



Casting the Net

Five years of Tasmanian Communities Online

Incorporating findings from *Local Access – Global Reach*

The report of the evaluation of the

Tasmanian Communities Online program

1998 – 2002

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ICT can help achieve a community's social, economic, political or cultural goals. Fundamental to this is access to the technology, since without at least minimal access, little can be achieved.

Gurstein¹

Using and building social capital are not only possible outcomes of learning, but they are also processes by which learning occurs. Balatti and Falk²

The renewal which ICTs can offer regional or depressed communities is not only in solving problems, but also in instilling hope for the future. Rhys Edwards³

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Making connections

When Jacinta Chandler became aware that there were some Deaf and hearing-impaired people who would like to use the Brighton Online Access Centre, she offered to help out. Staff and volunteers at the Centre were not sure how to communicate with Deaf people. Jacinta however, had learned Australian Sign Language (Auslan) at Claremont College, which is part of the Claremont Project for Deaf and hearing-impaired students.

She was happy to volunteer her interpreting skills on Saturday afternoons and the Centre was glad to be able to provide an extra service for their community. Jacinta was a regional winner in the 2002 Learning Together Award for Education Excellence.

MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTER

Since it began in early 1998, the Tasmanian Communities Online network of 64 Online Access Centres has built an enviable reputation in providing equitable access to information and communication technology. In comparison with similar programs nationally and overseas, the network has made significant progress in addressing the digital divide. Over 51,000 Tasmanians have registered to use an Online Access Centre representing some 13% of the population living in rural and regional Tasmania. Of these, 31,500 are regular patrons.

With significant financial and in-kind support as well as central coordination provided to the network by the State Government, the Online Access Centres provide considerable benefits for communities. Supported by their local Online Access Centre, many Tasmanians have acquired new skills that have helped them keep in touch with family and friends as well as develop new local, national and international social networks. Many have rediscovered an excitement for learning and are pursuing fresh interests, assisting others to acquire new skills or are undertaking formal education and training.

Online Access Centres are overseen by their community and the services provided strongly reflect local needs. The fact that over 1,700 volunteers either administer Online Access Centres or assist with their day-to-day operations, reflects strong community ownership. Centres are highly valued for their friendly and helpful staff and trained volunteers, the one-to-one assistance and personalised services as well as opening hours that meet the needs of the local community. Increasingly, small businesses are valuing their capacity to source local training and e-business support tailored to their individual needs.

Online Access Centres are playing a significant role in making rural and regional communities vibrant and desirable places in which to live. I am constantly impressed by the many reports of personal achievements from patrons of Online Access Centres. Many people owe newfound livelihoods and purpose to the skills, confidence and social connections gained through an Online Access Centre.

Some of these personal accounts are included in the following pages and as such, are testimony to the success of the Tasmanian Communities Online network. Along with statistics drawn from *Local Access – Global Reach*, the research report accompanying this publication, these stories highlight the fact that no matter where Tasmanians live or what their personal circumstances, they have access to lifelong education opportunities, to government and other online services and are able to assist in building the capacity of their community.

I look forward to the next five years, confident that the network of Online Access Centres will develop new services and partnerships, playing an important part in supporting their local communities.



Ms Paula Wriedt MHA
Minister for Education





Fun with computers

One Monday morning a month, a bus pulls up at Scottsdale Online Access Centre and five members – one in a wheelchair – of the Day Centre linked to the North East Soldiers Memorial Hospital arrive for their session of *Fun with Computers*. The volunteers at the Online Access Centre get them started while the bus heads back to the Hospital to collect four or five more clients.

The sessions have been running since Scottsdale Online Access Centre made a decision to reach out to groups that were not accessing its services.

David Waldron – one of the Centre’s coordinators – had a background in health and knew that the Day Centre group for adults with an intellectual disability was often looking for new activities.

And **Pat Bennett** – another coordinator – had seen how equipment and support accessed through Tech Assist* could assist them with designing a program. So David, Pat and a group of volunteers, worked out a program that they thought would fit the bill and started up the monthly sessions, held outside regular Centre hours.

David admits that he and Pat weren’t quite sure at first what the best approach might be. ‘But that kept us on our toes, noting what was working and what was not. We listened to what the clients needed, and noted when they were ready to move on to new skills.’

They started with email, which the clients were keen to learn. But most didn’t have anyone they could send messages to, as their families generally didn’t have email accounts. A connection with Seniors Link provided the answer, and now each member of the group has a friend they can email regularly. Making cards proved popular, as did some game playing, and learning a few Internet skills. Digital camera work might be next.

