Technology Enabled Inclusion

Educating and Empowering through Community Technology Learning Centres

Phase II Evaluation of The Smith Family’s Involvement with Microsoft Unlimited Potential

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with
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The Smith Family’s work with Microsoft Australia as a leading partner with other community organisations to deliver the Unlimited Potential program throughout Australia is particularly reflective of our personal development and literacy skills program streams.

This is achieved through four complementary program streams: (1) **Financial Scholarships** (which facilitate the participation of disadvantaged children and youth helping them to belong in formal education from early childhood through primary and secondary school to tertiary); (2) **Personal Support** (which goes hand in hand with financial support and is focused around enhancing the cognitive / academic skills of the individual through formal learning structures in tutoring, mentoring and coaching); (3) **Personal Development** (which focuses on developing an individual’s informal learning around socialisation and capacity to participate in extra-curricular activities such as sports and the arts through informal mentoring, training and advice across significant life stages e.g. ante-natal, early childhood and school-to-work transitions); and (4) **Literacy Skills** (which focus on building an individual’s capacity in comprehension, financial and technological literacies).

The Smith Family’s work with Microsoft Australia as a leading partner with other community organisations to deliver the Unlimited Potential program throughout Australia is particularly reflective of our personal development and literacy skills program streams. It has also built upon the findings from our first evaluation of UP ([It Takes a Community to Bridge a Divide: Working towards digital and social inclusion with Community Technology Learning Centres](The Smith Family, 2005), and continued using a place based approach by making technology meaningful in the lives of the adults and young people taking part in CTLCs.

The Phase II evaluation has collected and analysed data over the course of a year within 43 Community Technology Learning Centres (CTLCs) from among the 88 TSF affiliated CTLCs. It is encouraging to read that the CTLCs are continuing to facilitate the development of positive attitudes towards learning, to build confidence levels in the usage of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and to enhance social and economic participation in the communities where they are located.

The Smith Family commends the Report’s findings to all who are interested in supporting disadvantaged individuals and their families to create better futures through education through the use of computer technology as a tool for reengagement with lifelong learning.

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*Head of Research and Evaluation*
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Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the contribution of numerous people who assisted with the evaluation and production of this report. In particular, The Smith Family would like to thank Microsoft Australia for their continuing and generous support. This research is an important element of the Unlimited Potential initiative in Australia, and thanks must also go to RMIT University for their input in the design of surveys used in Phases I and II. Most importantly, we wish to thank all of the participants who completed evaluation surveys and the Community Organisations\(^2\) who work so tirelessly as part of the Unlimited Potential program in Australia – both were essential to the collection of data presented in this report.

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\(^{2}\) A full list of community organisations who participated in Phase II evaluation can be found in the Appendix to this report.
This report details the findings of a survey-based evaluation administered over the course of a year within 43 Community Technology Learning Centres (CTLCs) in which The Smith Family (TSF) facilitates the Microsoft ‘Unlimited Potential’ (UP) computer literacy program. It represents the second phase of evaluation carried out by TSF into the demographics and outcomes of UP participants, and significantly expands upon the Phase I evaluation conducted in 2004/05 (summarised in the report ‘It takes a Community to Bridge a Divide’, The Smith Family, 2005).

The aim of the UP program is to increase computer literacy skills among all members of the population, particularly those who for reasons of age, background, education, location or socio-economic status are less able to access such support. Microsoft’s support in providing the curricula and funding for informal training sessions at CTLCs allows participants to gain basic computer skills and access to the Internet, while improving lifelong learning opportunities by connecting individuals and communities. This reflects The Smith Family’s broader societal change agenda of supporting disadvantaged children and their families to realise a better future through education. The UP initiative therefore constitutes an important part of our work in increasing the reading, technological and financial literacy of individuals over the life course.

The 5 ‘Key Learnings’ of this second phase of evaluation consolidate and build upon those arising from Phase I.²

### Key Learning 1:

**The Unlimited Potential course provides participants with an accessible and appropriate ‘first-step’ platform for re-engagement with education leading to lifelong learning.** Disadvantaged groups have a high proportion of people who have disengaged from formal education, either as a result of negative experiences, financial difficulty or other physical / mental barriers.⁴ Returning to learning can be an extremely daunting and difficult task for these individuals, and the range of options open to them within their community may be limited to TAFE and other courses that operate at too high / intense a level to encourage their participation. The informal nature and learner-oriented focus of the UP course means participants have been able to use this platform as the first important step in regaining their confidence and seeing themselves as learners once again. As the Phase II data show, completion of the course inspires a strong desire among participants to continue learning through other pathways, both formal and non-formal, which in turn reduces their isolation and increases opportunities for their greater social and economic participation.

³ The 5 Key Learnings from Phase I Evaluation are included in Appendix A of this report.


This report is available from The Smith Family website: www.smithfamily.com.au
Key Learning 2:
Access to or ownership of a computer at home is not indicative of capacity in terms of technological literacy skills and/or confidence. It is often assumed that computer ownership equates with greater levels of computer literacy, as if skill sets are developed simply by virtue of ‘being around’ of having access to technology. A significant proportion of participants who take the UP course report having access to computers in their home environment. However, further analysis of Phase II data shows that this does not in any way positively correlate with increased confidence or capacity to use computers and the Internet. It would appear that the motivation, scope and frequency of an individual’s computer usage at home – particularly among adults – is limited in many cases without the learner-oriented guidance and relaxed environment of the UP course.

Key Learning 3:
Youth tend not to initially engage with computers as a learning opportunity, but given the right environment and appropriate guidance, their interest in its educational capability increases in tandem with their skills base and ability. Youth appear to view the CTLCs and UP training as external to and qualitatively different from school, and are initially attracted to the centres more in terms of taking advantage of the opportunity to access computers and the Internet rather than to consciously learn and expand their skill set. However, following completion of the UP course, the reasons behind continuing youth attendance at the centres had changed to reflect greater prioritisation of learning and personal development as opposed to simply using the resources as one would in an Internet café, for example. This confirms the particular approach of the UP centres in initially engaging individuals through their ‘fields of fascination’ (personal interests) and then using this as the platform to cultivate more generic skills development and learning.

Key Learning 4:
Use of computers at a Community Technology Learning Centre encourages wider and more frequent use of computers elsewhere. Data from Phase II show that following the completion of the UP course, both adult and youth participants are more inclined to take advantage of computer and Internet resources available outside the centre (e.g. at a friend’s house or at home). This is important in reflecting on the contribution of the UP program/centres in facilitating more active community participation and in creating greater levels of social capital across generations.

Key Learning 5:
Computer use and skills training for young people in an informal environment benefits and supports their broader academic and educational outcomes. By far the most common activity cited by young people who attended UP centres was the use of computers and the Internet for assistance with schoolwork. Aside from the inherent benefit of being able to access extra-curricular resources to aid and facilitate their learning, this finding is extremely positive given the international research showing that regular computer users perform better in key school subjects than those with limited experience or confidence. In addition, over a quarter of the adults who took part in the program reported using their new computer/Internet skills to help with their children’s homework.

In addition to the 5 Key Learnings listed above, the data from Phase II also gave rise to the following Key Outcomes that relate more specifically to participant experiences of the program:

Key outcomes

**Adults**

- 9% of respondents to the Registration (pre-program) survey identified as Indigenous Australians, which shows the centres have been successful in attracting and engaging this disadvantaged group far beyond the national demographic of 2.2%.6

- Following the course, 88.8% of adults agreed they could now use the Internet to find information, which is a significant increase from the 61.3% of adults prior to commencing.

