When the needs must, the hardware must follow

While so many other Australian schools are opting for a tablet form factor, one pioneering boys’ school needed something more specialised.

The website of CBC Fremantle, in the historic Perth suburb of Fremantle, reveals the approach the staff and school take to help prepare students. High on the list of facilities available to this boys’ high school are a technology centre, computer labs and visual art & media studios.

Providing such advanced resources for students means the 132-year-old private school is an avid consumer and user of technology, and they’ve found an eager and highly engaged partner in Acer Computer Australia.

In just one example, the course materials enable skills in art and design across media and design industries, so software like the Adobe suite of design tools and AutoCAD are active parts of learning.

It’s a software profile that calls for a unique hardware environment. As CBC’s Head of Information and Communication Technologies John Rear puts it, “we need a device with grunt – we couldn’t go with a low-powered processor.”
That meant a one-to-one student device with power, and despite good experiences with tablets, Mr Rear and his colleagues knew a tablet wasn’t going to cut it. In fact, he says the requirements of the school took many of the tablets on the market out of consideration straight away.

After assessing CBC’s needs, local education technology provider and Acer reseller JH Computer Services agreed on the need for an alternate form factor. “Most schools are going for tablets, but the way the College helps students learn is a bit different,” says JH Computers’ Antoni Garac. “Most of the time a basic entry- to mid-level tablet is sufficient, but the school’s projects call for a device that can handle a particular software environment.”

The device

The answer was the Acer TravelMate B113. With the unique FlowCurve design and superior technical specs to match, the TravelMate B series had the profile CBC Fremantle needed. Even though the school originally came to JH Computer Services intending to deploy a tablet fleet, the TravelMate’s Intel i5 were a better fit for what the school needed.

Of the elements that suited the school’s requirements, perhaps the most crucial was the TravelMate’s ability to combine the power the school needed to effectively deliver learning with the mobility students needed in the school environment.
CBC required a custom built solution for interfacing the notebooks with larger screens and keyboard / mouse to use in their design labs. JH Computer were able to take an existing Acer product, design some modifications, have it custom modified with manufacturing from a third party and additional components sourced and installed to give CBC the exact solution that they required. This extra ‘outside the box’ thinking helped ensure that JH Computer was a major contender in the tender process.

“It’s why we picked the 11.6” display,” Mr Rear confirms when asked about how much students’ systems move around. “The devices go home every night, come back in the morning and go from class to class. We wanted something a little more compact because anything a little larger and more like a conventional laptop took up too much room on the desk.”

Another very important thing was the battery life to support both power and mobility. It’s something Mr Rear and CBC Fremantle IT staff was very particular about – experiences with batteries in devices from other vendors had left them very wary.
He adds that battery life is such an important criteria to the school that – given the choice between two devices with otherwise equal specifications – the battery life would be the deciding factor. “Apart from the TravelMate having a fair bit of grunt, they have to last a whole day because we don’t have charging facilities at school,” he says.

“Today’s boys...

“Essential support

But there was one more piece to the puzzle that convinced CBC Fremantle that JH Computers’ advice was sound, and that was Acer Computer Australia. The unique, vertically integrated relationship between our customers, resellers like JH Computer and WA state Business Development Manager Julia Sinton connects us directly to the needs of users like CBC in both deployment and after-sales service.

JH Computer is the lynchpin of Acer’s support infrastructure, described by Mr Garac as being ‘Acer’s main repair centre in WA’. “We can do anything as far as warranty support,” he adds. “If there’s a breakage we can have it turned around in one to two days depending on parts.”

That said, the CBC Fremantle TravelMate fleet hasn’t nearly pushed JH Computer to its full abilities. Aside from some cracked screens thanks to the consistent daily use in a school environment, Mr Garac describes the device as very good. “We’ve experienced a minimal number
of manufacturing failures,” he says, “It’s more physical damage that’s more or less inevitable in schools.”

Mr Rear adds that - given the past experience of staff using laptops – the school had a good idea of what demands would be made on the student TravelMate fleet and how tough they needed to be.

**Into the future**

We all live in a fast moving world, and by the time CBC Fremantle’s year 7 boys are leaving at the other end of their school careers, personal computing will probably look very different.

It makes choosing the right device – and covering all bases with the purchase – more important than ever. Mr Garac says JH Computer Services are now starting to talk to the school about a rollout for 2015’s year 7 intake, and that the success of the TravelMate fleet will exert a strong influence on the direction the school takes.

The school opted for an extended three-year warranty because, as both Mr Rear and Mr Garac said, it ticked all the boxes.