

# **Bridging the Digital Divide: Utilising technology to promote social connectedness and civic engagement amongst marginalised young people**

**Atari Metcalf, Michelle Blanchard, Trent McCarthy and Jane Burns**

## **Abstract**

*The growth of the internet and related technologies such as mobile phones, digital film and photography in the last decade has seen a substantial shift in the way young people communicate and share information. The role that information and communication technologies (ICT) may play and the impact they may have on the mental health and wellbeing of young people is not well understood and there are gaps in the evidence base surrounding the efficacy of mental health promotion and prevention initiatives that utilise technology. The Bridging the Digital Divide Project examines the potential use of ICT to promote social connectedness and civic engagement in young people experiencing marginalisation. This paper provides an overview of the project rationale and presents preliminary research that explores the barriers and enablers to implementing an ICT based project designed to promote civic engagement and social connectedness with young people experiencing marginalisation.*

## **Introduction**

The Inspire Foundation is a national non-profit organisation, based in Sydney, Australia, with a mission to create opportunities for young people to change their world. 'Bridging the Digital Divide' is an initiative of the Inspire Foundation that utilises Information Communication Technologies (ICT) to improve marginalised young people's mental health by promoting social connectedness and civic engagement. Underpinned by a participatory action research approach, the project grew out of a need to expand the evidence base for ICT based mental health promotion and explore the role ICT plays in marginalised young people's lives. While ICT is increasingly recognised as influential in mediating health and wellbeing, there are still gaps in the evidence base surrounding ICT based mental health promotion, particularly in regards to engaging young people who may be experiencing or at risk of marginalisation (Wyn et al. 2005).

This paper will present the project rationale, discuss the key findings and implications of the research conducted with young people experiencing marginalisation, and describe how the research exploring their use of ICT has been used to design and pilot 'Youth Action Workshops'.

## **Project rationale**

Young people who experience social, economic or cultural marginalisation are at an increased risk of experiencing mental health problems (Herrman et al., 2005). In Australia, the prevalence of mental health problems is highest amongst young people experiencing social and economic marginalisation (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007). These groups include Indigenous young people, culturally and linguistically diverse young people, same-sex attracted and/or gender diverse young people and young people from low socio-economic backgrounds. Other groups at increased risk include young carers and young people with disabilities (Blanchard, Metcalf & Burns 2007).

The causes of mental health problems are complex and multifaceted, often comprising a mix of social, cultural, environmental and psychosocial factors that put at risk or protect

a young person (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care 2000; Zubrick et al. 2000). There is emerging evidence that ICT, such as the internet, also play an important role in mediating the social determinants of young people's mental health and wellbeing by influencing identity development and promoting social connectedness and civic participation (Wyn et al. 2005). The internet's interactive nature and capacity to facilitate interpersonal communication has led health and social researchers to conceptualise it as a virtual 'community' (Bernhardt 2000; Cohen 1998 in Hegland & Nelson 2002; Peattie 2006), capable of cultivating social networks and strengthening existing social ties (Boase et al. 2005; Kraut et al. 2002; Maibach, Abrams & Marosits 2007). As Wyn et al. (2005) suggests, the internet is 'continuously increasing the possibilities of who we connect with, and how we 'belong' both online and offline'. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest these possibilities may extend to political engagement that translates into offline, individual and collective actions which enhance social capital (Kahn & Kellner 2004; Lombardo et al. 2002; Norris 2005).

The advent of 'Web 2.0' technologies such as blogs, podcasts and social networking websites has also blurred the boundaries of consumer and producer. By enabling individuals to create and publish content themselves such technologies promote collaboration, ownership, and empowerment (Boulos & Wheelert 2007; Christensen, Griffiths & Evans 2002; Crespo 2007; Wyn et al. 2005). Freedom of information may also facilitate greater levels of flexibility, agency and democracy, and ultimately new forms of social organisation (Boulos & Wheelert 2007; Lefebvre 2007).

