First Foundations

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Digital Futures

Community-led digital skills programs to strengthen culture, protect and preserve country and create economic opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Digital Custodians Partnership

Indigital, Shared Path Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation, Microsoft

The Digital Custodians partnership between Indigital, Shared Path Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation and Microsoft, is focused on the development of digital skills within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Its aim is to encourage Indigenous women to be the Digital Custodians of their community. Not only in the protection and promotion of cultural responsibility within their communities, but to help communities understand and capitalise on future job and economic development opportunities.

Digital Custodians is differentiated from other digital skills programs because it's built from the lived experience of Aboriginal peoples, developing culturally-centric solutions with cutting-edge technologies in remote communities. These women are at the heart of our Indigenous communities and framed around language, lore and land, we're teaching them about artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, blockchain and mixed reality and how digital skills are relevant, transferable, and able to deliver lasting positive impacts.

As a proud Cabragal woman from the Dharug nation, I'm worried that our peoples will be left further behind if we don't get across these advances in technology. That's why we started Digital Custodians. We want to help find ways for our people to design these technologies and decide how they're used within communities rather than just being consumers of what's already available.

To further explore the issue, we brought together a select group of leaders for a roundtable discussion in October 2019. This included representatives from community groups, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses, the technology industry, government and academia who discussed the need to work with Elders and young people together – combining cultural knowledge and technical skills to empower our people for a successful future.

These are important insights for us all.

Mikaela Jade

Founder & CEO,
Indigital

Putting people first and technology second

Australia has an extraordinary economic track record with 28 years of uninterrupted growth. But what brought us here is unlikely to get us to where we need to go in the future.

According to the latest IMD World Competitiveness report, Australia last year climbed one spot and is now ranked 18th. But overall Australia's ranking has stalled, fluctuating between 17 and 21 in the last five years. Even more concerning, digital skills were identified as a weakness for Australia – we are ranked only 44th out of 63 countries.

I firmly believe that part of Australia's future success will come from growing our digital skills at the same time as building and adopting best-in-class technology in order to improve our global competitiveness.

After spending my entire adult life around technology, I've come to realise that its greatest successes come from a very simple equation – people first and technology second. Adding technology into homes, schools and workplaces without ensuring people have the skills and desire to use it is a recipe for failure.

This people first, technology second approach is acutely important for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Microsoft-commissioned research by IDC estimates that digital transformation will be worth $45 billion to Australia's economy by 2021. Microsoft strongly believes that value must be shared equitably among all Australians which is why we are enthusiastic partners in Digital Custodians with Indigital and Shared Path.

Digital Custodians has been designed with Indigenous leadership and culture front and centre, to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and develop their digital skills in order to help their communities flourish as we enter the fourth industrial revolution.

It is an initiative geared to foster a culture of lifelong learning that starts at school and extends throughout life, engaging everyone from the very young to Elders. We need to light a fire that encourages everybody to keep learning and become their best selves. And we need to do it now.

To produce this report we brought together a range of influential and passionate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives from education, technology, public policy and community engagement sectors. The discussion explored the co-design, implementation and governance of digital skills programs by and for communities. It was a privilege to listen and learn.

While this is only the beginning of an ongoing dialogue, Microsoft is committed to work alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to ensure they have the opportunities to gain the digital skills needed to achieve the outcomes that really matter to their communities.

We see this report as an important catalyst for success. I hope that you find it as inspiring as I do.

Steven Worrall
Managing Director,
Microsoft Australia

Contents

Key Learnings

- Developing digital skills within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities helps preserve culture, protect country and create social and economic opportunities.

- Success derives from community-led programs that lead with aspirations.

- Culture must stay at the heart of all skills development. It ensures people are put first and provides the context to support and propel lifelong learning.

- Community champions, especially Elders and leaders, are essential to drive uptake of programs in community and dispel distrust of technology. Indigenous business leaders are important mentors.

- Programs must have a long-term focus due to complex issues at play; there are no quick wins, this requires sustained effort and investment.

- A national funding model that can respond to the specific local needs and aspirations of different regions is required.

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have been inventing and innovating for thousands upon thousands of years.

Developing digital skills within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities serves two critically important and inextricably linked purposes. It helps protect and celebrate language and culture by retelling the stories of people and places in new ways, while also nurturing economic prosperity by creating new job opportunities.

