Free computing courses in NZ: What do users and institutions say

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Free courses offering basic-level computer training have been available since 2000 from a large number of institutions throughout New Zealand. In 2003/2004 a survey was undertaken of institutions offering the courses and students enrolled in them. The focus for the survey of students was the extent to which their needs were met by the range of courses offered, the access arrangements and the availability and adequacy of support for their learning. The focus for the survey of institutions was on the range of courses offered and their outcomes, the curriculum design and course development process used, any collaborative arrangements, and the current academic and technical standards applied, including online delivery.

The range and structure of courses offered at 17 institutions that completed the survey was similar, with the majority leading to one or more qualifications. The courses were mostly based on existing models and most material was developed inhouse. Two institutions offered online courses. All institutions reported that their free computing courses were approved at Academic Board level and that normal quality management systems applied. Free computing courses were offered in partnership or as part of an alliance with a number of other organisations. Several institutions were involved in some form of collaborative development as a result.

The courses most offered free are keyboarding, word processing, spreadsheets, database, desktop publishing, presentation software, email and Internet. The majority of the 600 survey respondents were satisfied with the access times offered, the location of the courses and the support available. 65% were female and 35% male, 14% were under 30, and 26% were over 61. 77% identified as NZ European, 8% identified as Maori and 5% as Asian. 40% were employed either full or part-time, while 24% were retired. 17% reported they were not employed and were seeking work. 22% reported they had no qualification, while 17% had completed a degree. 15% had School Certificate or a Level 1 qualification, while 14% had a trade or vocational qualification. Most respondents who completed the online survey were from six localities: Auckland, Bay of Plenty, Canterbury, Hawkes Bay, Otago and Wellington region.

How free courses are funded was a factor not intended to be covered in the survey of institutions, however it is relevant to overall conclusions about the courses to acknowledge that recent government decisions will impact on their future continuance and development. It was generally known that the free courses included in the survey were eligible for government funding in the adult and community education category. In 2003 increasing numbers of enrolments in this category resulted in a blow-out of EFTS funding overall. The government has now undertaken a review of the funding of community education courses and a change to the funding per student together with a cap on numbers has been signalled.

Keywords

Community education, free computing courses, online computing courses.

1. INTRODUCTION

The objective of this project was to carry out some initial research on the free computing courses currently running in New Zealand. This initiative started in 1999/2000 at Universal College of Learning (UCOL) in Palmerston North and spread quickly across polytechnics and institutes of technology to private education providers and other organizations.

Research in this area has been limited so far. Hart and Sathu (2002) reported on positive outcomes for free computing courses at Unitec. A strategy report from the Community Employment Group (2002) emphasised connectivity and the need for communities to have access to information and communication technology. A research study undertaken in 2003 by PricewaterhouseCoopers for the Tertiary Accord of New Zealand (TANZ) had a wide social, educational and economic focus, but was restricted to the Computing For Free courses offered by members of TANZ. The report from the study concluded that Computing For Free was contributing positively towards the achievement of government, student, institutional and sponsors' objectives by enhancing skills, creating jobs, contributing to foundation education and lifelong learning, facilitating connectivity and closing the digital divide. Brimblecombe (2003) suggested that further study

could be valuable for government departments formulating policy in a number of areas.

This research project sought to provide insights into a number of areas including the needs and wants of students, what additional courses were sought, the different modes of delivery available, the curriculum design and course development processes used by institutions, what collaboration was achieved and the current standards for delivery of the courses including e-delivery.

It was not intended to include questions on funding and numbers of students in the survey of institutions. However it is relevant to overall conclusions about the free courses to acknowledge that recent government decisions will impact on their future continuance and development. It was generally known that the free courses included in the survey were eligible for government funding in the adult and community education category. In 2003 increasing numbers of enrolments in this category resulted in a blowout of EFTS funding overall. The government has now undertaken a review of the funding of community education courses, and a cap on numbers and funding changes have been signalled. Some institutions are already offering free full-time courses that were previously fee-based, funded from other categories, and leading to recognised national qualifications.

2. METHODOLOGY

Project data was collected as follows:

- A list was drawn up of free computing courses at New Zealand institutions through online, telephone and prospectus searches. Information in the public domain was compiled. Institutions identified as offering free computing courses were contacted by letter or email to request support for this research project and their participation.

- An online survey for students was developed. Institutions were asked to encourage their students to complete the survey. Public advertisements were also placed in various media. The survey asked about the courses students had taken, additional courses they would like to take, the type of access available, their experience of the free courses, and some personal details relating to gender, age range, ethnicity, employment status, highest tertiary qualification and home locality.

- A survey form was emailed to individuals identified as responsible for managing the free computing courses at institutions on the list. Returned forms were followed up by phone or email if it was necessary to elicit further information or clarify details. The survey asked whether the free courses offered by the institution led to a qualification, the curriculum design and course development processes that were used, whether courses could be taken online, the academic and technical standards that were applied, and what collaborative development if any had been undertaken with other institutions.

