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Copper wire to the future

by Brigid Kelly

Is broadband better over copper? The answer to this, and other questions related to telecommunications' hottest product, should be forthcoming thanks to business-funded research at the University of Canterbury.

As the rest of New Zealand looks at ways to increase Kiwi broadband use, the New Zealand Broadband Research Facility will be finding out how to improve the service, both in New Zealand and overseas.

Research co-leader Professor Peter Smith says the programme, primarily funded by Telecom, will help New Zealand communications providers to test and understand actual DSL (digital subscriber line) performance characteristics.

"Until recently, most interested parties have either relied on Telecom data or models developed under different conditions in offshore markets."

The result of a partnership between the University of Canterbury, Telecom and Wellington-based ICT research aggregator Medialab, the project will also provide opportunities for New Zealand-based ICT companies to develop software and hardware tools with export potential. Four kilometres of modern copper distribution cable now run through the walkway tunnels beneath the University of Canterbury campus. Research staff also have access to the Christchurch and Linwood telephone exchanges to support the campus testing.

The project is part of the wider MediaLab Express programme, a multimillion dollar suite of network research projects undertaken across seven universities, which was launched in April.

Express brings together a range of research projects which have been developing since 2002, with the ultimate aim of developing downstream ICT opportunities as well as benefits to New Zealand's own ICT community.

MediaLab executive chairman Richard Bentley says while Express is supported by large ICT industry partners, the door is open for new participants, including innovative ICT start-up companies.

"We believe this... programme could last many years and channel our capabilities towards solving some of the greatest network challenges facing the global telecommunications sector."

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