- Similarly, while only 50.9% had been able to use email before starting UP, 85.3% of participants who finished the course felt confident in sending and receiving email – an increase of over a third.

- 9 out of every 10 adult participants confirmed that they would like to continue using computers and the Internet after the course, with 89.4% expressing a desire to learn more about these resources.

- 95.6% affirmed that they had enjoyed learning about computers at the centre, with over 90% consistently reporting that they were either ‘Very Satisfied’ or ‘Satisfied’ across all course indicators and their centre.

- “It has given me more confidence in myself and computers, and I have made more friends...”

- 97.2% were satisfied with the quality of staff / volunteers, classes / training and opening hours offered at their centre.

- 3 out of every 4 participants talk with other people at the centre either every time or most times they were there, suggesting the centres are successfully providing an environment in which all kinds of people feel comfortable coming together and sharing experiences.

- 2 out of every 3 participants reported that they would go on to share the skills they had learnt on the UP course with friends and family members who had not been able to attend, showing the broader societal impact of the program in spreading learning throughout the community.

- 9 out of every 10 participants confirmed that the centre had made them more interested in learning other things in the future, with more than 4 out of every 5 participants expressing a desire to enrol in further community education courses.

- 70.2% of adult participants suggested that the centre had made a positive difference in their lives.

**Youth**

- Following the course, 90.8% agreed they were now able to use the Internet to find information, while around 2 out of every 3 participants confirmed they could send and receive emails.

- 97.6% of youth participants suggested that they felt confident using computers and related technology following the course, and 88.2% expressed a desire to continue using computers and the Internet.

- 93.2% were happy with the quality of the classes / training they had undertaken.

- “I enjoyed coming here. I have made lots of friends. It’s fun and I want to come back...”

- 92.6% affirmed that they had enjoyed learning about computers at the centre.

- More than 8 out of every 10 youth participants expressed a desire to continue learning in the future.

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2.0 Background

From the Digital Divide to Social Inclusion
The educational, employment and economic benefits of using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) became evident in the 1990s, along with the fact that not all individuals reap these benefits. While the digital divide was initially thought to be a result of financial limitations, initiatives that solely provided access to the physical hardware and software revealed that the gap was not simply monetary. The ABCs of the digital divide, access, basic training and content, became the new catch cry, and local nets and CTLCs were established to address this divide.

While the digital divide remains a populist term, it has begun to lose relevance. Technological (digital) inclusion is far more complex than the black and white descriptive term, ‘digital divide’. Education levels, opportunities and motivations to learn are strongly tied to a person’s ability to access and utilise technology to its fullest capacity; and the extent of access and usage exists on a continuous scale, not merely as a two way split. Nonetheless, ICT can positively affect learning and social outcomes in certain circumstances and disadvantaged individuals arguably have the most to gain. Consequently, the term ‘digital divide’ has been replaced with ‘technology for social inclusion’; redefining the focus from technology as the end, to technology as a means to the end.

A key step towards social inclusion is engaging individuals in lifelong learning. ICT has the capacity, if used in the right environment and with sufficient support, to influence attitudes towards learning. This has significant implications for individuals who have become disengaged from learning – largely those with the lowest skill, education and employability levels. These individuals are usually those who could benefit most from training or education, but often lack the motivation and understanding of the benefits further education and/or training can render. Informal, community based education where learning can be self-directed and self-paced has been found to be successful in engaging these individuals. CTLCs can provide this environment.

Social inclusion goes beyond education to include factors such as social interaction, civic engagement and the all encompassing social capital. Some CTLCs have demonstrated their capacity to achieve these outcomes. CTLCs act as public meeting places where individuals from a community can meet neighbours and establish social networks. In addition, access to the Internet, along with sufficient training and support at a CTLC enables participants to build networks within and outside of their geographic area. These virtual and local networks can be used to draw upon social, emotional and economic resources, otherwise known as social capital.

Technology is merely the means to possible change and its ability to produce positive outcomes is contingent on a number of factors. A previous paper by The Smith Family (Connecting Communities with CTLCs, 2004) provides six best practice criteria, which have been found to produce positive social outcomes for some CTLCs. These include, formulating partnerships, engaging with the community, providing an appropriate learning environment, employing skilled and supportive staff and volunteers, ensuring the physical environment promotes both attendance and interaction, and evaluation.
The Smith Family and Microsoft ‘Unlimited Potential’

The Smith Family
The Smith Family is a national, independent, social enterprise that supports disadvantaged children and their families to realise a better future through education. Our Vision is of “A more caring, cohesive Australian community, and our Mission is that “Together with caring Australians, The Smith Family will unlock opportunities for disadvantaged families to participate more fully in society”.

The Smith Family works in two ways: by increasing the participation of those that have been marginalised and by engaging those individuals and organisations that have capacity to share (time, talent or money). The Smith Family has adopted a preventive approach to addressing disadvantage that is based on education and lifelong learning. The organisation has a particular focus on increasing the comprehension, technological and financial literacy capacity of children and their families.

Microsoft Unlimited Potential
The aim of the UP program is to increase computer literacy skills among all members of the population, particularly those who for reasons of age, background, education, location or socio-economic status are less able to access such support. Microsoft Australia has committed more than AU$40 million over five years in software, funding, curriculum and training support to reach disadvantaged Australians. UP is a multi-faceted program including the following components:

- UP Software Donation Program – free software for community organisations
- Resources to support Community Technology Learning Centres (CTLCs)
- Microsoft Authorised Refurbisher – free software for hardware refurbishing.

The Partnership
Microsoft Australia began donating software to TSF in 1998. In 1999, the two organisations came together to begin working on bridging the ‘digital divide’. Two Computer Clubs were established in suburban Melbourne to teach ICT skills to financially disadvantaged children. In November 2002, the partnership grew to include RMIT University and nine local community organisations. The reach was extended across Victoria and the target groups expanded to include regional citizens of all ages.

In June 2004, the Microsoft Unlimited Potential (UP) program was launched in Australia, with TSF as a leading community partner. At the time of writing this report, the TSF/Microsoft partnership is still growing rapidly and includes 53 community organisations across Australia delivering ICT skills training in 88 TSF-affiliated CTLCs. In 2006, The Smith Family was also recognised with a global award for its outstanding contribution to Microsoft Community Affairs and the Unlimited Potential program at the Microsoft Global Community Affairs Summit held in the US.

UP in Australia is designed and built on the collective experience, skills and networks of Microsoft, TSF, RMIT University and the other UP Foundation Partners – WorkVentures, Inspire Foundation, Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association (ASCCA) and Yarnteen Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Corporation. Across all the Foundation Partners, there are currently more than 200 UP CTLCs located in every Australian state and territory. The overall program aim for the partnership is to improve lifelong learning for disadvantaged people by providing technology-related skills through CTLCs. The target groups now include low socio-economic families, seniors, youth at risk, culturally and linguistically diverse individuals, those with a disability, people living in rural and remote areas, and Indigenous Australians.