It is evident that ICT offers significant potential for mental health promotion, particularly through empowering communities, strengthening social action and increasing community participation. However, there is concern that disparities in internet access and related technologies may reproduce and generate further health, social and economic disadvantage (Becta 2001; Bernhardt 2000; Wyn et al., 2005). Furthermore, little is known about marginalised young people's use of such technologies and the extent to which these technologies can be leveraged to promote mental health amongst these groups (Wyn et al. 2005). It is therefore important that research is conducted in this area to address current gaps in knowledge around marginalised young people's use of ICT, and that ICT based mental health promotion initiatives targeting marginalised young people are critically appraised in order to expand the evidence base for future work in this area.

### **Project overview: About 'Bridging the Digital Divide'**

'Bridging the Digital Divide' brings together the work of the Inspire Foundation's Beanbag and ActNow ([www.actnow.com.au](http://www.actnow.com.au)) programs. Beanbag partners with youth agencies nationally to provide young people with opportunities to access ICT, improve their technical skills, self-confidence and social connectedness. It delivers creative technology initiatives including film-making (KickArse), digital photography (Digital Eye) and online safety education (Str8Up). ActNow is a web based program that provides young people with opportunities to find out more about their world and take action on issues they care about. ActNow offers information on current social issues, tools for taking action, member profiles and a range of Web 2.0 features that enable young people to generate content on the site.

The overall goal of 'Bridging the Digital Divide' is to contribute to an increase in civic engagement and social connectedness amongst young people who experience or who are at risk of experiencing social, cultural or economic marginalisation. In particular the

project targets young people aged 16 to 25 whose experience of marginalisation places them at increased risk of developing mental health problems.

The project has three overlapping phases:

- Phase one - extensive qualitative research to investigate young people's use of ICT
- Phase two - the establishment of four new Beanbag centres in Victorian youth agencies
- Phase three - developing and evaluating 'Youth Action Workshops' at Beanbag centres which aim to provide young people with the skills and resources to take action on issues that affect them or their community.

The research findings and the practical experience gained through the development of ActNow informed the design of the 'Youth Action Workshops', which are being piloted in youth services across Australia. The workshop model, if successful in engaging young people and improving their mental health, will be made available to youth serving agencies nationally, reaching a greater number of young people in Australia.

### **Research Phase**

The initial phase of the project was informed by a multidisciplinary Project Advisory Group and a Youth Advisory Group with representation from young people with a diverse range of backgrounds. The groups were involved in developing and refining the study design and research tools.

The key themes explored in this research included:

- the role of ICT in young people's identity formation, skill development and social relationships
- the use of ICT by young people to exercise citizenship and civic engagement
- the digital divide created by lack of access to ICT
- organisational capacity of youth and related services to utilise ICT to promote social connectedness and civic engagement.

As the focus of this paper is to discuss the practical implications of the research findings for designing and implementing ICT based civic engagement projects, the most relevant findings are briefly summarised below. However, the research report (Blanchard, Metcalf & Burns 2007) *'Bridging the Digital Divide: Marginalised young people's use of information communication technology (ICT)'* is available online (<http://www.inspire.org.au>).

### **Research Methodology**

Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people and professionals who work with young people. All participants also completed a brief questionnaire which included an audit of their ICT usage and skills.

Sixteen focus groups and 22 in-depth interviews were conducted across 12 host organisations in Victoria. These organisations were selected through a snowballing methodology which commenced by meeting with peak organisations who work with marginalised young people in Victoria. These organisations helped identify appropriate local sites across metropolitan, rural and regional Victoria.

Data analyses occurred in two stages with members of the youth advisory group and project advisory group initially conducting a thematic analysis of responses to four key focus group and interview questions. The researchers, drawing on literature from the fields of sociology, health promotion and psychology, then conducted further thematic analysis of key themes.

### ***Research Findings***

Ninety-seven young people and 22 service providers participated in this study. The young people who attended focus groups came from a variety of backgrounds:

- Just over half the participants (56.3 percent) were male, while 44 percent were female.
- 61.5 percent identified as being from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) background while 25% identified as Indigenous;
- 70 percent were in school, TAFE or completing undergraduate study – many of these were young people who had returned to study after an absence;
- 54.2 percent lived with their parents or close family;
- 14.6 percent reported a disability or learning difficulty; and
- 29.1 percent identified as same-sex attracted.