On 17 October 2019, Microsoft hosted an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led discussion focused on the challenges and opportunities associated with digital skills development within communities. That conversation, moderated by National NAIDOC Committee Co-Chair John Paul Janke, underpins this report.

The overarching insight from that discussion is that success derives from putting culture and people first and technology second.

Using digital skills to connect people, place and culture is a huge opportunity but communities must lead and inform the process – defining their own aspirations instead of being consulted on pre-determined problems or challenges. Programs need to ensure regular, sustained involvement that continually seeks community input. This long-term commitment is critical for programs to gain community trust, secure government attention and have a chance of making a long-term impact.

It is important for Elders to understand the social, economic and cultural value of technology for their communities. When we get that right, they become powerful digital advocates within their communities, championing adoption, encouraging lifelong learning and fostering economic empowerment.

"Digital Custodians is telling contemporary stories of people and country that have existed eight times longer than the pyramids. It's the world's oldest civilisation and all Australians should be proud of that, not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people."

John Paul Janke
Co-Chair, National NAIDOC Committee

"Through Digital Custodians I have come to realise that our communities' most important needs are to have cultural safety and cultural competencies in emerging technologies. These are the foundations for equipping them to continue our cultures digitally. "

Mikaela Jade

Founder & CEO,
Indigital

Community Contributors

Sean Appoo is Co-Founder of Shared Path Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation. He has been focused on Indigenous public health for almost 20 years and has played a central role in the Digital Custodians program. "Young people are using technology but the older generations see this taking them away from culture," he says. "We need to bring these generations back together."

Jason Ardler PSM is Former Head of Aboriginal Affairs. The Agency is focused on promoting and protecting language and culture while creating economic prosperity and nurturing leadership. "I have a particular passion for challenging the negative narrative that dominates the discussion of Aboriginal affairs in this country," he says. "Starting with aspirations rather than grievances will generally frame the conversation to be about the future of their kids."

Kenny Bedford is a Director of the My Pathway group. He is also a Board Member of Reconciliation Australia and the National NAIDOC Committee. "Community access to learning opportunities must be designed to fulfill their needs rather than to fill a job," he says. "We need to be creative about how we help develop a sense of purpose for all members of a community."

Ben Bowen is Co-Founder and CEO of the Shared Path Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation, which is focused on helping Indigenous people start and build businesses. He has played a primary role in the Digital Custodians program. "It's primarily about self-determination so they can stay where they want to be and work," he says. "Technology gives us an ability to commercialise our culture in the right way because it's a huge asset."

Costa Demos is General Manager Operations at Supply Nation, which works to connect Indigenous businesses with its corporate, government and non-profit membership. "The capacity to develop digital skills is a challenge and, when you add in the lack of Indigenous technology graduates, that's going to create a supply issue," he says. "There's been talk of Indigenous business leaders getting involved as mentors and I definitely see that as an opportunity."

Renee Thomson was on the Kimberwalli Project Advisory Committee and is now working within the centre's project team. "Governments and people in power are making decisions for us rather than with us," she says. "We need to empower our young people to make their own decisions."

Lillian Gordon is the Acting Head of Aboriginal Affairs at Aboriginal Affairs. Lil has been leading Aboriginal Affairs NSW's Sydney/Newcastle Regional Teams, leading the establishment of the Kimberwalli (Aboriginal Centre of Excellence) in Western Sydney. In this role she also oversaw the progression of the NSW Aboriginal Languages Act 2017, the establishment of an Aboriginal Languages Trust and a strategic plan to invest in activities intended to reawaken, grow, nurture, promote or raise awareness of Aboriginal Languages.

Mikaela Jade is the Founder and CEO of Indigital, which develops new ways to digitise and translate knowledge and culture from remote and ancient communities. She has played a lead role in the Digital Custodians program. "We need to tap into the cultural knowledge that people have and start from there," she says. "Technology then comes into the conversation as a way to enable and support their ambitions."

John Paul Janke has covered Indigenous affairs in media and communications roles for 30 years. He is currently co-host of NITV's The Point, a news and current affairs show that airs on SBS every week, as well as being the co-owner of fit-out and refurbishment business Rork Projects. "A generation ago there were no Indigenous doctors, lawyers or journalists but there have been trailblazers who pushed through. We need to see that in technology," he says.