The UP Project
The objective of UP in Australia is to support CTLCs and networks of CTLCs to enhance their impact in the community and their long-term sustainability of operations. UP does this by:

- Providing direct resources to support CTLCs such as curriculum for formal and nonformal training programs, funding for elements of CTLC operations, and Microsoft software;
- Running Train-the-Trainer courses for volunteers and other CTLC staff;
- Facilitating information sharing forums on topics such as volunteer management, community engagement, and social impact evaluation tools;
- Facilitating the matching of Microsoft staff volunteers to provide services for local community organisations;
- Assisting CTLCs in community engagement and in attracting disadvantaged individuals in the community to attend centres, particularly through the 117 Learning for Life Workers employed by The Smith Family in its Learning for Life suite of programs;

7. For further information, see www.microsoft.com/australia/up
8. A further aspect of the Microsoft UP initiative in some countries, Disaster Relief Grants, is not part of UP in Australia.
- Linking other relevant local, state and national initiatives, such as PC refurbishing through the Microsoft Authorised Refurbisher program, migrant settlement services, and local iterations of job creation and employment programs;

- Conducting research and ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of the UP network and the social impact of UP CTLCs;

- Consulting and conversing with government and others to champion digital inclusion issues;

**UP Training Programs**

The funding provided to CTLCs is for the delivery of an 8 week training program (known informally as a Computer Club) with a minimum of 16 student contact hours. This training uses non-formal approaches and is based on the ‘Fields of Fascination’ concept (described further in a following section) as a means of re-engaging individuals in lifelong learning. The clubs are designed for those with little or no ICT literacy skills and use the UP Curriculum, adapting it to the needs of the participants. A Computer Club could therefore be structured around learning how to use the internet or it could be focused on Digital Storytelling, depending on the target groups the CTLC is attempting to engage. Trainers (paid staff and volunteers) at the UP CTLCs are provided with Train-the-Trainer programs to ensure they are equipped with the skills and confidence to run the Computer Clubs.

_A summary of the Key Findings from Phase I Evaluation can be found in Appendix A._
3.0 Introduction to Phase II Evaluation

The data used for this second phase of evaluation is from 43 CTLCs from around Australia, and therefore incorporates a larger range of centres than in Phase I, which focused on 11 of the more established CTLCs. The evaluation is based on two data sets from the UP program: Part A uses the Registration surveys to report on the demographic characteristics of the adults and youth who registered to take the UP course (totalling 812 and 268 respectively), and includes analysis of issues such as gender, education level, employment status and familiarity with technology. It represents a significant increase in numbers from Phase I, creating a stronger, broader dataset from which to draw conclusions. Part B then draws on the Evaluation (post-program) surveys of 632 adults and 178 youth to assess the impact of the course in changing participants’ computer usage and confidence levels, and provides insight into their enjoyment of the program and potential to continue their learning in the future.

The surveys used in this second phase of evaluation were designed to reflect as closely as possible the areas of interest used in Phase I in order to permit comparative analysis. Part of the benefit of this lies in the possibility of confirming more strongly the findings that arose in Phase I, while also drawing on the significantly larger sample size of Phase II to provide a more finely-grained analysis. As an evidence-based organisation, The Smith Family is committed to ensuring that the design, development and expansion of interventions within our Learning for Life suite of programs is based as far as possible on the collection of accurate and appropriate data, in combination with the national and international literature relating to this field. Both phases of evaluation were therefore undertaken with a view to improving our knowledge of the community with whom we are working, and the potential for The Smith Family, Microsoft and CTLC staff to collaborate in continually improving the services provided therein.

Throughout this report, reference is made to findings from a separate qualitative stream of evaluation also conducted by The Smith Family over the course of 2006. This third evaluation dataset consists of in-depth longitudinal case studies of adult and youth experiences of the UP program, and also includes feedback from CTLC staff and UP trainers from a range of centres around Australia. In the context of Phase II, selected data from the case studies will be used only with a view to adding credence or qualitative context to particular findings, and will not be included or analysed in full.

9. A full list of participating centres can be found in the Appendix to this report.
10. The ratio of adults to youth represented in the survey is considerably greater due to the fact that the UP program is specifically designed for and marketed to adults.
11. In Phase I evaluation, a total of 128 adults and 210 youth completed the Registration (Pre-Program) Survey.
12. In Phase I evaluation, a total of 98 adults and 145 youth completed the Post-Participation (Post-Program) Survey.
13. The full data collected as part of the longitudinal case studies will be separately released in the form of a ‘Good Practice Handbook’ for all UP stakeholders in early 2007.
The aim of the Registration (pre-program) surveys was to construct a demographic portrait of the adults who participate in the UP program, and to assess how this corresponds to the aim of the initiative in attracting individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. A total of 812 adults completed the Registration survey in either a paper or online format, with the data then collated into a single dataset for analysis below.

4.1 Gender

Around three-quarters (75.3%) of the survey respondents were female, which represents a slightly larger proportion than was reported in Phase I (where two-thirds were female). This gender imbalance is not surprising given research that has shown (a) the known dominance of women participants in the adult community education sector; (b) the fact that women tend to nominate community centres as a comfortable learning environment more often than men; and (c) that women are more likely than men to recommend adult community education courses as a resource for exploring learning options than men. In fact, research suggests that in regional and rural Australia, where many of the CTLCs that participated in this evaluation are located, males tend to form only a maximum of 20% of the enrolments in adult community education courses. In addition to these broader demographic trends, there may also be circumstantial factors influencing the majority of female attendance at the centres, including the timing of the courses, which are usually held during the day and between Monday and Friday.

4.2 Age

As the chart shows, the majority of adult respondents to the survey were between the ages of 35 and 74, and this is reflected in the significant number of retired individuals (see section 4.4 ‘Employment status’ below).

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The proportion in the 20-34 age bracket constituted only 16.4%, which suggests that many adults approach the centre as a step to re-engaging with learning later in life, rather than accumulating skills before entering the labour market.

4.3 Family status

Just over a quarter (25.4%) of the adults registering for UP were lone parents, with over 80% of these having children who were still dependent on them. This is in line with the dramatic rise of one-parent families in Australia – an increase of as much as 38% between 1991 and 2001 to constitute close to 25% of all families today. With this proportion projected to increase over the next 20 years, it is important that the centres continue to attract this demographic and support them in the provision of skills that will be instrumental in helping them tackle the greater challenges to workforce participation that they face in comparison to couple families. In this context, it is equally important to note that the course appears to be particularly popular with parents, for just under three-quarters (72.3%) of participants had children (whether dependent or not).

One of the key aims of the UP program in Australia is to ensure that adults are not isolated through intra-familial digital divides, e.g. whereby parents struggle to relate to their children, who have grown up in a technological era and who are likely to gain familiarity with computers at school. In fact, it would appear from the in-depth longitudinal case studies that many UP adult participants recognise the increasing need for and accessibility of technology in maintaining family relationships. As these two mothers remarked,

“There are a lot of parents who don’t understand computers in our community – but their kids do, and there is a danger that this might create a rift in their relationship and their ability to share time together.”

“I want to be able to help my children – and know what they’re up to! At the moment, they spend a long time on the computer, and I don’t even know if they’re doing homework or playing games!”