‘The structure we’d first planned for the program went out the window eventually and the emphasis moved to having fun. I’m glad Pat and I were confident enough to keep adapting what we were doing, moving on until we got it right.’

It looks as though they were spot on. *Fun with Computers* is enthusiastically endorsed by all concerned, and in 2002 Pat and David, on behalf of staff and volunteers from the Dorset Online Access Centre cluster, accepted the *Learning Together* State Award for Educational Excellence for their work with the frail, aged, and people with an intellectual disability in Scottsdale.

Other Online Access Centres also run regular sessions for people with a disability.

*Tech Assist Online is a service to assist people in Tasmania who want to use the Internet but have difficulty with a standard computer set-up. (www.techassist.org.au)

BACKGROUND

Tasmanian Communities Online

The Tasmanian Communities Online (TCO) program has established a network of 64 community-based Online Access Centres (OAC) across rural and regional Tasmania. Centres are strategically located to ensure that Tasmanians disadvantaged by geographic location or personal circumstances have easy, low-cost access to computers and the Internet as well as one-to-one assistance and basic training in their use.

To rapidly accelerate the uptake of new information and communication technologies by Tasmanians, overseas experience was sought. This indicated that access to computers and the Internet needed to be provided close to where people live. Hence, the Tasmanian Communities Online project was formulated with the Department of Education as the lead agency responsible for its implementation.

An Online Access Centre has at least two multimedia computers, a printer and a scanner, offering access to the Internet for registered users in a flexible, supportive and non-threatening environment. One-to-one assistance is provided by paid staff and trained volunteers. There is a strong focus on equitable access particularly for members of the community potentially disadvantaged by the 'digital divide.'

The network of 64 OACs was established in two stages utilising \$7.83 million in funds from the Commonwealth's *Networking the Nation* (NTN) program. Stage 1 established the first 20 centres for a total amount of \$1.63 million. In Stage 2, a further \$6.2 million in NTN funds established the remaining 44 Centres, provided partial funding for each centre in their second year of operation and assisted with the provision of access to further training and information technology facilities and services.

Utilising its network of schools and libraries throughout Tasmania, the Department of Education provides significant in-kind support for many of the OACs. This includes the provision of dedicated rent-free premises as well as central support for the network through the TCO Centre Support Unit. In addition, access to telecommunications is provided at no cost to the community for centres collocated with a Departmental site, greatly assisting in centres' long-term viability. Prior to this initiative, private and public access to the Internet across Tasmania was variable.

As each OAC completed its first two years of NTN funding, the State Government has continued to provide an annual grant to assist with meeting ongoing operational costs. It is expected that each centre will generate between 10% and 20% of their budget through user fees and other revenue-raising activities, dependent upon community size.

Central support to the network has continued to be provided through the Education Department. In April 2002, the Online Access Centre Association of Tasmania was formed to represent the interests of the 64 OACs.

After five years, all 64 OACs continue to operate successfully. However, a number of different models for their management are emerging. In several regions, a number of committees have amalgamated to form a single regional administering body with each community represented on the management committee. A further 18 communities have negotiated to have the Department of Education take over the financial and employment administration of their OAC while still retaining a strong strategic and oversight role.

THE EVALUATION

Casting the Net combines data and information from *Local Access – Global Reach*, the report of the evaluation of the Tasmanian Communities Online program, with stories of people and programs from some of Tasmania's 64 Online Access Centres in regional and rural Tasmania.

By the end of 2002, the Tasmanian Communities Online program had been operating for four and a half years and it was time to undertake a careful study of its impact. The evaluation examined the reach and effect of the program on individuals and communities around Tasmania, and compared it with similar programs operating in other States of Australia and overseas. There was an intention as well, to see to what extent the operation of the program, with its 64 centres was complementing key goals identified in Tasmania *Together* and *Learning Together*, two important Tasmanian Government initiatives.

Therefore, a quantitative evaluation was designed to assess the achievements and progress of Tasmania's 64 Online Access Centres against the Tasmanian Communities Online mission and goals and key State policy directions.

Included in the evaluation was an analysis of past and current usage of centres, a comparison between communities with and without an Online Access Centre, and a determination of some of the key social and economic benefits of the Tasmanian Communities Online program.