Professor Peter Radoll is Dean of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership and Strategy at University of Canberra. He has been involved in numerous skills development programs over the years, which has taught him the importance of community involvement. "You can have all the marketing in the world but unless it's relevant to the community, it's really hard to get them to engage," he says.

Brett Leavy is the Founder of Virtual Songlines, which captures Indigenous stories for present and future generations. He wants people to be able to see, hear and feel those stories so that they become immersed in them. "My grandfather taught me that the darkness between the stars is just as important as the stars themselves," he says.

Liz Wren is Director – Traditional Owner Partnerships at the Great Barrier Reef Foundation. In this role she is focused on the co-design, co-delivery and strategic direction of the Reef Trust Partnership. "We're in a phase of discovery because a lot of people have never been asked about their motivations," she says. "The innovation lies in taking knowledge and making it contemporary with technology as an enabler."

Microsoft

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Three Pillars
for Success

1. Lifelong Learning
2. Cultural Foundations
3. People Centred

1. Lifelong Learning

Technology can transform economies, preserve societal and environmental value, build new industries and accelerate cultural innovation. The Australian Government's Artificial Intelligence Roadmap predicts this technology will create substantial job opportunities in capital cities and regional areas by 2030.

However, Australia's education system is currently struggling to equip Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with the digital skills necessary for employment in today's job market, let alone participate in this future AI workforce. Half of Australian students in Years 6 and 10 are deemed proficient in ICT literacy. Among Indigenous students, that figure drops to 24 per cent.

"Kids are often being excluded from tech because it's used as reward and punishment. Once kids disengage it's very difficult to get them back. They're also way more advanced than their parents when it comes to using technology. If you're not exposed to technology at home and then get excluded at school, it leaves a trail of disaster that we call the digital divide," says Professor Peter Radoll, Dean of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership and Strategy at University of Canberra.

Creating high expectations around education, digital proficiency and supporting student aspirations sets them up for lifelong learning.

Lillian Gordon, Acting Head of Aboriginal Affairs at Aboriginal Affairs – wants to see more time spent teaching soft skills like adaptability, creativity and resilience. These are key skills which will increase in value as technology and automation advances, according to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report.

"Kids in primary school tell us that they don't see a future in digital technology because they've already been dislodged from it," says Ben Bowen, Co-Founder and CEO of the Shared Path Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation. "We need to design project-based work that creates industries within our communities, so we become blockchain architects, digital animators or whatever a specific community wants to work with. Then we can connect communities and have a national industry working together. That's the scale we need to think about."

Brett Leavy, the Founder of Virtual Songlines stresses the value of programs centred around project-based work. "If we can think about it that way, that's where the jobs are going to come from. What's the pathway, who's going to lead and who's going to want to follow? We need to be evangelists."

It is a critically important issue. Indigenous 15 to 19-year-olds increasingly are not in employment, education or training, and the unemployment rate for Indigenous people of working age is 2.7 times the non-Indigenous unemployment rate. We need to connect all the dots – so young people see a viable pathway from skills development, communities support this development and the education system supports people with their aspirations.

"If you're not exposed to technology at home and then get excluded at school, it leaves a trail of disaster that we call the digital divide."

Professor Peter Radoll Dean of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership and Strategy, University of Canberra

Hayley McQuire, National Coordinator of the National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition and Head of Education for the Foundation of Young Australians also wants young people to be empowered to solve real-world issues in local communities.

"Let's think big. We know demand for solar energy and battery storage is on the rise, which aligns with Indigenous values about caring for country," she says. "There are so many communities where this could be an economic opportunity to sell power back into the grid.

"We should give our young people the skills to install this infrastructure and monitor it. We want them to own and control the services that get created through the application of digital skills."

As a leader among young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Renee Thomson says the focus also needs to be on helping kids in the communities restore links with culture and secure their future. "I envision our kids becoming leaders and teachers so they're not playing catch up. We want them to be whatever they want to be instead of the stereotypical Aboriginal child that all of these kids still believe they are. Success is when they believe in themselves."

Elders who witness the impact digital skills can have become powerful community advocates for lifelong learning and change the narrative around distrust of technology in communities. Elders not only play an integral part in preserving traditional knowledge, they are also pivotal in helping tackle broader community issues such as education, unemployment and inclusion. By empowering Elders with the understanding of technology, we show how it is relevant to communities and can make a positive step in helping close the gap in skills transfer.