4.4 Employment status

31% of participants were unemployed at the time of registering for the UP course, although 18.7% suggested that they were actively looking for work. Just 4.2% were employed full time, which might be a consequence of the daytime scheduling of the course, and the fact that the UP program targets those who are marginalised from the education and employment sectors. Only 12.9% reported being employed part-time or on a casual basis, while the majority (31.8%) were retired, suggesting that the course is attracting a large number of pensioners who are motivated to improve their familiarity with the technology they themselves would have had little access to as children. In addition to formal employment, it was also important for the survey to understand the nature of the other activities to which adults devoted their time. As the chart below depicts, many were involved in full or part-time volunteering within their community, and/or busy with carer duties. This kind of contextual knowledge is valuable in understanding the range of responsibilities participants have that may hinder or facilitate their involvement in the program, and the cross-section of people who are attracted to the course.

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17. For example, lone parents face an unemployment rate of 12.0%, which is more than twice the rate for all persons and more than four times the rate for persons in a couple relationship (2.8%). They also face low earning capacities, poor working conditions and reduced probability of accessing training options. Sources: Parliament of Australia (2005) High Unemployment at a time of Low Unemployment. Research Note No. 15, 31 October 2005. Parliamentary Library: Canberra; ABS (2004) Family Characteristics, Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics: Canberra.

18. See Section 3.0 ‘Introduction to Phase II Evaluation’ for more on the longitudinal case studies.
Close to one in five (17.2%) of participants also reported having a disability of some kind, and although the survey did not in this instance explore whether this disability was physical or intellectual, this figure is in line with the national proportion. However, around 4 of every 5 participants (80.7%) reported having a pension, health care or concession card, which is well above the national population figure of 33% and shows the success of the centre in attracting the more marginalised groups within society.

4.5 Birthplace and Language
In terms of birthplace and language spoken at home, it appears from the data that the centres are attracting individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse (NESB) backgrounds in similar proportions to their representation in the Australian population. For example, 67.2% reported that they had been born in Australia (compared to 73.6% of all Australians) and 18.3% mainly spoke a language other than English at home (compared to 20% of all Australians). These proportions are slightly different to those reported in Phase I evaluation, but this is to be expected given the much larger sample size and spectrum of the Phase II data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>8.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>35.9</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

4.6 Indigenous participants
Encouragingly, a total of 9% of registration respondents identified as Indigenous Australians, which is well up on the 1.6% recorded in Phase I evaluation and represents a significant rise from the national proportion of 2.2%. This is most likely a reflection of the extra efforts made

19. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing 2001, 20% of Australians have a disability.
21. Phase I recorded 53.9% of adults surveyed were born in Australia, with 40.6% speaking a language other than English at home. National data quoted here is drawn from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing 2001.

Engaging Indigenous groups through ‘Digital Storytelling’ – Case Study

The Taree Community College Unlimited Potential centre has taken a unique approach to learning through ‘Digital Storytelling’ workshops. The challenge in Taree was finding a way to engage all participants in the education process, in particular, local indigenous youth. Students attending the classes had varied literacy levels and computer skills so the learning structure needed to reflect this diversity. Tutor Simone McManus decided, after completing a professional development program in Microsoft Movie Maker, that ‘Digital Storytelling’ would allow all her students to tell their own stories and learn useful skills at the same time.

“Digital Storytelling” allows students to tell their own stories and express themselves more freely through the inclusion of images, narration and music”, explains Simone. “As a result, the emotional impact of the work produced by the students is extraordinary!”

Students in the classes were also paired up with mentors from the local Koori community. These mentors worked with participants throughout the creation of their project, assisting by sharing their own personal and cultural experiences and knowledge with students. Many participants told stories about their families, one student dedicating his project to his father and younger sister. Some narratives were purely fictitious whilst others told stories of personal experiences, cultural and local history or traditional customs.

Debra Nicholson from Taree Community College sees these workshops as serving the community in a number of ways. The young adults have developed personal skills and community focused values and have had the opportunity to take leadership roles in the management of their project. The Club has provided a forum for mentors and storytellers to share their knowledge, skills and experiences helping to build greater understanding and tolerance.
by many of the CTLCs that took part in Phase II (such as Redfern, Taree and Tamworth) to actively attract and promote the program to Indigenous members in their local communities. It may also be the result of greater capacity and understanding within The Smith Family as to how Indigenous groups can be more appropriately engaged with ICT, e.g. through digital storytelling (see case study on previous page).

4.7 Education
With regard to the highest level of education completed, over half (58.5%) of participants reported that they had left school before finishing Year 12. Research conducted by The Smith Family has shown that early school leavers can have significant and debilitating ramifications throughout their adult life, and face an increased likelihood not only of failing to make successful school to work transitions, but also of earning less money, obtaining poorer quality employment and attaining lower literacy and numeracy skills.23

The majority of those who did go on to some form of post-school education went into TAFE (11.8%), but even this step can pose significant challenges, not simply with regard to financial pressures, but also because the transition in learning styles and responsibilities may be too abrupt for those who struggled at school. For example, participants interviewed as part of The Smith Family’s longitudinal case studies found that they did not get the kind of individual support they needed from TAFE institutes, and felt overly pressured (see quotation centre of page).

It is perhaps less surprising in this context to note that 50.7% of participants in the Phase II dataset reported that they had not undertaken any community education courses prior to UP. This would suggest that a considerable number of participants are therefore approaching the program as the first step on the road to their re-engagement with education, and that the learning environment of the centre affords a level of comfort and confidence among participants that they have difficulty finding elsewhere.

4.8 ICT / Computer Experience
Participants filling out the Registration Surveys were asked to report their previous level of experience with computers in order to provide approximate baseline data on their access to and familiarity with ICT before the UP course. As found in Phase I evaluation, around three out of every four participants (75.9%) had used a computer in the past year, with 50% confirming that they had access to a computer at home.24 It is important to note that the survey did not ask respondents to specify whether they had Internet access on this computer, or how powerful / old the computer was. The question was instead concerned with exploring frequency of contact with this resource, and with 57.8% of those with confirmed home

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24. This statistic of 50% is calculated by adding the number of respondents who replied ‘Never’ to this question (149) to the number of missing responses to this question (258) and dividing this by the total number of survey respondents (812). This calculation was done because only those who responded affirmatively to this question can be assumed to have home computer access. In other words, there is a good chance that people without home access chose to leave this question blank rather than ticking the ‘Never’ box. The figure of 50% is slightly less than the national proportion of 67% recorded by the ABS in Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005, Cat. 8146.0. However, it is in line with the figure of 55% recorded in Phase I evaluation.
access reporting that they used the home computer at least once a week, this suggests that the course is successful in attracting not only absolute beginners but also those who may have a basic level of computer knowledge.

After the home, the second most popular place individuals accessed computers was at a community centre similar to the one where they were undertaking the UP course (51.5%), followed by the public library (40.9%). Interestingly, community centre access appeared to attract users more often than libraries, with the majority (31.7%) visiting weekly as opposed to once or twice a month (28.6%) for libraries. This may be an issue of location, quality / level of staff assistance, the number of computers available and in particular, issues such as atmosphere – libraries are still likely to constitute a formal learning environment in the mindset of many participants. Finally, only 27.7% reported using a computer at work, which confirms the high proportion of unemployed / retired participants noted earlier.

