IT's a great pity, but a public stoush between Apple Computer Australia and the Gartner market research firm is obscuring some intriguing discoveries about the operation of mixed networks of Macintoshes and Windows PCs.

Neither Apple nor Gartner is talking, but the Barrow has been able to lift at least a small corner of the curtain. Here's what happened.

Apple last year hired Gartner to conduct a survey at Melbourne University - which operates a mixed network - to see how the costs of operating the two computing platforms worked out.

The major finding: the uni's Macs were easier and cheaper to own and run than its Windows machines. Not just a bit cheaper - a whopping 36 per cent less costly.

The study finds 4676 Macs cost the uni $14.1 million a year to run while the 5338 Windows-based machines cost $18.9 million.

The uni spent an average $1953 a year on technical support for each Mac, compared with an average $2522 on Windows machines. This is actually a 22 per cent saving.

So where did the 36 per cent savings figure come from? According to Apple, in examining direct costs, Gartner found that Macintosh hardware and software costs were lower and the Macs needed less technical support. This translated into direct savings of 25 per cent.

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Combine the direct and indirect savings and you wind up with a total cost of ownership "36 per cent lower than similar PC environments elsewhere".

After running its eyes over these figures, Apple Australia rushed out a press release trumpeting the results.

It quoted a delighted Arno Lenior, the local outfit's marketing director, saying the findings illustrated how medium to large organisations such as Melbourne Uni could save time and money by investing in Macs rather than PCs.
Apple's press release was largely ignored by the local press, but was picked up last week by UK Macworld's web news site, and from there it got a great run on many other international tech news sites. This was too much for Gartner, which had not authorised the Apple statement.

The research firm quickly made its displeasure known, and told inquirers it did not endorse the figures. Did that mean the figures were not accurate? Gartner declined to discuss the matter.

It complained to Apple's headquarters, and the press release has since been removed from Apple Australia's website.

Apple public relations people declined to comment further, as did Gartner. But they're not so reticent at Melbourne University.

James Hale, manager of the uni's ArtsIT facility, is quite happy to talk about the faculty's experience with its mixed network.

Yes, he says, the cost figures seemed pretty accurate, although he is scathing about the Apple press release's suggestion that the network is confined to the Arts faculty.

The figures are for the network across the whole university, he says.

ArtsIT has about 500 PCs and workstations, of which nearly 300 are Macs, he says.

The faculty's website reveals there is also a multimedia laboratory stacked with G4 desktops, iMacs and iBooks, some with CD/DVD burners and a Mac video-editing suite, as well as a couple of unspecified PCs.

"We have certainly found Macs are way down on the cost scale compared with Windows machines," Hale says.

A major reason is the Mac's relative freedom from viruses, he says.

"We have a lot of silly users who open emails with .exe attachments," and infect the network with viruses or worms, he says.

That involves a lot of downtime and cleaning up.

Another point: "When an app goes west on a PC, nine times out of 10 we have to reinstall the whole system." More time, more cost. Surprisingly, he doesn’t agree that Mac users tend to be more self-supporting because the Mac's supposed ease of use.

Viruses apart, most people at the uni are pretty good at solving their own problems, whichever platform they use, says Hale - himself a Mac Titanium PowerBook G4 user.

But he does find computer novices get started faster when they use a Mac, and they become self-supporting more quickly.

The university has had a mix of Macs and Windows for many years, in much the same proportions.

Hale doesn't see that changing: unlike some overseas universities, Melbourne has no plans to ditch the Mac.

Nor - given the Gartner/Apple findings - should there be, in The Barrow's opinion.

Endorsed or not, the lesson of the study seems to be that - contrary to the beliefs of many less-informed systems administrators - mixed environments of Macs and Windows PCs work very well and for the most part quite easily.

People get to use the platform that they like and is best suited to its task.

Moreover, the higher the percentage of Macs in such an environment, the more the enterprise will save.

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