2.1 Limitations of the Surveys

- The online survey relied on students who would self-select to complete it.

- Students were asked their home locality rather than to name specific institutions at which they were taking free courses. The survey was not intended to evaluate or compare institutions.

- Some institutions identified as offering free computing courses chose not to participate.

- Institutions were not asked about numbers of students or funding totals as this information is available elsewhere.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Survey of Students

The free courses most students had taken were modules of keyboarding, word processing, spreadsheets, database, desktop publishing, presentation software, email and Internet. According to the survey feedback, the courses students would like added included basic computing knowledge, accounting packages, graphics, design and multimedia, photo editing, industry certification, programming, operating systems, web page development, genealogy, CV preparation and music notation.

The majority of the 600-odd survey respondents were satisfied with the access times offered. 53% mainly accessed the courses during the day, 28% in the evening and 19% at the weekend. 64% reported they had to book in advance while 25% could turn up when they wanted. 11% of those who responded had access to online courses. Comments from students indicated more access to online courses would be welcomed.

For most students the location of the courses was no more than 5 kms away. For 26 % the location was between 6 and 15 kms away and for 8% it was over 15 kms.

A large majority (87%) of respondents reported that the support available met their needs. 72% had access to self-paced workbooks or printed handbooks while smaller numbers had access to CD-based or online material. 22% reported that their courses included up-front teaching from a tutor to groups of people however most courses had no up-front teaching but provided one to one support when needed.

51% described themselves as knowing something about computing and wanting to learn more. 21% were competent in computing basics and wanted to gain specific new skills. 28% reported knowing nothing about computing before starting the courses. 86% reported that the free courses met their expectations about how much they would learn while 11% said their expectations were met partly. 3% reported their expectations were not met. Comments indicated some people thought they would learn more quickly, or that they needed more one to one help, or that their original expectations were not clear.

66% reported they would gain a certificate through completing the courses. The certificates mentioned included ICDL, MOS, various NZQA certificates, and attendance certificates and summaries.

The survey respondents were 65% female and 35% male. 14% were under 30, and 26% were over 61. 77% reported that the ethnic group they most identified with was NZ European, 8% identified as Maori and 5% as Asian. 40% were employed either full or part-time, while 24% were retired. 17% reported they were not employed and seeking work.

22% reported they had no qualification, while 17% had completed a degree. 15% had School Certificate or a Level 1 qualification, while 14% had a trade or vocational qualification.

Most respondents who completed the online survey were from six localities: Auckland (14%), Bay of Plenty (17%), Canterbury (9%), Hawkes Bay (19%), Otago (17%), and Wellington region (14%). Other localities reported: Gisborne/East Coast, Manawatu/Wanganui, Nelson/Marlborough, Northland, Southland, Taranaki, Waikato, Wairarapa, West Coast.

Additional comments from the survey respondents were very positive and emphasised the benefits of gaining new skills. A large number mentioned access to email and the Internet as being of great importance to them.

3.2 Survey of Institutions

Forms were returned from 17 institutions. The range and structure of courses offered was similar. The courses most offered free were short modules in keyboarding, word processing, spreadsheets, database, desktop publishing, presentation software, email and Internet. Some institutions also offered accounting packages and other options. Some offered full-time programmes free that were previously fee-based or were considering this. For ten of the 17, the free computing courses they offered led to one or more qualifications. Another four institutions planned to introduce this. The qualifications offered or planned ranged from unit standard-based local or national certificates (10), the International Computer Driving Licence ICDL (9) and Microsoft Office Specialist MOS (3).

Curriculum design and course development were mostly based on existing courses and modules. The course material supplied to students was mainly developed inhouse, although some institutions had purchased material and customised this.

At the time the survey was completed two institutions were currently offering online courses, in conjunction with a commercial partner. The system used was purpose built by the partner company. Two other institutions had previously offered online courses but these were now not running. Four others were planning to introduce online courses in the future and another three were considering this possibility.

All institutions reported that their free computing courses were approved at Academic Board level and that normal quality management systems applied.

Free computing courses were offered in partnership or as part of an alliance as follows: with other public tertiary education institutions (5), with secondary schools (7), with private training establishments (1) and with others (8). The latter included organisations such as Seniornet, local councils, community trusts and commercial companies. Nine in-

stitutions reported they had been involved in some form of collaborative development of the free courses as a result of the partnership or alliance.

4. CONCLUSION

Although the number of respondents to the online survey was small compared to the numbers believed to be enrolled, the feedback received was very positive about the opportunities these free courses provide. The courses attract a range of people and support increased connectivity of individuals and the gaining of skills necessary to take an active part in a knowledge society. In relation to the institutions who offer these courses, increased collaboration may benefit future development, particularly if this includes cost-effective online options that are educationally sound and linked to workplace learning. However, proposed changes to future funding may impact on further development overall.

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