Moreover, an individual's access to or confidence with computers is not necessarily indicative of how meaningful the actual computer usage is. Despite three-quarters of the adults having used computers in the past year, almost exactly half (49.1%) reported that they had not used email before attending the centre. Slightly fewer (38.7%) also reported not having used the Internet. Of the 61.3% that had used the Internet before attending the UP course, the majority (49.4%) had used it to find information of personal interest to them (their “field of fascination”), to keep in touch with their family and friends (41.4%) and to find information about their local area (36.2%). Encouragingly, over a quarter (26.9%) reported surfing the Internet to help with their children’s schoolwork, and 22.7% had used it to look for work.

4.9 Accessibility of the UP course

There appeared to be 5 main ways in which participants heard about the UP centres, the most popular being through an advertisement or flier in the local press (31.7%), followed closely by word of mouth from a friend or family member (27.8%).

The vast majority of adult participants (77.4%) travelled to the centre by car (many adding that they get a lift with a friend). The proportion who catch public transport such as a bus or train is very low in comparison (9.6%), and yet the location of their residence and / or the centre, combined with the reduced regularity of timetabled services during the day and poor servicing of disadvantaged areas, may have had a strong influence on this, as a centre manager interviewed for the longitudinal case studies confirmed:

“A few years ago, I saved up $600 to buy an ex-government computer, but ended up buying from one of my friends who was also able to give me a very basic lesson in how it worked. Because of this most of what I could do was self-taught, and was limited because I was afraid of going wrong and breaking it.”

“We’ve had a computer at home since 1995, but it was only my son and daughter who used it. I did ask my son for some lessons, but we’re like oil and water – he’s too impatient and I’m too slow! I don’t think family can really teach each other something like this without it being very stressful!”
“Transport to and from the centre is a big problem for our families. We used to have funding to run a minibus to and from locations around the area, but the money dried up and visitors to the centre are sometimes forced to wait up to an hour for a bus after their session. Despite numerous consultations and promises by the City Council, public transport remains inadequate and inefficient, with the responsibility for improvement passed around on a regular basis. Unfortunately, this has led to other less-established community centres having to close down due to lack of attendance / support.”

Although the transport options for travel to the centres appear somewhat limited, a positive finding is that the vast majority (92.2%) of participants attending the UP course were able to get to the centre in 30 minutes or less, with 50.6% living less than 10 minutes away. This suggests that the UP centres are attracting a strongly localised demographic.

4.10 Reason for attending the UP centre
The majority (74.6%) of participants felt that learning technology skills was the most important reason for their attending the UP centre, followed closely by the opportunity to use computers (68.9%), and increase their self-confidence (67.9%). The fact that attendance was free / cheap was also a high priority for a large number (66.1%) of participants (reflecting the high proportion with pension, healthcare and concession cards), as was the opportunity to find information (63.6%). At this stage, one in five participants (20.9%) felt that the chance to find out about future job/study options was unimportant, with a further 10.9% unsure as to its value. This confirms the aptitude of the “fields of fascination” attraction strategy in the centres, where individuals learn ICT skills through their areas of interest, rather than being enrolled in more formal computer training focused around specific outcomes. Finally, the opportunity to find out about future jobs scored the lowest in the reasons deemed to be ‘Very Important’, which is in line with the findings above regarding Internet usage.

25. The distinction between ‘learning’ about computers and simply ‘using’ them is an important one, and refers largely to the mindset of the participant attending the centre with regard to whether they are keen to absorb new information / skills or simply practice / apply their existing knowledge.
A total of 632 adult participants completed the evaluation survey following their course. This represents a 78% response rate in relation to the original 812 who filled out Registration surveys, and is extremely high for survey-based research. The purpose of the Evaluation Surveys was to gather data around participant outcomes that contribute to the goal of the centres providing a place where people could learn not only ICT skills, but where they could also foster increased community connectivity and be motivated / inspired to (re)engage in lifelong learning.

5.1 Patterns of computer use following the course
In the time period since taking the course (8 weeks), the employment circumstances of around 1 in 5 participants (18.7%) had changed. Unfortunately, because a smaller number of participants completed this second survey compared to the Registration survey, the percentages unemployed, employed, retired etc. following the UP course are not directly comparable to those recorded prior to the course. It would anyway be inaccurate to establish causal linkages between participation / completion of the UP course and changes in circumstances, unless this connection was directly specified by the participant.

Nevertheless, it is possible to note a few distinct trends that have developed regarding participant computer use since commencing the course, and these are illustrated in the charts below. The first is that following the course, the participants’ use of computers at community centres increased across all levels of frequency, most likely as their confidence and familiarity with the resources grew. Secondly, the percentage of participants using their computer at home 2-3 times a week and 4 or more times a week also increased, suggesting that participants are practicing the skills learnt on the course, or that their motivation and confidence in exploring this resource had simply increased.

It may appear confusing that some respondents reported that they ‘never’ used computers at community centres after the conclusion of the course. This statistic should be taken as referring to computer use at a community centre other than during the UP training.
Perhaps aligned with this, the data indicate that participants' computer use at a friend or relative's house also increased slightly in frequency since commencing the course, which might again suggest that they are in the process of conquering any fears or embarrassment they may have had regarding their computer ability. It may also simply be that the course has helped them become more involved and active within the community.

5.2 Reasons for continuing attendance at the Centre
The chart below shows how the participants’ priorities in coming to the centre shifted slightly over the duration of the course. The first four indicators – learning technology skills, using computers, using the Internet and finding information – all increased in importance, perhaps as a consequence of participants understanding more about the potential of computer technology in continuing to provide new skills and opportunities in these areas. Visiting the centre to simply check or send email had become less important following the course, most likely because of the range of additional capabilities the UP program opens up for participants. It is unfortunate that the desire to find out about future job / study options appears to have waned following the course, although it should be remembered that a large proportion of adults attending do not come to the centre with this objective in mind. Equally, it may be that the UP curriculum could benefit from more direct demonstrations of how computer technology can aid in the pursuit of employment / further study opportunities. Finally, it is encouraging to see that the issue of cost has become considerably less important to participants following the course, which suggests that their appreciation of the value of what they have learnt and continue to learn has risen as a consequence.

Following the course, 88.8% of participants agreed that they could now use the Internet to find information, which is a significant increase from the comparable figure of 61.3% prior to commencing the program. Similarly, while only 50.9% had been able to use email before the course, 85.3% of participants who finished felt confident sending and receiving email – an increase of over a third (34.4%). Perhaps most importantly of all, 91.1% confirmed that they wished to continue to use computers and the Internet following the conclusion of the course, with 89.4% expressing a desire to learn more about these resources. This suggests that the course has been extremely successful in (re)engaging adult participants in lifelong learning, and in helping many to once again see themselves as capable learners.

Following the course, 77.6% also agreed that they felt confident in using computers and related technology, which represents a significant increase from the levels recorded in the Registration Survey, where only 14.4% felt ‘very confident’ and most (44.3%) suggested they were ‘slightly confident’, with a further 41.3% reported feeling either ‘neutral’, ‘slightly unconfident’ or ‘very unconfident’. It is also in line with the level recorded in Phase I evaluation of 76.5%.
5.3 Adult tasks / activities completed since attending the centre

The Evaluation Survey also asked participants to indicate all of the computer-related activities / tasks that they had completed since attending the centre. The most common task was, as expected, finding information of personal interest (or following their ‘fields of fascination’), which shows the importance of this in acting as a ‘gateway’ activity to other learning and skills development. Four other activities had also been completed by over 50% of the participants: looking for local information and/or events (59.2%); keeping in touch with family / friends (59.3%); typing and printing a letter (59.1%); and playing computer games (52.4%). Participants also showed a strong interest (46.1%) in using the computer / Internet to access government information and services, which suggests they are willing / have been able to improve their knowledge of their rights and responsibilities as both individuals and (for some) parents.