The evaluation was conducted and the report compiled in consultation with Tony Hocking of Enterprise Marketing and Research Services, independent consultant, Glen Appleyard and NCS Pearson, an international consulting and technology services firm.

A copy of the report of the evaluation, *Local Access – Global Reach* may be obtained at <http://www.education.tas.gov.au/tco/eval/evaluation2003.pdf>

SOME KEY FINDINGS



Equitable Access to Computers and the Internet

Many Online Access Centres are located in communities that are below the State average in terms of household incomes and levels of education attained.

People of all ages use Online Access Centres, however, a higher than average proportion are aged between 18 and 69 years.

The most common reasons for using an Online Access Centre is to search for information for personal interest, to communicate with family and friends and to improve computer skills.



Supporting Lifelong Education

Online Access Centres provide both learning and social benefits to their communities. The majority of patrons report increased basic computer skills and more positive attitudes to learning as a direct result of coming to an Online Access Centre.

This effect is most marked for those over 30 years of age and is leading to enrolment in both informal and accredited education programs.

Skills learned at an Online Access Centre have direct personal benefits. Patrons report significant benefits to their recreation, work and business activities.



Access to Online Services

Many patrons use Online Access Centre facilities to access government and other online information, complete online transactions such as Internet banking and purchasing goods and services as well as for employment purposes such as job searching or emailing a resumé.

Many patrons have a computer at home. However, they still use their local Online Access Centre because they do not have home Internet access, because they need help with computer problems, or in order to learn new skills.



Community Capacity Building

The \$13 million invested into the Tasmanian Communities Online program between March 1998 and December 2002 has leveraged a direct return to the Tasmanian economy of just over \$26 million.

Online Access Centres are viewed by patrons as a very important part of their local community and an important source of local information.

OAC management committees are made up of long-standing and experienced volunteers who tend to be active members of several other community groups.

The many activities based in and around Online Access Centres enrich the life of local communities with the majority of patrons saying that one of the reasons they go to an Online Access Centre is to socialise with others.



One small step

One small step took **Lisa Oneil** into the Ringarooma Online Access Centre to learn basic computing, Internet and email skills. Two years later, her highly developed computer skills have been put to good use touring with Targa Tasmania 2003 as an official recorder. But her own track record is pretty impressive too.

After acquiring her basic skills at the centre, Lisa went on to complete the TAFE *e-Learn Online* program and a Certificate 2 in Information Technology as well as the Certificate 2 in Multimedia by distance education through Launceston College.

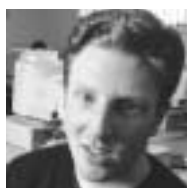
Like many volunteers who have gained their skills at Online Access Centres, Lisa now offers a range of other services to her community that include volunteering at the Scottsdale Online Access Centre and for the local Waterwatch group. She has been employed as a relief coordinator, and is always willing to fill in.

With some new web publishing skills under her belt, Lisa also assists Sharon Sachse, coordinator of the Ringarooma Online Access Centre, in updating weekly football results on the North East Football Union website, and maintains the Ringarooma community website. Sharon loves having Lisa on board: 'I truly could not do without her.'

Realising the strengths she's acquired through her many roles with the centres, Lisa has enrolled in Certificate 3 in Business Administration at TAFE. From now on, it's not only Targa results she'll be recording.

PEOPLE AND PROGRAMS

The Stories





Building community – building a smart community

‘A smart community is a community with a vision of the future that involves the use of information and communication technologies in new and innovative ways to empower its residents, institutions, community groups and businesses,’ says Peter Kenyon, Director of the Bank of IDEAS.

And that seems to be the vision shared by a number of groups and individuals in Campbell Town and its surrounding areas that Peter has been working with. A valuable hub for this development is the **Campbell Town Online Access Centre**.

Members of Online Access Centre management and advisory committees are highly experienced with 65% serving from the centre’s opening, or shortly thereafter.

Almost 70% of members of Online Access Centre management and advisory committees use their skills to assist with the management of other community organisations.

80% of users say that their Online Access Centre is important to their local community. Almost 65% said one of the reasons for coming to an Online Access Centre is to socialise with others.

Suppose you’re having a weekend festival of Plein Air painting. Twenty-five artists paint twenty-five pictures and want to sell them right there and then. You want to set up an online gallery and market the works to Tasmania, Australia, the world. The Online Access Centre can, and did handle that.

