, delivery on that first and back it up with communication and good value.

It has been good to listen to our users, we reckon it keeps us in business. ■

*AccessPlus is a Queensland based specialist provider of Managed Internet solutions to student accommodation, hotels, resorts and conference centres around Australia and yacht marinas along Queensland's cruising coast.*

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**And as a PS – results of research into favourite ice cream flavours (in descending order) – you may want to bear this in mind for your next resident meeting:**

- Chocolate
- Vanilla
- Cookies and cream
- Choc chip
- Banana
- Choc chip cookie dough
- Choc mint
- Strawberry
- Pecan praline
- Mango
- Peanut butter and chocolate
- Pistachio
- Macadamia