"We're seeing aunties that had never picked up a computer before now coding, designing websites and building apps because they see a place for it. That spreads really quickly across the community. Focusing too heavily on schools is a challenge because it isolates the rest of the community, including the Elders. How do we have our communities bringing this technology into schools so that they're the cultural digital educators and leaders?" says Sean Appoo, Co-Founder, Shared Path.

Business leaders in the community also act as digital champions. PwC estimated that Indigenous businesses added as much as $6.6 billion to the Australian economy in 2016. Besides this economic contribution, Indigenous businesses provide significant social benefits to the community.

They are 100 times more likely to hire Indigenous workers than non-Indigenous businesses, with research by Supply Nation showing that for every dollar of revenue generated by an Indigenous business, it generates more than $4.40 in social return.

Yet hiring digitally proficient Indigenous people remains a challenge. The most recent Census revealed that fewer than 1,900 achieved IT-related certificate III or IV, degrees or diplomas in 2016.

With the increasing digitisation of organisations across all sectors, Indigenous businesses and business owners play a vital role in closing the digital skills gap. Unless more students can be encouraged to develop digital skills Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses may face a skills crisis.

"There's been talk about how our Indigenous business leaders can get involved as mentors in the use of technology and I definitely see that as an opportunity," says Costa Demos, General Manager Operations, Supply Nation.

"We're seeing aunties that had never picked up a computer before now coding, designing websites and building apps because they see a place for it. "

Sean Appoo

Co-Founder,
Shared Path Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Corporation

Equipping students for sustained success

Education is the best foundation for future success, and in the 21st century success will require digital skills, experience in STEM and an ability to collaborate and to create. But in the race to innovate and transform, it's critical also to protect and preserve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language, culture and heritage, ensuring that 60,000 years of innovation and knowledge is not lost or overlooked.

With many spoken Aboriginal languages at risk of being lost in NSW, Microsoft partnered with Indigital, Shared Path and the NSW Department of Education to pilot Australia's first culturally-led mixed reality program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Over a six month period, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students worked together with Elders to recreate a dreamtime story into a mixed reality language learning resource where students can see their work and hear the story in Dharawal and English.

Framed around local culture and language, it provided the students the opportunity to build their technical, digital, creative and collaborative skills for the future.

As one student, Jake, said; "The technology work is very knowledge expanding. They taught me things I didn't know how to use, or even existed."

Act Now

- Reset expectations around what students can achieve and show them how learning is directly relevant to those goals

- Provide greater opportunities to use technology throughout learning

- Support students to learn at their own pace

- Foster a love of lifelong learning by teaching adaptability, creativity and resilience

- Provide real work experience during school

2. Cultural Foundations

One question comes up time and again when Mikaela Jade explains the Digital Custodians program to people who are unfamiliar with it: *"Why did you focus exclusively on women?"*

It's because focusing on women is an investment in the entire community. Being on country they are intrinsically linked to the social, cultural, economic, physical and emotional wellbeing of community.

Yet right now, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are amongst the most digitally disadvantaged people in Australia, Jade says. "We're working hard to change that so we don't just consume other people's technologies. We want to build them ourselves in ways that honour and uphold our cultures.

"Our women are in sectors of the economy that will be disproportionally impacted by automation – more than half of the jobs projected to be displaced between now and 2026 belong to women. If you work in customer service, education or administration, your work future is at risk. The gender and racial bias occurring in society can also be magnified by these new technologies, including AI."

Equip women with digital skills and they contribute meaningfully to the community. One group from the Kimberley region of Western Australia proposed gamifying a language app so that people collect coins to buy cultural artefacts as they learn new phrases, helping to preserve a local endangered language. After a couple of conversations, it was decided that users collect cultural artefacts in the app to show progress. This could then allow parallel programs during school holidays where children go out to country with Elders to collect or manufacture these artefacts, closing the loop between language, culture and technology.

Unleashing digital in the community

Lucille Cassar from Wujal in northern Queensland is coding in three different languages, including Python, after taking part in Digital Custodians. She's also revitalising the local language and has created three jobs for herself within the community. This sees her working as a cultural liaison, developing youth skills and producing a language documentary. And because her husband runs a construction business, she's also built him a website, completes new business tenders and does administration work. She initially found that developing digital skills isolated her but has since been able to engage the community through her new roles.