Suppose you are working to build on the strengths of the oldest country show in the southern hemisphere – established for 165 years. You want brochures, pamphlets, name tags, as well as publicity in the *Midlands Herald*. Then the Online Access Centre is the answer. They publish the *Midlands Herald* as well.

Suppose you are an organisation looking for volunteers. The Online Access Centre will advertise your request. Perhaps you wish to set up a community calendar, or develop a youth strategy.

All these and more are practical ways that the Online Access Centre is at the centre of community development. But it’s the intangibles as well that are important. It’s the computer and Internet skills developed by individuals who use the centre and the confidence and skills built up by the volunteers and by those who serve on the Board of Management. Indeed it was in recognition of the way that the centre could build community that was behind an allocation of funding for the coordinator to take on a community-building role.

Campbell Town is a place where the quality of community life is changing for the residents. People driving through, notice the new businesses and new facilities. But for the locals there’s a new spirit in the community. It comes partly from improved business prospects. But it also shows itself as a spirit of community where people get to know each other better as they work together on projects and where they feel confident that they can meet a challenge such as hosting *Circus Oz* for the *10 Days on the Island* festival.

Something seems to have changed in the minds and hearts of the locals. We can’t of course put it down to just the presence of an Online Access Centre, but it would be a different place without that facility.

A growing business

Thanks to a combination of vision, serendipity, passion and hard work by **Estelle Harvey** and her husband **Michael**, and thanks also to the services and support that were offered by staff at the Kingston Library, Kingston Online Access Centre and at the Kingborough Community Enterprise Centre, Estelle Harvey's business is growing – literally.

During 2002, Estelle wished to develop a small business. She and Michael were intrigued with the idea of cultivating wheat grass to provide the juice that was proving to be popular as a health supplement. Early research at the library where the staff obtained some key resources for her, encouraged her to keep looking at the possibilities of growing wheat grass as a commercial crop.

And right next door to the library, was the Kingston Online Access Centre. So Estelle's next step was the Internet to find further resources and information. Her skills were minimal at that stage. 'There was no such thing as computing when I went to school.' But staff and volunteers at the Online Access Centre were 'absolutely brilliant.' It seemed a small step from a tentative use of the Internet to working with a volunteer to produce business cards and a brochure for the business.

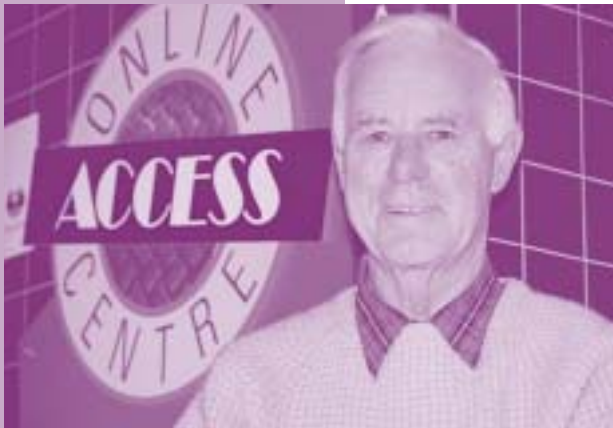
Next door to the Online Access Centre, was the Kingborough Community Enterprise Centre who added their advice and expertise on business requirements such as GST and an ABN as well as providing an introduction to the Organic Growers' Society. As Estelle and Michael carried out early trials of growing and juicing, and contended with setbacks, they knew they were in the right business. It's early days still, but they'll keep growing – and developing the IT skills they need to run their business.



25% of the users have been helped by their Online Access Centre to access government information from the three tiers of government.

Online services most accessed were local tourist information (25%) Service Tasmania Online (24%) and Centrelink (21%).

Most users of Online Access Centres come for more than one hour at a time and have been coming for at least one year.



Never too late

Bob Bensemam admits to being around 70, and not really about to tackle keyboard skills. However his family have persuaded him to write his very interesting life story. So the speech recognition software and the soundproof booth at Launceston Online are the solution for him. His autobiography is now coming along well.

The soundproof booth has been invaluable for other patrons too such as migrants listening to news services over the Internet spoken in their native languages.

There is one OAC per 3,200 Tasmanians which is comparable with similar overseas programs.

54,400 Tasmanians living in rural and regional Tasmania have used an Online Access Centre at least once, and 31,500 do so regularly.

Home ownership of computers in Tasmania (37% of households) is significantly below the national average (56%).

Almost 70% of OAC users do not have a computer at home.