### ***Marginalised young people's use of ICT***

This research found that on the whole young people experiencing marginalisation are confident in their computer, internet and photography skills. Many used instant messaging services (MSN, SMS), email and social networking sites to communicate, maintain and build new relationships with other young people and significant adults such as their youth workers or teachers. Like many others, young people experiencing marginalisation have created their own social networking profiles on sites including Bebo and Hi5 and are using them to maintain their online and offline connections. There were surprisingly few differences based on gender and age amongst the study participants. The only exception to this is that the young women in the study tended to use the internet for more sociable reasons.

A majority of the young people who participated in the study were aware of the potential dangers online and have strategies to manage unsolicited contact, meetings in the offline world and cyber or text bullying. However not all young people are 'tech savvy' and some were concerned about the risks associated with the internet and the breakdown in face-to-face communication.

### ***Service providers understanding of the role ICT plays in young people's lives***

Professionals who work with young people (service providers) feel much less confident in their use of ICT (particularly their use of creative technologies), expressing a need for education and training that provides them with the skills to engage young people experiencing marginalisation in the use of ICT. Service providers are concerned about the risks associated with ICT, specifically chat rooms and the economic vulnerability young people might experience due to the costs associated with mobile phones and broadband access.

### ***Conceptualising 'taking action'***

The concept of 'taking action' was interpreted widely, with few participants likening the phrase to civic or political participation. The majority of participants cited examples of individual, socially oriented behaviours. These ranged from violence on the grounds of

retribution, to addressing personal issues such as mental health problems or alcohol and/or other drug issues. When asked to identify their role models for action, almost all cited examples of friends or family who had overcome personal obstacles. Same-sex attracted young people were the exception to the above, with many participants citing examples of political or civic participation when asked about the concept of 'taking action.' Broadly, the definitions articulated by participants included (in their words): doing something to address an issue, being proactive, protesting, fighting and working together.

When asked to identify issues they cared about or wanted to take action on, young people's responses varied with issues ranging from personal ones such as improving their relationships with others, to broader community issues such as the environment and racism. A number of young people and service providers highlighted that personal circumstances affect the issues most important to marginalised young people. For example, a young person experiencing homelessness might prioritise taking action to find themselves secure accommodation over environmental issues. This is not to say that broader community issues do not concern these young people, but rather they would prefer to invest their time and energy in impacting those issues which affect them and their survival first.

The term 'politics' was considered a turn off for some, despite the issues they cared about being inherently political. In some of the focus groups participants expressed a dislike for people in positions of power. What appeared clear from their responses was that they felt they weren't being heard by decision makers, nor did the decision makers understand their experiences.

The way respondents conceptualised 'taking action' in this study - particularly in terms of individual, socially oriented behaviour and the emphasis on actions and issues that are of direct personal relevance - are consistent with recent theoretical shifts around 'civic engagement' and 'political participation' which suggest that young people are motivated to connect and engage with others on the basis of issues or causes (Norris, 2003; Bang, 2005; Collin, 2007), and that their preferred mechanisms for political and social action have moved beyond traditional activities (e.g. voting) and institutions (e.g. governments and political party membership). This lends support for ICT based forms of civic engagement that can assist young people to explore issues that personally affect (or interest) them, linking them to practical (online and offline) strategies to take action, connect with peers and relevant community groups, and have their perspectives heard by producing and publishing online content.

### ***Barriers and enablers to young people's civic engagement***

Participants also cited a number of barriers to being able to take action on issues that affect them. Personal characteristics such as low self-esteem, a lack of motivation, low self-efficacy and feeling a lack of worth all acted to prevent young people from participating. Not being able to see the outcomes of their action, lack of financial support, time constraints, and not knowing how to take action also proved to be barriers. Participants saw personal issues such as experiencing homelessness or being unemployed as significant barriers to being able to contribute to community change. Issues such as finding housing, gaining employment and remaining healthy also featured. For those who wanted to take action to address a personal issue, such as substance abuse or participation in crime, friends as well as personal characteristics were seen as an important influence and could act as both a barrier and an enabler to action.