The challenge is finding time and space for women to invest in their digital learning while remaining connected to community. Work is now underway to figure out better cultural protocols that would allow women to work in collaborative spaces and validate their knowledge without having to leave the community where they live and work, or be stripped of their empowerment after learning these new skills.

"Women have always been masters of this kind of grassroots change. We had women who had never used a computer before sitting in a coding class within three days of starting," Appoo says.

"Some of them would consider English their fourth or fifth language but they were damn good at making holograms because it's similar to weaving," adds Jade.

"It's about making people feel safe and empowered to speak up and learn. The social issues are a challenge but there's also a real celebration of women as leaders in communities. It's complex and it's up to traditional owners to decide. We're trying to create the space and the means for them to determine what they want to design," Liz Wren, Director – Traditional Owner Partnerships at the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, says.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index shows that Australians are connecting more devices to the internet, consuming more data and participating in a greater range of social, cultural and economic activities online. However, it's unevenly distributed and heavily influenced by differences in income, age, education levels and employment. For Indigenous communities, remoteness, access and affordability all play a role in digital exclusion, with mobile-only connectivity prevalent in many communities.

Mobile phones can connect people to country and community and the areas in community with connectivity can become a gathering point, providing an opportunity for people to engage with each other.

Yet technology and digital skills should only be adopted in communities or schools with proper cultural consideration. Programs need to address the concerns among Elders and community leaders about the impact of technology on community and prove they offer value for cultural learning, environment and economic opportunity.

"We need to get people developing skills and accessing valuable resources they're not even aware of rather than getting distracted. One of the most positive uses I've seen is connecting back to the history of people and places. We need to help communities develop the skills to connect to that culture online," Kenny Bedford, Director of the My Pathway group, says.

When technologies are applied well within communities it can lead to surprising conversations. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture has, for example, traditionally avoided naming the dead, or showing their images, as a mark of respect. But Digital Custodians projects featuring voice recordings in the Kimberley region and the use of holograms in Kakadu have prompted discussions about those protocols.

"We follow cultural protocols and licensing for when people pass away," Jade says. "But we've had traditional owners in Kakadu telling us they don't want their holograms to be taken out of the app in the future. Once they saw the technology and understood how it works, they were prepared to change laws because they want to stay connected with country and future generations."

Bringing magpie geese back to Kakadu

Kakadu National Park in Australia's Northern Territory is one of the most beautiful places on the planet. It's a precious resource for Traditional Owners who have hunted, fished and lived on the land for thousands of years.

It's also the site of a ground-breaking project that combines Indigenous knowledge, scientific research and artificial intelligence to protect the environment and preserve biodiversity. The Healthy Country project brings together the Kakadu Board of Management, Bininj co-researchers and Indigenous rangers, CSIRO, Microsoft, Parks Australia, Northern Australia National Environment Science Program (NESP), University of Western Australia (UWA) and Charles Darwin University (CDU).

Kakadu's wetlands are one of the last refuges for protected Australian species, including magpie geese, which are considered a key indicator of healthy country by Traditional Owners. But invasive species such as para grass, an introduced fodder crop which has become an aggressive and fast-growing weed, are displacing native plants and

reducing the habitat for magpie geese, ducks and turtles.

Under the direction of Traditional Owners and Rangers, drones are being used to capture video footage in Kakadu National Park. Data is collected, labelled and interpreted using a combination of Indigenous knowledge, Microsoft artificial intelligence, CustomVision AI from drone footage, data visualisation, and scientific research to help solve complex environmental management problems through an adaptive co-management approach ensuring Traditional Owners are front and centre with decision making.

The approach is working. Only 50 magpie geese were counted in late 2018 before the project started. Now more than 1,800 have returned to the wetlands.

Act Now

- Lead with culture, follow with the technology

- Share stories of women role models benefitting their community through their digital understanding

- Demonstrate to Elders and community leaders how technology supports community aspirations

3. People Centred

Australia needs a digital workforce committed to lifelong learning to meet the nation's current and future needs. The strategies and training programs implemented in Indigenous communities need to be determined by the community and put the needs of learners first.

Research from The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development reveals that Native nations empowered to make their own decisions consistently outperformed external decision makers. This is true for decisions about government reform, natural resource management, economic development, healthcare and the provision of social services.

Instead of engaging Indigenous people in the co-design of a program to tackle a pre-determined issue, success derives from self-determination followed by co-design.

