

# Emerging Patterns in Public Perceptions of Computers

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## Abstract

Over 18 months, three classes in UNITEC's Master of Computing programme have conducted surveys to investigate public perceptions of computers. This poster presents the survey results and highlights some interesting patterns in the responses (including age and gender differences), and how these have varied over time.

## Introduction

One of the four compulsory courses in UNITEC's Master of Computing programme has the stated aim "to enable students to analyse the impact of information technology on society from social and ethical perspectives". Topics covered include historical development of IT, culture and gender issues, strengths and weaknesses of new and emerging technologies, ethical behaviour and criteria for professionalism. Over 18 months, 66 students have taken the course.

## The Survey

As part of the information gathering for the course, each student had to get at least 7 people (at least one per decade) to complete a survey. The survey established each respondent's age, gender, current weekly computer useage, first computer use (what, where and when), and first significant impact of computers on them. Respondents were then asked to identify

- two ways in which computers have made their lives better
- two ways in which computers have made their lives worse
- two ways in which computers could make the world better in future
- two ways in which computers could make the world worse in future.

Most of the impacts identified in the last four questions could be placed in one of twelve categories: business, communication, dependency/vulnerability, education, health, information, keeping up, leisure, security/privacy, social, time, work.

## Conclusion

Some interesting patterns have emerged from the nearly 500 responses. For example:

- the top three to five impacts have remained fairly constant:
  - 1 life better: communication, then information, then education/leisure/work (order varied)
  - 2 life worse: dependency/vulnerability, health, social, time (order varied)
  - 3 world better: communication, then information then education
  - 4 world worse: dependency/vulnerability, social, security/privacy (order varied)
- more women than men thought computers had made communication better in their lives
- more women than men thought computers had made them more dependent/vulnerable
- more women than men thought information from computers would make the world better
- most of those who thought computers had improved their leisure were males under 20
- most of those worried about security/privacy issues were aged 30 or over
- business impacts were mentioned by very few respondents aged under 30.