Other enablers to action identified by participants included having assistance from supportive people, recognition, motivation, having a clear plan and access to knowledge, skills and resources. For young people, these 'supportive people' could take the form of friends, family or service providers. Ultimately the factor that determined their supportiveness was their capacity to encourage the young person to pursue positive activities.

While young people didn't specifically cite the role of technology in assisting them to take action, it could be inferred that there is potential for ICT to aid in facilitating supportive relationships as well as access to knowledge skills and resources. For instance, service providers highlighted during the interviews that internet based tools such as social networking websites offer significant potential for engaging young people in services and projects outside of weekly meeting times and regular appointments, thereby reducing barriers to participation. Similarly, social networking sites are increasingly acknowledged as facilitating and mobilising communities of interest, and may therefore also assist young people in developing new connections that support and motivate them in taking action.

Additionally, creative use of ICT such as digital storytelling, podcasting and blogs offer channels for young people who've taken action to showcase the outcomes of their efforts, which may in turn, inspire others to participate in similar activities.

### ***Service providers understanding of young people's civic engagement***

It was evident that service providers viewed young people's interest and capacity to take action on issues that affect them differently to how young people themselves viewed their interest and ability to take action. Few service providers felt that the young people they worked with would be interested in taking action and would find it difficult to identify changes they wanted to make, however young people themselves had little trouble articulating those things most important to them. They did however identify a range of barriers to taking action including society's perceptions of young people, their own personal circumstances and not knowing how to take action or who can help them to do so.

Again, the role of ICT did not explicitly feature in service provider's responses when conceptualising young people's civic engagement. This may relate to service provider's reported limited understanding of ICT more broadly, as well as issues surrounding their capacity to integrate ICT into practice, such as limited staff confidence and skills to effectively utilise ICT in their work and organisational constraints (for example, inadequate ICT infrastructure, costs, competing priorities and staff time). These factors may therefore in part explain why ICT did not feature in service provider's current conceptualisation of young people's civic engagement, and be indicative of a lack of awareness about its potential for facilitating civic engagement.

### ***Young people's responses to the Action Workshop Concept***

Overall, young people responded positively to the concept of the Youth Action Workshops, suggesting it was an initiative they would be keen to participate in. Participants felt that as some people 'want to take action but they don't know how' these workshops would help answer some of their questions. The opportunity to use ICT (particularly digital cameras and computers) was also appealing for many, as these were seen to offer opportunities for sharing stories and building participant's skills.

However, a small number of participants felt that the workshops were not really something they would like to attend, explaining that 'it's for other people'. When prompted about what sorts of people might be interested in attending the workshops they replied with 'non-lazy people', 'people who feel sorry for people who are homeless', 'political people' and 'people who feel strongly about things'. They explained that they didn't believe these characteristics described them.

The focus group participants also identified factors they felt would make the workshops appealing, and suggested strategies to ensure they were culturally appropriate and accessible for different groups. Among the key recommendations were that the workshops needed to be practically focussed and flexible, to suit the varying needs and learning preferences evident within the target group.

### **Youth Action Workshops**

The development of the pilot workshops was guided by the research findings and both the Youth Advisory and Project Advisory Groups, who provided input into workshop design, content and resources. Pilot workshops were conducted in Beanbag centres and other youth serving organisations during 2007.

The workshop goal was to motivate, inspire and assist young people to identify what they are passionate about changing in their worlds (whether on an individual, community or global scale), and provide them with the tools and skills to get started. The main objectives were to:

- Increase participants' awareness of ways to take action
- Increase participants' skills to take action
- Provide opportunities to take action
- Increase participants' civic literacy (understanding and awareness of social and political institutions and processes)
- Increase participants' self efficacy.

The workshops were also an opportunity for young people to meet new people, share stories and experiences about taking action, and exchange visions for the future. These stories will be published on ActNow ([www.actnow.com.au](http://www.actnow.com.au)), which serves as a platform for taking young people's voices to the wider community. This has the added benefit of increasing and diversifying the content on ActNow.