What the data also show is that most participants (77.3%) appear to be reluctant to engage in any kind of online bill payment or banking. This is to be expected given the relatively short exposure they would have had to this facility (if at all), and the fact that they are unlikely to have built up enough trust in the technology yet to undertake such transactions.

5.4 Satisfaction with the Centre / Course

When asked to reflect upon their experience of the centre and the UP course in particular, participants provided extremely positive feedback. Overall, 95.6% affirmed that they had enjoyed learning about computers at the centre, with over 90% consistently reporting that they were either ‘Very Satisfied’ or ‘Satisfied’ across all indicators of measurement. The quality of staff / volunteers, classes / training and opening hours all received a 97.2% satisfaction rating, closely followed by cost (96.8%) and the social atmosphere of the centre (96.3%). All of these findings reinforce not only the UP program structure, but also the suitability of the training environment and the selection criteria that The Smith Family use to determine new UP centres.

It is worth noting that participants were least satisfied with the availability of hardware and software at the centre. This is most likely due to two reasons: firstly, that most centres running the UP program are heavily over-subscribed, reducing the likelihood of gaining access to ‘spare’ resources; secondly, the UP program does not currently include or provide for the hardware that is needed to run the training, and it is therefore the responsibility of each individual centre to secure these resources according to their respective capacities. These factors together would go some way to explaining the lower satisfaction rating recorded here, and point to the potential for The Smith Family and/or Microsoft to investigate the possibility of securing a hardware partner as part of the program.
Overall, 9 out of every 10 respondents (90.1%) confirmed that the centre had made them more interested in learning other things in the future, with more than 4 out of every 5 participants (81.4%) expressing a desire to attend other community education courses in the future. This is excellent, as it suggests that participants are now motivated to embark on the longer journey of lifelong learning.

5.5 Community Connectivity

One of the aims of the UP program is to assist those who lack confidence or who are socially marginalised (for whatever reason) to become more involved with their community again. It would appear from the data that the UP centres play an important role in this, with over three-quarters of participants (77.3%) reporting that they would talk with other people using the centre either every time or most times they were there.

Significantly, over two-thirds (67.6%) confirmed that the others who they would talk to were from a different culture, religion, age and/or background, suggesting that the centres are successfully providing an environment in which all kinds of people feel comfortable coming together and sharing experiences.

Regarding the nature of this interaction, the data also tell us that around a third of participants (31.4%) regularly help those around them with computer / Internet problems, with a similar percentage offering assistance with other non-technological matters from time to time. Close to three-quarters (73.1%) had themselves received help for computer problems from other users at the centre at one time or another, compared to 63.6% who had received assistance with non-computer related issues.

The data also show that around 2 of every 3 participants (64.9%) go on to share the skills that they learn on the course with friends and family members who have not been able to attend, in the process diffusing the knowledge and helping to sustain and/or create new relationships for those involved. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that close to half the participants (46.7%) feel that the centre has made a real difference to their local community, as the quotations in the boxes on the following page illustrate.
The broader impacts of UP

What difference has the Centre made to your local community?

“The community is much more friendly towards each other, as well as having more get-togethers to socialise.”

“Friendships are established; it helps the community get together in an atmosphere that is both relaxed and stimulating.”

“It provides social interaction in a small town, an opportunity for learning new technology and keeping in contact with friends and family elsewhere.”

“It has provided a meeting place for people to explore options and undertake courses.”

“It brings basic education services to people who would not otherwise have them.”

“We now have more choices in our education…”

“The centre is becoming a central point for meeting and learning and has opened up new ideas for this area which I have never seen before. Thank you!”

“We don’t have to travel so far to get information…”

“It has made information technology accessible to ordinary people in a small community.”

“It has helped people like myself be aware of what there is for us in adult education.”

What difference has the Centre made to your life?

70.2% suggested that the centre had made a positive difference in their own life.

“Having moved to a small country town from another capital city, I miss family and friends, and coming to the centre gives me the opportunity to meet new people, exchange conversation as well as use the Internet to email people and undertake my hobby – family history research. It’s a sort of lifeline for me.”

“It has given me more confidence in myself and computers, and I have made more friends.”

“A boost in confidence and increase in self-esteem. I learnt practical skills for finding work and this led to me finding full-time employment.”

“I am now able to email with my grandkids overseas.”

“I can communicate with everyone through the Internet via emails and have joined forums of interest. As well, I can also save a fortune on postage by sending emails and cards online.”

“I have been able to teach my daughter about resumes and databases, as well as spreadsheets and presentations.”

“It has a big impact on my life because I am residing in this area and I was lonely after my kids started school. So this centre is the best thing to happen to me. I meet new people, learn new things and have become a part-time volunteer at the centre!”

“It has given me confidence in returning to the workforce.”

“Meeting and getting to know my neighbours, and being able to socialise as well as getting out of the house.”

“Being retired I was a little reluctant to learn about computers. Family and friends encouraged me and since doing this course I have thoroughly enjoyed it and am looking forward to learning more!”

Has coming to the centre made any difference to your local community?

Has coming to the centre made any difference to your life?
6.0 Youth Engagement

The aim of the Registration (pre-program) surveys was to construct a demographic portrait of the youth who participate in the UP program, and to assess how this corresponds to the aim of the initiative in attracting individuals from disadvantaged and culturally diverse backgrounds. A total of 268 youth completed the Registration survey in either a paper or online format, with the data then collated into a single dataset for analysis below.

6.1 Demographics

The gender ratio among youth participants was more balanced than for the adults, and the males (56.4%) actually just outnumbered the females (43.6%). In terms of age, the majority (54.2%) were aged between 10 and 14 years old, although over one-third (37%) were adolescents between 15 and 19 years old. Almost half (47.9%) were from lone parent families (far outweighing the 19% of youth living in these families throughout Australia\(^\text{27}\)), and almost 1 in 5 were born overseas.\(^\text{28}\) 12.6% also reported speaking a language other than English at home,\(^\text{29}\) and more than 1 in 10 identified as an Indigenous Australian, thus confirming, as Phase I did, that the centres are successfully attracting a high proportion of disadvantaged youth.

In terms of their education, 99.1% reported that they were still at school at the time of attending the centre, with the majority in Years 7 (18.6%) and 3 (14.0%). The survey also explored attitudes to and experience of employment, given that many of the youth attending the centre were of an age when they might be considering this issue. In the context of this particular evaluation, the majority of youth had not yet reached secondary school at the time of attending the centre, so it is unsurprising that 88.5% were not working. However, while 64.2% felt they were too young to have a job (and 10.1% had no desire for one), 14.2% suggested that they would indeed like to be working, whatever job they had in mind. Of the 11.5% who reported current employment, this appeared to be very casual, with the majority (53.8%) working between 1-5 hours a week, and 38.5% working between 6-10 hours a week.

\(^{27}\) The number of children aged 0-14 years living in one-parent families is projected to increase from 745,000 in 2001 (19% of children aged 0-14 years) to between 875,000 (23%) and 1.3 million (33%) by 2026. Source: ABS (2006) 2006 Yearbook Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics: Canberra.

