

Free computing courses in NZ: considering their impact and importance

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ABSTRACT

Thousands of people throughout New Zealand are now able to access free, basic-level computer training at a range of institutions. This movement which started at UCOL in Palmerston North in 2000, has now spread across polytechnics and institutes of technology to private education providers.

In some cases partnerships have developed with schools and other organisations, so that the free training courses can be offered in small and rural communities, or together with private enterprise. The courses are generally eligible for government funding as community courses, but may be funded through other arrangements. They can be offered free as they require minimal staffing for the self-paced, mainly self-directed delivery, and make maximum off-peak use of otherwise empty facilities. The courses form part of polytechnic, community and private sector initiatives to lift national levels of computing and IT literacy.

Various names are used for these courses, including Community Computing, E-4-Free, Computer Gym, Computing 4 Free and others. The courses attract a wide range of students who take up the free training offered for varying reasons. There are also differing outcomes: some courses offer free training but no formal recognition of achievement, while others are free National Certificate programmes with opportunities to be assessed against NZQA unit standards and gain qualifications.

Issues have been raised informally in relation to the courses, including quality aspects, continuance of government funding, and gaps in access and availability. As yet there are no statistics available nationally in the public arena on the numbers of free courses and people enrolling in these. Some limited information

available indicates participants include a significant number of older people, unemployed people and people from a diverse range of ethnic groups with strong representation from Maori and Pacific people. There is also little information available about the impact of these courses on similar fee-paying programmes, or subsequent enrolment in higher-level programmes. These statistics, together with information on how these courses could contribute to resolving access issues, increasing employment readiness and raising e-literacy levels could be valuable for a number of government departments formulating policy in these areas.

Keywords

Free computer courses, e-literacy, workforce development

1. INTRODUCTION

At a Central Region Polytechnics meeting hosted at Universal College of Learning (UCOL) in Palmerston North in May 2000, as part of an information sharing session, a UCOL representative mentioned a new initiative to provide free computing courses aimed at up skilling local business people and the community, with the help of a grant from the Eastern and Central Community Trust. The courses would cover software packages in general use, be self-paced and mainly self-directed, and held at off peak times when computer rooms were under-utilised. Self-directed workbooks to support the courses would also be made available. Within two months similar free courses were offered at

Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT) in Hawkes Bay, then a little later at Whitireia Community Polytechnic in Porirua and Kapiti, followed by many others.

The initiative spread widely across polytechnics and institutes of technology to private education providers, and thousands of people throughout New Zealand are now able to access free, basic-level computer training in a range of places. The courses are generally eligible for government funding as community courses, and can be offered free as they require minimal staffing for the self-paced, mainly self-directed delivery, and make maximum off-peak use of otherwise empty facilities. Some access Community Trust, Iwi or other sources of funding. For many institutions, these courses have resulted in a significant boost to overall funding. To be eligible for most of the free courses, people must usually be over 16 and New Zealand citizens or permanent residents.

The majority of the courses offered by various organisations are similar in structure and generally cover such areas as keyboarding, word processing, spreadsheets, desktop and file management, databases, presentation software, publishing software, email and Internet. Some include accounting and other packages. Self-paced and self-directed material is usually provided for students, either in printed form or online. Little or no direct teaching is available however assistance to get started and ongoing support is provided in various ways. Most courses do not include any formal recognition of achievement, although some are planning to link with the International Computer Driving Licence (ICDL), accredited through the NZ Computer Society. A recent development has been a number of institutions offering free courses consisting of NZQA unit standards, with provision to gain National Certificates in Computing at lower levels.

After the initial wholesale approach, a number of segmented models have appeared, aimed at meeting the specific needs of particular sectors and interest groups, for example Maori, Pacific Islands, the elderly, business, professional development for primary and secondary teachers, migrant groups and others. Many institutions have developed partnerships with schools, marae, private companies and other organisations, so that the free training courses can be offered in small and rural communities, or to various sections of the community. An example is the Key4Free programme which is a joint initiative funded by the Tindall Foundation between The Warehouse and the Tertiary Accord of New Zealand, (Manukau Institute of Technology, Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology, Universal College of Learning, Otago Polytechnic and The Open Polytechnic), to offer free computing courses at Warehouse Stationery stores.

Another example is the partnership between Positively Wellington Business and Whitireia Community Polytechnic to provide free computer courses for the Smart Newtown initiative, at the Newtown Community Centre, Pacific Island Network Centre and the Newtown Park Flats. Another is the partnership between Waikato Institute of Technology and a private company, Technocat, to provide free Internet and Web training. SeniorNet has agreements with some institutions to provide the facilities for computing courses for people over 55. Many other examples are evident.