### ***Theoretical basis***

The theoretical basis for the workshops draws on social cognitive theory and the theory of planned action (Ajzen & Madden 1986). These models are commonly used in health promotion and have been found to also be effective in promoting social and political change in the form of advocacy programs (Egger et al. 2002). The concepts of self-efficacy and behavioural intention are identified in these theories as key predisposing factors to action.

Social cognitive theory describes self-efficacy as 'a cognitive state of taking control, in which people are not just acted upon by environments, but also feel they can act upon and help create and control their environments' (Green & Kreuter 2005, p. 160). It is largely influenced by past experiences or observations.

The theory of planned action considers 'behavioural intention' as the final step before action occurs, and is strongly influenced by attitudes and social norms about the

behaviour (Ajzen & Madden 1986; Green & Kreuter 2005). Furthermore, the theory of planned action stipulates that such attitudes are derived from beliefs ‘concerning the efficacy of action in achieving the expected outcomes and by attitude toward those outcomes’ (Green & Kreuter 2005, p. 161). Skills, self-confidence and environmental factors (such as availability, accessibility and affordability of resources) are also considered enabling factors to taking action. Given the role of attitudes and beliefs in mediating action, the workshops therefore aim to promote attitudinal change and challenge the barriers to action highlighted by young people and service providers during the research.

Additionally, the workshop model is grounded in recent theoretical perspectives surrounding young people’s civic engagement (such as Norris, 2003; Bang, 2005; Collin, 2007) in which the concept of ‘taking action’ extends beyond traditional civic and political activities (such as voting or involvement in political parties) to include actions related to specific issues or causes. Thus, the workshops aim to increase young people’s civic literacy, in terms of participants’ awareness of ‘political institutions’ (such as governments) and ‘social institutions’ (both formal and informal). In planning the workshop model it was consequently important to provide opportunities for young people to explore issues that were personally important to them and to build participants’ confidence and skills to address these issues through informal and formal, social and personal actions, as well as through more conventional forms of civic engagement.

Given ICT (particularly online technologies) are increasingly seen as facilitators of participation in civic and political activities, and as playing a significant role in young people’s lives more broadly (Blanchard, Metcalf & Burns 2007; Norris 2005; Wyn et al. 2005), the workshops employ ICT as both an engagement mechanism and tool for participants to assist them in taking action. Thus, a key aim of the workshops is to increase participants’ awareness of how they can utilise internet-based resources (such as the ActNow website) to take action, as well as offer opportunities for young people to share their perspectives through digital storytelling and photography.

The following were also key factors in planning the workshops:

- Addressing specific cultural needs (e.g. provision of Halal food)
- Employing experiential strategies to engage participants and maximise skill development
- Employing a flexible approach that acknowledged ‘readiness’ or young people’s capacity to participate.

Consequently, it was important to build as much flexibility into the workshop model as possible in order to allow tailoring of activities and content to meet the needs and preferences of different participants.

### ***Workshop structure and activities***

Another key consideration highlighted by the focus group participants was that offering a structure for planning action was important. The workshops were therefore structured using a leadership development model called VEPAR (McCarthy & Purdie 2008, pers. comm., 23 January). This model was developed over a five year period using experiential enquiry and action learning methods. VEPAR is a cycle that represents five stages that participants move through when taking action on an issue affecting them - Visualise, Energise, Plan, Act and Reflect.



The five VEPAR stages may be viewed and used as a self-perpetuating cycle, whereby the participant moves from: visualising their desired change; energising themselves (and often others); planning the steps toward the change; putting their plan into action; reflecting on their achievements; to then returning to visualise their next desired change (which may or may not be related to their previous issue of concern).

Workshop activities and resources were developed for each stage of the VEPAR cycle in order to simulate the action-cycle and particularly emphasised creating links between what young people considered personally important to them and their visions for change. The main goal for each workshop was to devise individual and/or collective plans for action that participants could implement within four to six weeks following the completion of the workshop.

Participants were invited to document their visions for change, and/or reflections, for publication on the ActNow website using creative technologies including film making, audio recording and digital photography equipment. All participants were also encouraged to sign up to ActNow during the workshop to promote sustained action, connect them to a wider network of young people participating in action, and increase access to resources and materials to support their actions. Print based support materials summarising the VEPAR process, tips on taking action and contact details of community supports were also distributed at workshops along with general promotional merchandise (such as ActNow postcards and stickers).