They are all so helpful

At nearly 80 years old, **Laura Walker** thought it might be time to leave the typewriter behind and have a go at computers. 'I just wanted to see if I could catch up with the young ones.'

Though her daughter has a computer, Laura was reluctant to try it out, in case she damaged something. So she reported in to Penguin Online Access Centre, and soon the one-to-one assistance gave her the confidence to become a regular user. 'They're all so helpful. It's very encouraging.'

Laura is not planning to buy a computer. 'That's a bit too much money for me – and there's not really enough room in my unit.' So on Wednesday mornings, she's down at the centre emailing friends and family, or typing up notes from a couple of clubs that she belongs to. It looks as if she's caught up with the young ones!



It started out small

'I'd been working on our family history at home for a while,' says **Jenny Richardson**. 'It started out small, and got out of hand. So I headed for Burnie Online Access Centre to learn some computer skills. Just what I needed. I still get into trouble of course, but I just dial Maureen (Burnie OAC Coordinator) and yell for help.'

Jenny's family history has now been printed, bound and distributed to members of her family. As well, the section about Jenny's parents immigrating to Tasmania was included in a production as part of the *10 Days on the Island* festival.

Now Jenny is running family history workshops through Adult Education and other organisations. She's using Online Access Centres in some small towns as the venue. And singing the praises of the Online Access Centre network.

*There's a big wide world out there
and I can be part of it!*

This was the realisation for **Lesley Field** after her first *Introduction to Computers* course at Oatlands Online Access Centre in 1999. Now Lesley and her two daughters are all students together. Lesley is actually undertaking two degrees at the same time, as well as teaching IT to individuals and groups. Her degree in Adult and Vocational Education will probably lead her to offering on-the-job training in industry, where she believes there are often people who just need a bit of quick top-up training, best done in the work place. As for the Bachelor of Arts she's working on, she'll think about whether to major in sociology or psychology.



She certainly has leapt out into the big wide world with a vengeance. When she first headed off to the Oatlands Online Access Centre she was living in a small community east of Oatlands, wanting to reach out and learn something new. 'This was a first step for me. I loved the introductory course so much I did it again. It was such fun. And the instructor was an inspiration to me. She was so animated and alive. The courses I did really stretched me. It felt great.' She was hooked on learning. After her two introductory courses, Lesley completed the Certificate 2 in Information Technology through Oatlands District High School, became a volunteer at the Online Access Centre and a mentor at the community VET college; and she's still working on those two degrees.



Any course that's on offer I'll do it

Vicki Evans is like many users of the Online Access Centre network, who move from learning basic IT skills to going on to further education as part of getting a taste for what is coming to be called lifelong education, and often improving their job prospects in the process.

After taking a couple of introductory courses at Geeveston Online Access Centre, Vicki progressed to Excel, two MYOB courses, Photoshop and other graphic programs.

She used an e-learn voucher provided by TAFE to start her Certificate 2 in Information Technology and is currently completing that through the Centre and Hobart College. She's also undertaking the Certificate 4 in Workplace Training and Assessment.

That's quite a few courses under her belt. And she's working as relief coordinator at Geeveston OAC.

The most common reasons for using an Online Access Centres are to improve computer skills or take a course (36.8%), search for information (26%), to communicate with family and friends (21%) and to surf the Internet (21%).

Over 50% of patrons said that the Online Access Centre had directly contributed to them having a more positive attitude to learning.



The \$13 million investment by the Commonwealth and State Governments has provided a direct return to the Tasmanian economy exceeding \$26 million.

The majority of patrons (80%) say that they regularly seek help from the Online Access Centre coordinator and trained volunteers.

At any one time, 1,140 trained volunteers assist with the day-to-day operations of Online Access Centres (OACs) and 521 Tasmanians sit on the voluntary OAC Committees. They have contributed over 285,000 hours, equivalent to over \$1.5 million annually.

Calendars building communities

Many Online Access Centres over the five years that the program has been running have worked with their communities to produce calendars, either to raise funds for local projects, to capture something special about the community, or to record aspects of the history and tradition of the local area.

The two stories below are good examples of the way in which the 64 Online Access Centres in the TCO network can assist to revitalise and enhance rural Tasmanian communities.

The recent Bruny Island Calendar was the end product of a photographic competition that drew the whole community together. In fact people entered into a spirit of friendly competition and pride in the beauty and history of the island. For this calendar, over two hundred photographs were submitted to be exhibited over a two-day period in the community hall to enable residents and people with ties to Bruny Island to vote on the most popular photos. By the time some historical photographs provided by the local historical society were included, islanders had a calendar to be proud of. And many people had re-established old friendships, built new skills and celebrated the strengths and uniqueness of their community in the process.

