



Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
The Australian National University

Education, Training and Indigenous Futures
CAEPR Policy Research: 1990-2007

Research Summaries

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Reference No. 38

Summarising: Daly, (2005), *Bridging the Digital Divide: The Role of Community Online Access Centres in Indigenous Communities*

Responsibility for the preparation of this research summary rests with the authors of the MCEETYA report *Education, Training and Indigenous Futures: CAEPR Policy Research 1990-2007* and not the original author(s) of the summarised material.

The MCEETYA report and associated research summaries are available at <www.anu.edu.au/caepr/education.php>.

Title of Research:

Bridging the Digital Divide: The Role of Community Online Access Centres in Indigenous Communities.

Research Publication:

CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 273/2005

<http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2005_DP273.pdf>

Name of Researcher (s):

A.E. Daly

Time Period:

2001-2005

Geographic Location:

Nationwide, with an additional fieldwork focus on rural NSW (Dubbo, Mennindee, Wilcannia).

Methodology:

This research is based upon data from the 2001 ABS Census of Population and Housing, which it uses to highlight the 'digital divide' in computer and internet usage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This information is used to complement a review of recent literature, and fieldwork conducted at community online access centres in rural NSW.

Aims:

The aim of this research, based on the census evidence of Indigenous disadvantage in access to private computing and internet facilities, is to evaluate whether the development of 'community online access centres' can help to bridge the digital divide.

Selected findings and insights:

The study found that in 2001, the total Indigenous population that **used a computer at home** was well below that for the non-Indigenous population in each State:

- The ACT had the highest proportion of computer users among both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, but it was in Tasmania where the gap between the two groups was smallest.
- The two jurisdictions that stand out as having the lowest ratio of Indigenous to non-Indigenous computer users in the population were Western Australia and the Northern Territory. In each of these States the ratio of Indigenous users to non-Indigenous users was less than one-third.

Use of a computer at home was higher in the **capital cities** than outside. While over 40% of the non-Indigenous population in each capital city used a computer at home, the share of the Indigenous population using a computer was less than 20% except in Melbourne and Hobart, where about one-third of the population had a computer at home.

Computer usage was lower outside the capital cities in each State, but particularly so for the Indigenous population.

- The largest proportion of the Indigenous population outside the capital cities using a computer at home was in Tasmania at about one-third; but
- In the Northern Territory and Western Australia less than 10% of the Indigenous population used a computer at home compared with about 40% of the non-Indigenous population.

The study found that being Indigenous was one of the most significant negative determinants of computer and internet usage across Australia. It also found that:

- Educational qualifications and income were the major determinants of internet access at home; therefore
- The relationship between Indigenous education and employment was directly correlated to the access and utilisation of these technologies.

The paper concludes that these characteristics, coupled with the remote nature of many Indigenous communities, make any gradual improvement in private access unlikely. It points out that one way to address the digital divide, and the educational, economic and administrative disadvantages to which it is correlated, has been for the government to initiate and fund community online access centres. The success of these centres in Indigenous communities was dependent upon several factors:

- Community support for their introduction;
- Envisioning and implementing a development role for these centres, whereby they become integrated with other needs, services and organisations within the community; and
- The inclusion of provision for significant training programs in any funding model: to ensure the maintenance of such technologies and programs can be undertaken by local Indigenous people.

The success of these centres remained contingent upon their eventual capacity to become financially self-supporting. This required centres to become able to generate income, which, at an early stage of development, remained a significant problem.

Educational implications:

Internet access, whilst often envisaged in terms of entertainment by young people, can also provide them with reading, comprehension and communication skills they would not otherwise be acquiring. It is also increasingly a valuable educational aide in classrooms, and in terms of accessing online programs for remote students offered by TAFEs. So while lack of *private* access to the internet might currently be correlated to lower education levels, in some ways it is possible to envision how the increased access to these services through *community* resources might in turn be correlated with increased opportunity and involvement in education.

The ultimate success of online access centres is dependent upon the integration and articulation of such centres with other organisations and community partnerships, such as schools and health services. [learning centres] [curriculum]

Relevance:

Domain 5: Pathways to training, employment and higher education

Access to post-compulsory schooling, training, employment and higher education

Pathways and strategies for remote locations

Related papers:

N. Biddle, B.H. Hunter and R.G. Schwab, 'Mapping Indigenous Educational Participation', *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 267*, 2004.

<http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/DP/2004_DP267.pdf>