Immediately following the workshop, participants were sent a copy of their collective action plans and additional support materials to help them complete their action. Young people also wrote themselves a postcard with an 'I statement', which is effectively a commitment to completing a particular personal action. The project team post these back to participants 3 months following the workshop as an additional motivator.

### ***Workshop evaluation***

An evaluation framework was designed to capture the extent to which the workshops met their objectives, and to gain insights into key barriers and enabling factors that contributed to young people's participation in the workshops and their levels of civic engagement following the workshops. Additionally, facilitation notes, documentation of project process to date from fortnightly project team meetings and feedback from the Project Advisory Group and the Youth Advisory Group contributed to the process of evaluation. Preliminary findings are summarised below.

A total of 59 young people participated in six pilot workshops implemented in the ACT, NSW, SA, VIC and WA. A further 84 young people were involved in workshops that were often shorter in duration and delivered in different formats and styles.

Each workshop comprised the same core VEPAR framework, however, the specific activities were tailored across locations according to the participants' needs. The use of ICT as an engagement tool was relatively effective. Digital film and audio equipment proved particularly useful for providing participants with an initial purpose to discuss and reflect on issues that were important to them. While many participants found this aspect exciting, Indigenous participants were generally less comfortable being recorded on film or audio. A short multimedia video was produced using footage captured in the workshops and uploaded to ActNow at the end of the year.

Upon completion of the workshops, most participants had generated action plans for addressing specific issues affecting their communities. These were developed on an individual basis or collaboratively as a group. Thirty-three participants also participated in 'quick' actions during the workshops (including writing letters to government, signing or developing petitions). The key themes arising from the action plans included:

- Police-young people relations
- Conservation and wildlife protection
- Safe environments for young people
- Alcohol and other drug support services
- Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) funding in Indigenous communities
- Promoting diversity and anti-discrimination
- Local traffic injuries
- Availability, affordability and accessibility of public transport
- Refugee rights.

In three locations, technological limitations hampered the extent to which participants were able to engage with ActNow, which resulted in significantly fewer participants registering for membership to the site. These limitations can be attributed to ageing computers and/or outdated software (for instance, computers without Adobe flash plug-ins were unable to load aspects of ActNow); and poor quality internet access.

Facilitators observed that, in some instances, there were additional factors related to young people's organisational capacity, which limited workshop delivery and/or the extent to which young people sustained their actions following the workshops. These included:

*Limited service capacity/resources to support project*

- Partner organisations were generally unable to allocate more than three to four hours for delivery and evaluation of the workshops. This restricted the time available for comprehensive post-workshop evaluation and resulted in poor focus group attendance and many partially completed questionnaires. Several participants mentioned in the evaluation that they would have liked the workshop to be longer in duration.
- Staff turnover and limited organisational resources made it challenging for staff in host organisations to support participants in implementing their action plans and engaging with the ActNow website beyond the workshop.

*Young people's ICT skills*

- Despite many young people reporting that their ICT skills were of a high standard in the research, some groups found it difficult to complete basic activities in the workshops, such as signing up to ActNow or creating email accounts.

A short survey asking participants to rate the extent to which the workshop objectives were met was distributed at the end of each workshop. Preliminary results were positive, indicating that the workshops were successful in meeting the objectives.

Nearly all respondents reported that the workshops made them more aware of how they could take action, and three-quarters said that the workshop gave them the skills they

needed to take action, with even more participants reporting the confidence to apply the skills they had learnt in the future. This feedback indicated that the workshops had significantly exceeded the workshop objective of ensuring that 60 percent of participants would feel confident about being able to make future use of the skills covered in the workshop.

Three-quarters of respondents said that the workshops helped them understand social issues and political institutions and processes, while two-thirds reported their awareness of these increased. Again, these results indicate the workshops exceeded the objective of 50 percent of participants reporting increased awareness of social and political institutions.

Similarly, more than three-quarters of respondents reported feeling that they can now make a positive difference and that the workshops helped develop their skills in using the internet for learning more about issues and/or taking action (exceeding the target objectives of 50 percent for both objectives).