When the Redpa-Marawah Online Access Centre was looking for ways to raise funds, Anthony Spinks, the coordinator, suggested a male calendar, using the skills and equipment of the centre to take the production right through to pre-press stage.

The idea was quickly adopted. A local photographer donated her expertise to take the photos. The hardest task was whittling the volunteers down to the twelve needed. Marawah seems to have so many characters who were prepared to strip off for a worthy cause that not everyone could be included first time around. Their turn will come. The launch in the local hall was a great fun night, and an opportunity to further publicise the Online Access Centre. It's just one of the many ways that the Online Access Centre has become an important part of the Redpa-Marawah community.

Local newspapers, too

Many centres, including Dover, Flinders Island, Lilydale, Bruny Island and Ouse, assist with the production of local newspapers. As well as receiving free publicity in the papers, the tasks involved building the skills of centre staff and volunteers – skills which subsequently benefit the community.

We'll take you to where you want to go

It's no coincidence that there are quite a few locals using the Ulverstone Online Access Centre to get into or support University or TAFE study. **Anne-Marie**, the coordinator, says that here at Ulverstone Online they are committed to encouraging people who want to get back into education.

The notion of lifelong learning is a real one for Anne-Marie and the volunteers at Ulverstone Online. 'We're passionate about encouraging people to keep learning. They come in and use the centre to build up their confidence. Sometimes someone will think that they're not going to make it. We give them a good talking to. Remind them of how much they've learned, and give them the extra help they need at that point.'

Their motto is 'You can start where you are at – and we'll take you where you want to go.' In Kellie Boon's case it's all the way to an arts degree, and possibly a teaching qualification.

'If it wasn't for the Online Access Centre I wouldn't be able to even think about doing a Uni course,' says **Kellie Boon**. She's nearly finished a TAFE Library Technician course, and has discovered how much she enjoys learning. So this year, she is juggling the final units in her TAFE course, with some first year Uni subjects, as well as her home and family – with four kids less than 11 years of age. 'I'm determined Uni is for me,' says Kellie. 'She'll go far,' adds Anne-Marie.



28,250 Tasmanians have attended 7,300 basic computer and Internet training courses at Online Access Centres over the last five years.



Moving forward

On most Wednesday mornings, **Lisa Anderson** is at the Burnie Online Access Centre working with support worker Debbie Lovell. Debbie, as well as other workers, has time allocated each week to spend with Lisa, who has an intellectual disability. Along with the other staff and volunteers at the centre, these support workers have helped Lisa with some basic computer training.

During 2002 Lisa used an *e-Learn* voucher to do part of the TAFE Certificate 2 in Information Technology online.

'It was really hard work,' she says. Debbie adds, 'It was great for Lisa to have some structured learning, and to learn some specific computer skills that are reinforced each time she visits the centre.'

'I like games, too, and making cards,' says Lisa. With a couple of family birthdays coming up, Lisa is going to be busy.

Almost 60% of Online Access Centre training courses have been provided free of charge to the public.

Since October 2001, 544 students have enrolled in e-Learn Online delivered in partnership with TAFE. Over 90% completed the course.



Over 15% of patrons have done their banking online at an Online Access centre and 19% have purchased goods or paid bills online.

Almost 1800 Tasmanians attended awareness training in the use of the Service Tasmania Online website in 2001.

29% of the users have used an Online Access Centre to search for a job, 28% to prepare a resumé, and 15% to submit a job application online.

In 2002 Online Access Centres hosted training in Internet banking for several hundred users.

Online and in touch

When **Keith Mason** graduated from university in October 2002 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Electronic Media, he knew it could be a while before he found full-time employment. However, he kept in touch with his field and with what jobs were on offer from home and on the Internet at Kingston Online Access Centre. He could download selection criteria and position descriptions from a relevant website and prepare and keep his CV up to date at the centre. While he was waiting for a result, he offered his services as a volunteer and was welcomed with open arms.

It soon became obvious that his website design skills were at the professional level, so the centre offered him paid work to build websites for centre clients. The opportunity to match his skills with the needs of paying customers gave Keith a feel for the real world of business.

When Keith finds other work, the Kingston Online Access Centre staff will be sorry to lose a skilled and committed volunteer, but will be happy to see him move on perhaps to full-time employment or even his own business.