\(^{28}\) The top three countries of birth other than Australia were New Zealand (62.2%), Sudan / Somalia (15.5%) and Croatia (6.7%).

\(^{29}\) The top three languages other than English spoken at home were Vietnamese (2.8%), Somali (2.3%) and Samoan (2.3%).
It was obvious that computers had played a big part in attracting youth to the centres, given that the majority (37.7%) expressed a strong consistent interest in learning new things related to computers, followed closely by the things they learnt at school (36.1%). A large proportion reported that they enjoyed learning new things at school, which suggests these youth may not be those at risk of disengaging from education at a young age. Moreover, the findings also indicate that the youth were less comfortable (or perhaps more cautious) regarding learning in environments outside school, underscoring the importance of the centre’s efforts to create a non-threatening environment for participants.

6.2 ICT / Computer Experience

Around 74.3% of youth surveyed reported accessing a home computer in the last 12 months, which is a similar proportion to that revealed in Phase I. Many of these were highly engaged with their home computers, with over a quarter (27%) using it four or more times a week. As expected, the most popular access point for computers was at school, where the majority (87%) appeared to have regular opportunities to use computers each week. In line with the adults, public libraries did not appear to be attractive access points for youth, with 56.6% reporting that they had never taken advantage of this resource in the last 12 months.

6.3 Travelling to the Centre

The majority (49.1%) of the youth reported walking to the centre, which suggests that either the centres are located in easy reach of many families, or that the public transport is inadequate (only 7.9% specified a bus or train in their journey). In fact, almost five times as many youth walk to the centres as adults, most likely because their transport options are more limited. Meanwhile, just over 2 out of every 5 children (40.2%) arrived at the centre in a car, but this dataset does not permit speculation on whether this was with a family member driving or as part of a car-share agreement with other centre attendees.
6.4 Youth reasons for attendance
In contrast to the adult participants, who were most keen to learn technology skills, youth based their attendance at the centre primarily around the opportunity to use computers and the Internet (e.g. as in an Internet café). They were less concerned (perhaps because of their greater self-confidence) with receiving guidance and direction around new skills, and were less inclined than adults to see the centre as a learning opportunity.

Finding out about future job / study options ranked as the least important reason for attending, which is in line with the fact that most were, at the time of the survey, at an age where this consideration may be seen as relatively unimportant. Finding general information and using the computer / internet for homework appeared to be more influential factors in their decision. The opportunity to play computer games was lower in importance than might be expected of this age cohort, although this may be because they are more comfortable doing this at home.

“I enjoyed coming here. I have made lots of friends. It’s fun and I want to come back.”
A total of 178 youth returned the Evaluation surveys. This represents a response rate of 66% from the original sample of 268, which is still a very good response rate for survey-based research, particularly in light of the age group targeted. The purpose of the Evaluation surveys was to gather data around participant outcomes that contribute to the goal of the centres providing a place where people could learn not only ICT skills, but where they could also foster increased community connectivity and be motivated / inspired to (re)engage in lifelong learning.

7.1 Patterns of computer use following the course
As with the adult Evaluation Surveys, it is possible to note three distinct positive trends that have developed regarding youth participant computer use since commencing the course, and these are illustrated in the charts below. The first is that following the course, the frequency with which youth use their home computers has increased, suggesting that participants are practicing the skills learnt on the course, or that their motivation and confidence in exploring this resource had grown.

Secondly, the participants’ use of computers at school showed signs of moving away from the dominant weekly access, with the percentages of youth accessing a computer 2-3 times and 4 or more times a week increasing. This may be a motivational issue, in the sense of participants turning to the computer more often after having derived a stronger grasp of the different tasks / activities available, or it may be structural, in the sense of the school providing students with more time or resources for computer use. Taking into account the fact that three out of the four frequency indicators also increased regarding youth computer use at a friend / relative’s, it would be reasonable to assume that motivational boosts are likely to have played a significant role in all of these trends.

7.2 Reasons for continuing attendance at the centre
The chart on the following page compares the importance attributed to various reasons for attending the centre both before and after undertaking the UP course. The data suggest that three indicators in particular have significantly increased their importance for youth: the opportunity to learn technology skills, to
find information and to use the computer / Internet for homework. This last trend is especially encouraging, as it indicates that the UP course helps motivate and equip school students with the abilities needed to explore computer technology as an educational resource. While the impetus to find information appears stronger than before, it would appear that this is linked more to the students’ current circumstances and needs (e.g. homework) than future job / study options for example. On the other hand, previous research by The Smith Family has shown that students in Years 8 and 9 are already beginning to identify paths they want to follow in terms of work, and there is potential for UP centres to play a more direct role in this respect.30

7.3 Confidence with computer technology
Approximately 3 of every 4 youth participants (72.9%) agreed that they felt confident using computers and related technology having completed the training, which represents an increase of over 10% prior to the course. This improvement was particularly evident across the particular skill sets they had developed, with 90.8% agreeing that they were now able to use the Internet to find information, and around 2 of every 3 participants (62.4%) confirming that they could send and receive emails. Most importantly, 88.2% expressed a desire to continue using computers and the Internet, with 82.3% eager to learn more about what these resources had to offer.

7.4 The nature of youth computer / Internet use
As with the adult Evaluation Survey, youth participants were asked to indicate all of the activities / tasks that they had completed since attending the centre. The most common activity, with almost 8 out of every 10 youth (78.6%) having undertaken this task, was getting help with schoolwork, followed by keeping in touch with friends / relatives (54.9%), and typing and printing a letter (52.6%). In light of UP’s aims in creating and sustaining learners, the fact that educational activities figure so highly is excellent, and is a sign of the program / centre’s success in promoting lifelong learning.

Youth participants appear least inclined to use their computer and Internet skills to prepare a resume, which could be a consequence of their age, their low motivation to look for work, or of having a lack of guidance / encouragement in this area from those around them.
7.5 Satisfaction with the Centre / UP Course
When asked to reflect upon their overall experience of the centre and the UP course in particular, youth participants provided positive feedback similar to adults. 87% were satisfied with the range of computer programs on offer at the centre and used in the course, with 89.2% praising the help they had received from staff and volunteers. 93.2% were happy with the classes / training they had undertaken, and the location of the centre was also deemed to be appropriate for 91.4% of the youth. Overall, 92.6% affirmed that they had enjoyed learning about computers at the centre, with more than 8 out of every 10 (81.3%) expressing a desire to continue learning in the future.

7.6 Community Connectivity
Just under half (49.7%) of the youth who attended the UP centre reported talking with others on a regular basis, and a further 37.3% from time to time. Over two-thirds (68.2%) of these conversations were held with individuals different to them in age, ethnicity, religion, background etc, which is a similar proportion to that recorded in the adult Evaluation Surveys.

The final question in the Youth Evaluation survey asked whether, since attending the centre, they had taken on a part-time or casual job. 10.9% replied that they had, and while the skills they had learnt while on the course (e.g. in finding information on the Internet, writing letters etc.) are likely to have contributed to this outcome, the dataset limits the possibility of drawing any stronger causal connections.

Some of the participants then took the opportunity to write a few comments in the survey on their experience at the end of the course, including:

“I have been very happy in this computer class.”
“It’s been so much fun, I can’t wait to come back!”
“Really cool and good.”
“Well structured class with a very patient instructor.”