Encouragingly, nearly three-quarters of respondents noted that they felt they achieved something from participating in the workshop, also exceeding the target objective of ensuring 50 percent of young people report feelings of confidence and a sense of achievement after participating in the workshops.

### ***Limitations to evaluation***

Although evaluation time was factored into the workshop delivery plan, in some locations young people had to leave immediately after the workshop to meet other commitments, or because of issues (independent of the project) arising at the youth service (such as urgent client issues or crises). Consequently, only 11 young people participated in focus groups and 33 post-workshop surveys were completed (representing 56 percent of the total number distributed). Where possible, informal attempts were made to ascertain feedback on the workshop with any remaining participants and/or youth service staff and documented in facilitator's notes.

Additionally, while most participants registered their consent to participate in short one on one telephone interviews at three to six months following workshop delivery, only two participants were able to be recontacted. This was primarily due to many participants having changed their contact details between the workshop and the follow up interview and, for young people from CaLD backgrounds, language difficulties associated with conducting an interview in English over the telephone. The lack of follow up data made it difficult to assess the extent to which participants continued to engage with the ActNow website, and the extent to which their civic participation was sustained beyond the workshop.

### **Insights and implications for practice gained through the project**

Based on the preliminary project evaluation conducted to date, numerous factors were identified as barriers or enablers to the project's success.

#### ***Enabling factors***

- *The project's participatory action research approach (PAR):*
- Employing a PAR approach ensured methodologies were relevant and appropriate to target group as well as facilitating reflective practice.
- *Partnering with youth-serving organisations:*

- Working collaboratively with established youth serving organisations to implement workshops was crucial to engaging the target groups and developing rapport (particularly in Indigenous and CaLD communities).
- *Keeping workshop content personally relevant, experiential and practical:*
- Focusing on issues that were personally identified by participants kept the workshop engaging and also enabled participants to develop tangible plans for action.
- *Maintaining flexibility:*
- Tailoring delivery approaches, content and engagement strategies were key to overcoming participation barriers experienced by the target groups (such as literacy issues, diverse learning styles, limited existing knowledge of political institutions and process, and negative attitudes towards civic participation). Allowing time for extra breaks, and the provision of food and drink assisted in keeping participants engaged.

### **Barriers**

- *Limited capacity of host organisations:*
- Limited internet access and/or poor ICT infrastructure alongside limited ICT skills amongst staff and other organisational constraints (such as time and resources) hampered the extent to which participants were able to engage with ActNow both during and after the workshop.
- *Readiness of the target groups to participate*
- Many young people in the project target groups experience significant life challenges resulting from the social, cultural, and/or economic marginalisation they face. Consequently, in some instances, young people were unable or not ready to participate (or could only partially participate) in the research and/or workshops.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the research conducted in phase I of the project and the pilot evaluation, it appears that ICT does indeed play an important role in the lives of marginalised young people and that it can be used as a tool for promoting civic engagement. This suggests there is great potential for using ICT in mental health promotion projects with marginalised young people in the future. However, there is a need to increase service providers' understanding of young people's use of ICT and develop professionals' skills in using ICT in their work with young people. Organisational capacity building, particularly in terms of ICT infrastructure, is also necessary to ensure future projects are effective. Project evaluation is clearly a challenge and a focus needs to be given to employing multiple and innovative methods to collect information relating to process and impact measures that capture the outcomes of the Youth Action Workshops.

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### **About the authors**

Atari Metcalf is the Project Manager for the Bridging the Digital Divide project at the Inspire Foundation. He recently completed his undergraduate studies in health promotion at Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia.

Michelle Blanchard is a Research Officer at the Inspire Foundation. She is also a probationary PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, researching the use of ICT by professionals for mental health promotion.

Trent McCarthy is a speaker, facilitator and consultant who has collaborated with the Inspire Foundation on a number of projects including the development of the Youth Action workshops as part of Bridging the Digital Divide.

Dr Jane Burns is the Director of Research and Policy at the Inspire Foundation and a VicHealth Senior Research Fellow at ORYGEN Research Centre, University of Melbourne.

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