A transformation

Personalised assistance in a relaxed and supportive environment helps many to overcome their fears of the new and unknown. **Judith Reindl** – in her seventies – had been using the Geeveston Online Access Centre just for email for some three and a half years.

She was still not a confident user, but knew there was always help when she needed it. She had no intention however of learning anything more than the email skills that she had already mastered.

This notion was challenged when Geeveston hosted a training session on Internet banking. She rather reluctantly participated – and became a convert. She's now confidently paying her bills and undertaking other banking activities online.

Not stopping there, she went on to take an *e-Learn* course and is planning to become a centre volunteer so that she can help other less skilled patrons to learn to use computers and the Internet. A transformation indeed.

e-Commerce is really working for me

'I can pick up the phone at any time, and I can always find someone who can walk me through a technical problem I might be having.'

Tracey Carter runs a successful floral art business, with customers all over Australia, from her home at Trowutta in the north west coast hinterland. The business is fairly new, with tremendous potential for growth. She was just considering her future plans, as all small businesses do, when she was contacted by Maureen Webberley from Burnie Online Access Centre. She was invited to participate in the eAware program. Tracey's business is now one of 28 in the Burnie area that came on board.

Tracey had the usual business plan, but that plan had not necessarily taken into account ways that she might enhance her operation through a wider range of e-business tools than she was currently using. Tracey was intrigued by Maureen's proposal. They did some planning, brought in a mentor employed under the program and Tracey opted into the project fully.

Right now she is committed to piecing together the advice she's been getting from her mentor and from Maureen, and applying it to her business plan. She's had help to set up a website – which is the way that her customers round Australia choose items they want. And since items change quite regularly the website must be carefully maintained and updated.

Tracey's with this project for the long haul and so are Maureen, the TCCI and TECC. 'We'll be staying with her well beyond the initial period,' says Maureen.



The eAware program is offered through a partnership between the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TCCI), the Tasmanian Electronic Commerce Centre (TECC) and thirteen strategically located Online Access Centres.

Through the eAware program, some 160 small Tasmanian businesses were assisted to implement e-business solutions in their enterprise.



Skills learned at an Online Access Centre have direct personal benefits. Almost 15% of patrons used computers and Internet more at work; 10% had taken an online course as a result and 25% say that they have improved work outcomes (promotion, increased pay, better job etc).

Online Access Centres make an indirect contribution to the economy by providing invaluable skills training for the job market in a variety of technical, computer and office skills, as well as management and organisation, communications, fundraising and interpersonal skills.

Onya Matt and the team

Matt Hill is mentor, teacher, and big brother to a group of young people who have come together – thanks to some Office of Youth Affairs funding – to build an interactive website that will inform young people about services and activities in their local area.

It's part of an initiative to ensure that information and advice are available to young people through a range of media without duplicating existing sources. Online Access Centres were an obvious focus for the activities, and Tasmanian Communities Online was delighted to host the project.

At first it seemed ambitious, but after setting some short- and long-term goals, allocating tasks, and undergoing a full day of training in website construction and graphic design, they were off. The energy, ideas and enthusiasm flowed. The group, scattered across six southern communities, shared their progress in designing the local pages via an email group and chat room. They are aiming to publish their website to coincide with International Youth Day.

Through it all, Matt supported and coached a disparate group aged from young teens to early twenties; a group that became committed to a project offering a dedicated space where young people could come together to 'chat' to each other, read local good-news stories about youth, access local educational and other information, and take part in regular 'issues' forums hosted there. Matt understands how tough it can be for young people to find public space they can own. 'This is a good spot for them. There are other youth sites, but this one is all about their own district.'

More about Matt

This young man is more than just mentor to a group of budding website designers. At 17 – he's 21 now – Matt attended a meeting to establish Derwent Valley Online Access Centre and was founding secretary and committed volunteer for some years. It was this volunteer work that showed him his career direction in graphic design. He now offers training in graphics packages to Online Access Centres in the Derwent Valley.

And that's not all – bringing together his commitment to youth and his knowledge of electronic media and multimedia – Matt has just been appointed project officer to the Electronic Information Services for Youth project in the Derwent Valley, established with a Youth Advisory grant from OYA. So, some Online Access Centres in the Derwent Valley now have a dedicated computer on which young people can access information on Family Services, Centrelink, mental health, housing, education, and drug and alcohol services. It will link to the Onya website, of course. Onya Matt!