Regarding the nature of these interactions with others at the centre, 29% of youth reported providing assistance to others for computer / Internet related problems every time or most times they visited, while just under half (48%) received similar help themselves from another user on a regular basis.
This report details the findings of the second phase of evaluation undertaken by The Smith Family into Microsoft Australia’s ‘Unlimited Potential’ initiative. It has shown that the overarching goals of the initiative in supporting disadvantaged individuals and their families to realise a better future through education has been achieved through the use of computer technology as a tool for re-engagement with lifelong learning. It is also evident from the data that the UP centres not only provide individuals with the benefits of new and improved skill sets, confidence and motivation to continue learning, but that they also function to facilitate and promote the strengthening of community connectedness and the creation of social capital in disadvantaged areas.

For some, the UP centres have become a ‘lifeline’ through which to escape social isolation, while for others the course constitutes the first important step on the journey (back) to economic independence and potential labour force participation. Both adults and youth have, through the unique environment and ‘fields of fascination’ approach promoted by the centres, come to discover (or rediscover) the value of education in their lives and its ability to unlock opportunities for greater social and economic participation in Australian society.

8.0 Conclusion

“It has made information technology accessible to ordinary people in a small community.”
Key Findings from Phase I Evaluation

The 2005 report summarising the findings of Phase I of The Smith Family UP evaluation, “It Takes a Community to Bridge a Divide”, included five Key Learnings that had arisen from the data. These are listed below, although readers are encouraged to refer to the original report for more contextual information.31

Key Learning 1:
Individuals can re-engage in lifelong learning through their ‘Fields of Fascination’. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the most common barrier to learning is motivation and understanding the benefits of learning.32 A key feature of UP in Australia is a focus on non-formal learning as a means to re-engaging disadvantaged Australians in lifelong learning. Many participants in UP have had negative experiences in formal education and do not see themselves as learners. Through the approach developed in partnership with RMIT University, participants are encouraged to re-engage in lifelong learning by focusing on topics of personal interest, or their ‘fields of fascination’. These can cover any area, from gardening to cooking to V8 supercars. Participants learn ICT literacy skills as they explore their interests. These skills are largely incidental to the overriding aim of helping people believe they can learn (again) and see themselves as learners.

Key Learning 2:
Partnerships and community engagement are vital for CTLC sustainability. A key to sustainability is through developing meaningful partnerships. Community organisations, businesses and individuals possess numerous skills, resources and networks, which can be drawn upon to assist CTLCs to achieve their desired educational and social outcomes.33 Organisations working in isolation are unlikely to be sustainable and/or successful. The sustainability of a centre is highly dependant upon funding it can attract or revenue it can raise. After many years some centres and learning networks have ceased operating or are currently vulnerable to closure partly because of a dependence on a single source of centralised funding, usually from government.34 Since 1997 the federal government has injected large amounts of funding into CTLCs under the Networking the Nation initiative. The 2003-2004 budget, for example, included $27.9 million. Yet from 1 July 2004 funding stopped. Thus the issue of sustainability is now paramount in the mind of those who have survived, especially because most centres have remained reliant on government funding.35

Key Learning 3:
Local success revolves around ‘local champions’. As part of managing and coordinating the growth of UP in Australia, TSF identifies communities across Australia likely to benefit most from digital inclusion programs. This depends in part on community needs, but also on the communities’ capacity to use and build on the resources provided by UP. Sufficient infrastructure must be in place for UP to be effective in a community. The required level of physical infrastructure is relatively simple to define and procure, however the required level of social infrastructure is more nebulous. When recruiting CTLC partners for UP, the single most important factor TSF considers is the strength, capacity and quantity of ‘local champions’ or pro-active leaders who are well connected and engaged in the community. Such ‘champions’ come from various backgrounds and cannot be easily defined, except perhaps for displaying a proven track record for making a difference in the community through worthwhile initiatives.

Key Learning 4:
Training programs must be flexible to meet local needs. UP in Australia is a national program delivered locally by selected community partners who are already actively engaged in their communities. The community partners are empowered with the flexibility to deliver the program depending on their local conditions. UP recognises that local community organisations are best placed to assess local needs and demands. The differing types of CTLCs delivering UP in Australia include community centres, libraries, community colleges, primary and high schools, learning centres, and youth centres. Many of these centres are used to a top-down approach where they

31. The reports from Phase I & II Evaluation are available on The Smith Family’s web site, www.smithfamily.com.au
are instructed as to what courses will be offered, the manner in which they will be delivered and what outcomes should be attained. While UP has a formal curriculum, which is utilised as an effective resource, it is very flexible in its approach. Although a few centres found this flexibility challenging initially, it is now overwhelmingly perceived as a major asset of the UP model.

**Key Learning 5:**

**Volunteers are invaluable but not ‘free’.** Volunteers are a valuable resource and have been heavily utilised by CTLCs in Australia and around the world. In 2001 alone, over 1,000 volunteers spent more than 80,000 hours assisting CTLCs. While much has been written about the advantages of using volunteers, there are also challenges and our experience to date confirms much of the wider literature. Although an invaluable resource volunteers require time consuming management, ongoing support, training, precise information, clearly defined policies and their skills and interests need to be matched to available roles. Managing volunteers is not the same as managing staff, but volunteer management still consumes significant resources.

The UP funding provided to CTLC partners to deliver Computer Clubs is intended to help cover the costs of volunteer recruitment and management. However, we must recognise that not all centres can realistically attract and retain good volunteers and occasionally paid resources are necessary. The TSF affiliated UP centres are not required to provide certified/qualified trainers. The level of ICT knowledge required is relatively low. As many of the participants experience learning difficulties and/or have had negative experiences with formal learning, the important characteristic for trainers is that they can empathise with the participants and engage them.

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Appendix B

UP Centres participating in Phase II evaluation

New South Wales
- Adult Migrant English Service, Burwood
- Bonnyrigg Community Centre
- Broken Hill Skills Centre
- Coffs Harbor PCYC
- East Fairfield Community Centre
- Kyogle CTC
- Mission Australia-Wagga Wagga
- Nowra Youth Centre
- Old Bar CTC
- Port Stephens Telecentre
- Redfern Computer Centre
- Southern Tablelands Education Centre
- Tamworth PCYC
- Taree Community College

South Australia
- Aldinga Community centre
- Anglicare Whyalla
- Bagster Community House (City of Salisbury)
- Burton Park Community House (City of Salisbury)
- Christie Downs Community House
- Eudunda Telecentre
- Morella Community House (City of Salisbury)
- Robertstown Community centre

Tasmania
- Oak Lifestyle Options inc
- St. Mary’s Online

Victoria
- Bairnsdale West Primary School
- Eaglehawk Focus Centre
- Future Employment Opportunities (Eaglehawk)
- Guthridge Primary School
- Hume Global Learning Village
- Infoxchange Australia
- RMIT
- TSF Collingwood UP Centre
- Yarraville Community Centre

Queensland
- Kingston East Neighbourhood Group
- Leichhardt Community Group
- Pathways Enterprise Centre
- Silver Bridle Neighbourhood Centre
- The Victory Centre
- Twin Rivers Care
- Zillmere Community Centre

Western Australia
- Gosnells PCYC
- Technology Assisting Disability WA
- YMCA Youth Leederville