"Too often we go in thinking about problems and conflicts that we're trying to solve. Asking people what they want to achieve is a fundamentally different question. When I think about conflicted communities, starting with aspirations rather than grievances will generally frame the conversation so that it's about the future of their kids," Jason Ardler PSM, Former Head of Aboriginal Affairs, says.

Technologies like artificial intelligence and data analytics have an important role to play in protecting cultural and heritage values, conserving biodiversity and enhancing the resilience of the natural environment. Traditional Owners need to be engaged in the discussions and decisions about their country, and benefit from understanding how technology can be applied to help.

Creating a big impression

Katherine Samuels from Cape York had used computers in a rudimentary way before joining Digital Custodians. Within days of getting involved she was coding and augmenting her artwork. Since going back to her community, where she works for the local land corporation, she has become the go-to person for digital skills around the office. This typically sees her using design software and digitising documents. She's also part of the recently established Cape York Grassroots Hub, which acts as a base for skills development and training for many Communities across the Cape York region.

"We're in a phase of discovery because a lot of people have never been asked about their motivations," Wren says. "The innovation lies in taking knowledge and making it contemporary with technology as an enabler."

Consulting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is also critically important for improving the prospects of young people who all too often end up in the juvenile justice system.

"When we get Elders together with government, they'll ask questions that agencies haven't thought about. These are often focused on issues like cognitive impairment, homelessness and school suspensions.

"This means the data gets cut in a different way so we can dispel some myths and come up with new strategies for keeping kids out of incarceration. We get different outcomes when we ask the communities about their goals and aspirations instead of leading with government priorities. They don't want to be told what to do. They want people to work with them to understand the data and develop a shared understanding before working out solutions," Ardler says.

Greater understanding about data and AI empowers communities to guard against bias in data and algorithms, promoting better outcomes for all.

The Digital Custodians initiative is geared to encouraging informed dialogue and empowering women in communities with digital knowledge that will help them steer critically important conversations – with people at the heart.

Act Now

- Lead with self-determination which is critical for successful initiatives
- Demonstrate how digital understanding helps communities make better decisions
- Explain the role of data and AI algorithms and why bias needs to be removed

Designing Programs

Designing Programs

Engage communities

Ask communities what their aspirations are. That's what should guide priorities and how you know what to measure as success.

Prioritise projects

Design project-based work shaped by community priorities.

Think big

Develop skills for today and tomorrow. Indigenous students can be blockchain architects, digital animators and AI developers collaborating in and across communities to create new industries and jobs within communities.

Australia wide

Overcoming the digital divide requires a well-funded national digital skills program that can be tailored to meet the priorities determined by communities in different regions.