Family matters

‘I didn’t want to be left behind,’ says **Kryn Meerman**. When the Longford Online Access Centre opened three years ago, Kryn Meerman was quick to register. ‘At my age I learn more slowly than the young ones. But I never worried about that. The staff at the Centre were very helpful and understanding.’ For three years, regularly each week, Kryn has used the centre to email his son John in the Australian Navy.

When John had joined the navy straight out of college in 1975, Kryn said he would write every week and did so for quite a few years. Then John’s replies became intermittent. He wasn’t as keen a writer as Kryn.

With the opening of the Online Access Centre Kryn realised he had another way of keeping in touch – email. Now they are they are regular correspondents, with replies coming back quickly. Both of them enjoy the informality and ease of this way of keeping in touch. Kryn may email his relatives in Holland next. However, he still quite enjoys writing a real letter.



What a blessing

Four years ago, around the middle of 1999, **Mary Binks** stepped into her local Online Access Centre at Devonport. A complete newcomer to computers, Mary was ready to have a try. ‘I knew I’d come to the right place – the help offered was marvellous. I couldn’t have asked for more.’ It didn’t take long to learn some basic computer skills.

As it happened, those skills soon came into their own. In October 1999, Mary was elected Mayor of Devonport, holding the position until retiring in October 2002. ‘What a blessing I’d learned those computer skills – it made my task of taking up the role of mayor that much easier. I had a computer at Council, and had the confidence to use it straight away.’

Though Mary has retired from Council, she is still on various committees, and contributing to her community in many ways. She’s not buying her own computer just yet, so accesses her email account down at the Centre. Even when the time comes to get onto the Internet at home, Mary thinks she might continue to use the centre, too. ‘I really like meeting people down there.’

Adult Tasmanians are the main users of Online Access Centres. Approximately 14% of patrons are under the age of 18 years.

On average, each Online Access Centre is open for 30.6 hours per week.

80% of surveyed patrons had used an Online Access Centre in the past two weeks.



The 64 Online Access Centres maintain over 9,500 webpages that showcase their communities to local, national and international audiences.

Since October 2002, Online Access Centres have listed on the Internet over 2000 community organisations through the Tasmania's CommunityNet database.

Online Access centres provide the equivalent of almost 30 full-time jobs in information technology in rural and regional Tasmania.

Working smarter

'Let's share the work and the information,' says **Gerald Monson**, Manager of Northern Midlands Council.

He's talking about an initiative by the Northern Tasmanian Regional Development Board and the Tasmanian Government to develop and share community information – and the far-reaching Online Access Centre network is the linchpin. The project has been designed to

'...work in consultation with local communities to assess their information needs and develop a single comprehensive and accessible database of community and sporting groups that meet these information needs.'

Tasmania's local-government community had already discovered the tremendous benefits the Internet could bring. In 1998, three local-government bodies – Northern Midlands Council, Southern Midlands Council, and Central Highlands Council – decided to work together to set up one web presence that could serve the greater area. Through this website, residents could pay rates, view and submit tenders, and access a business directory.

The site quickly became a valuable resource, with links to tourist information. In addition, councils started to bring together information about community groups and events. Compiling and maintaining these lists is always a challenge, but a solution was just around the corner. In 2002, council officers became aware that Tasmania Communities Online, in partnership with Tasmania Online and the State Library of Tasmania, had developed a community database with information maintained by the network of 64 Online Access Centres across the State.

With this service called Tasmania's Community Net (TCN), information about each organisation is managed and displayed by the centres using their local websites and a user-friendly web publishing system, AutoPublish, developed by Tasmanian multimedia company Little Devil Media. And it gets even better – all these independent listings are brought together at Tasmania Online, at <http://www.tas.gov.au/> enabling users to easily search for community organisations across the State.

The three councils are enthusiastic about their developing vision of working with local Online Access Centres. Meanwhile, centres around the State are hard at work promoting the database and assisting community organisations to create and manage their own Internet listings. Community organisations can add or edit a listing from any computer connected to the Internet and the Online Access Centres are always there to help if needs be. TCN was awarded one of the Statewide Learning Together Awards for Educational Excellence in 2003.

Keri Webb

Keri Webb of St Marys Online Access Centre – recipient of a *Regional Award for Educational Excellence* in 2002. Keri facilitated a pilot program to introduce members of the local Aboriginal community to IT. Eight participants went on to gain a formal qualification.



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