2. CONSIDERING IMPACT AND IMPORTANCE

The initiative to provide free computing courses has no central organising force, however information on these has been shared freely among many of the institutions involved. Information about the structure, content and availability of the free courses is readily available on organisations' websites. It appears that most if not all polytechnics and institutes of technology are running these courses in various forms, mainly supported through government funding.

A number of questions arise when the importance and impact of these free computing courses is considered: where courses are being offered, who is taking them, what knowledge is being developed as a result, how useful they are, what kind of standard, whether the informality is cost-effective or wasteful. Is this an effective way to lift national levels of computing and IT literacy, and contribute to supporting e-citizens in an e-government environment? Is it a good way of bridging the digital divide for the unemployed, elderly, Maori and Pacific peoples? Does it reduce isolation for rural areas? Is it diverting resources away from other higher priority uses? Has the practice matured or is it still spreading? Are the marginal benefits of extending participation now tending to zero? In addition, there appears to be little tie up between the move to the Tertiary Education Commission and a structured portfolio of tertiary education provision, and this mainly unstructured provision of training: unstructured as to content, quality, number of providers, locality, relevance and other dimensions.

As yet there are no statistics available nationally in the public arena on the numbers of free courses and people enrolling. Some limited information available from one institution together with anecdotal feedback from others indicates that the courses attract a wide range of students who take up the free training offered for varying reasons, and that many of these

people are new to tertiary institutions. Participants appear to include a significant number of older people, unemployed people and people from a diverse range of ethnic groups with strong representation from Maori and Pacific people. With an ageing population that may need to work longer, and growing numbers of Maori and Pacific who represent a creative workforce resource, research into an initiative that appears to support involvement of these groups in initial skills training or retraining options could be of benefit.

The free computing courses currently available have differing outcomes. Some courses offer modules that provide free training in software packages but no formal recognition of achievement. Others that have emerged recently have a broader aim and content, and provide opportunities to be assessed against NZQA unit standards and gain national qualifications. Carich Computer Gym and Te Wananga o Aotearoa both offer free computing courses that include assessment for NZQA Framework qualifications such as the National Certificate in Computing Levels 2 and 3. Whitireia Community Polytechnic is offering the National Certificate in Business Administration and Computing Level 2 free in semester two this year. Other examples are available.

There is little information available at a national level about the impact of these courses on similar fee-paying programmes, or subsequent enrolment in higher-level programmes, although some institutions are following up on this. A study to identify any positive and negative consequences could produce useful information for future planning.

The Computers in Homes project piloted in Porirua and Panmure by the 20/20 Communications Trust aimed to exploit the potential embodied in the infrastructure and skills in schools and tertiary institutions throughout the country to build community capability, by investigating the benefits of computers in homes for teaching and learning. Part of the training offered to families involved in the project in Porirua included free computing courses and support from Whitireia Community Polytechnic. The initial report on the pilot completed by a researcher from Victoria University concluded that communication between the home and school improved greatly. Parents also learned to prepare CVs and gained the confidence to apply for jobs that required basic computing skills which they previously lacked. Other community initiatives are also linked with the free courses. Further investigation of free computing courses as a generic workforce development initiative throughout New Zealand could be undertaken.

3. RESEARCH PROJECT

A research project to examine the areas discussed above has been proposed and a full proposal is being prepared. The main aims would be to understand what is happening now, identify any gaps, consider other funding possibilities, compare and analyse outcomes, consider user evaluations, identify how many students staircase to mainstream courses, and consider the impact on employment capability and achievement. The economic and social benefits to be gained through the potential contribution to productivity improvement are also of importance. The scope has not yet been finalised, and could be national or limited to a number of local studies. Links to any existing research in this area either in New Zealand or overseas would be included. Access to relevant data and information would be required from the institutions involved and their students.

The research would involve analysis of a range of statistics, together with information on how the free courses may be contributing to resolving access issues, increasing employment readiness, and raising e-literacy levels ie underwriting some of the long-term objectives on e-government. Results would provide support for decisions on whether the courses should continue, under what funding arrangements, and whether any intervention is needed or the existing process remain.

4. CONCLUSION

The manner of the introduction and spread of free computing courses in New Zealand reflects an organic bottom-up development with little or no central organisation. As a complex adaptive system, it is a good example of a “kiwi” model of development: innovative application of funding, wide sharing of information, quick response to the concept and adaptation to suit local circumstances. Institutions have implemented variations, and developed partnerships, to suit local needs.

Anecdotal evidence supports a number of positive outcomes claimed for the free computing course model. However, research based on relevant statistics and other appropriate primary information is needed before any objective and valid conclusions can be drawn. Results from such research could have value for a number of government departments formulating separate policy in specific areas. The Tertiary Education Commission, Ministry of Education, Department of Labour particularly the Community Employment Group, Skill New Zealand, State Services Commission E-Government Unit, Te Puni Kokiri and



the Ministry of Social Development are potential research users.

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