Business support

When corporates engage with non-profits new pathways for digital skills to be shared with community and business are developed.
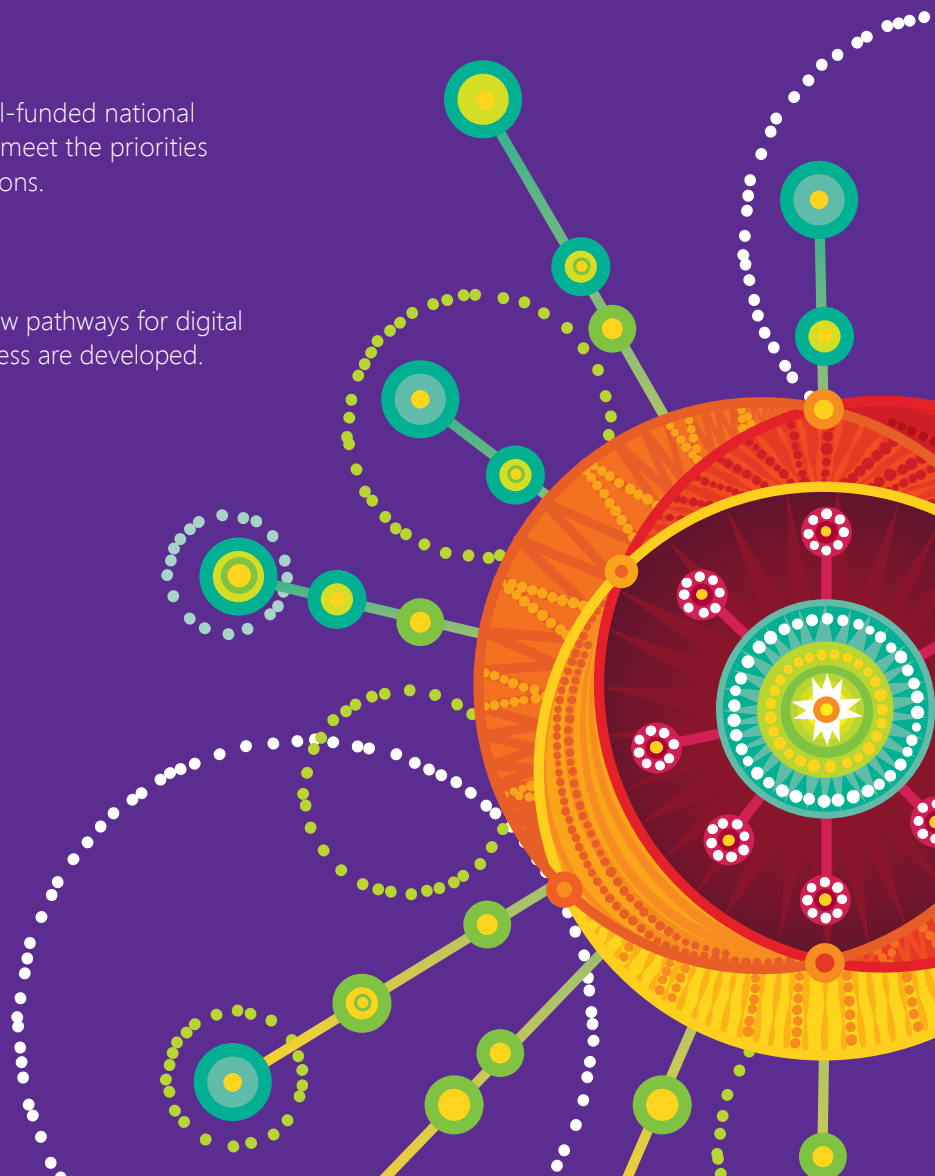
Conclusion

Digital skills have an important role to play in closing the opportunity gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. But programs must be community-led with a twin focus on preserving culture and creating opportunities.

Conclusion

The development of digital skills within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is complex but crucially important. A number of guiding principles emerged from the roundtable discussion.

Most important is that programs are community led. This means understanding the aspirations of people within different communities, guided by community Elders and leaders.

Elders and leaders who understand the role of technology and how it can support the social, cultural, economic, physical and emotional wellbeing of their community can become the digital champions in their community. This helps engage young people as well as schools and other relevant community organisations critical to skills development.

Culture plays a critical role in making the digital skills and aspirations relevant to community, with technology the enabler. Developing women's digital skills is a catalyst for community success.

A national funding model able to be localised to account for the aspirations of different communities will be key to developing digital skills able to protect culture, preserve country and create economic opportunities.

Government will play a key role in the development of digital skills within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and there is also a huge opportunity to build connections in the non-profit and corporate sectors.

In the first phase of Digital Custodians we have seen communities using technologies in ways that experienced professionals working in the program had never imagined. We need to keep providing access to tools, developing skills and dealing with concerns as they arise. We will also need to start thinking about seed funding as a fresh wave of Indigenous entrepreneurs emerges.

There are questions still to be answered:

1. How do we encourage communities to work together so that a dataset encapsulates the entire region rather than a small pocket of it that might be ignored?
2. How do we skill people to use data and understand how environmental decisions impact whole ecosystems rather than just one specific community?
3. How do we create new industries in the green economy or health care at a regional level?

The Digital Custodians partnership is committed to working with communities, with Elders, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples to find the answers.

GET INVOLVED >

Around the table

John Paul Janke National NAIDOC Committee

Prof. Peter Radoll University of Canberra

Liz Wren Great Barrier Reef Foundation

Lillian Gordon Acting Head of Aboriginal Affairs

Kenny Bedford My Pathway

Brett Leavy Virtual Songlines

Costa Demos Supply Nation

Mikaela Jade Indigital

Sean Appoo Shared Path

Ben Bowen Shared Path

Jason Ardler PSM Former Head of Aboriginal Affairs

Tianji Dickens Microsoft

Steven Worrall Microsoft

Matt Tindale LinkedIn

Neil Gordon Microsoft

Renee Thomson Kimberwalli Centre

Lisa Weitzel Literacy for Life Foundation

Marija Juric Microsoft

Brian Corrigan OPR

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