

## Bridging the digital divide for Australia's disadvantaged school students

- A new report shows a staggering eight in ten students surveyed in lower socio-economic schools indicate that a lack of adequate access to a computer meant they had trouble finishing class work and assignments
- Sadly, two in five Year 6 students and a quarter of Year 10 students do not have access to a computer outside of school<sup>1</sup>
- Ahead of the new school year, not-for-profit, WorkVentures, is calling for the introduction of a National Device Bank for students to access vital educational technology if they can't afford their own

**EMBARGO: 24 January 2024** – The COVID-19 pandemic thrust us into an era of accelerated digital transformation, particularly in education. With classrooms increasingly dominated by digital learning environments, the ability to utilise online resources and technology is an essential part of student learning.

Yet, the stark reality is that digital exclusion is a very real problem in Australia, with one in two (51.6%) lower income families\* reporting their children could miss out on the digital devices needed for schoolwork because they won't be able to afford them<sup>2</sup>. This access issue puts children at risk of not only falling behind academically but also grappling with the social impacts and limitations of future employment opportunities<sup>3</sup>.

A new report prepared pro-bono by KPMG on behalf of WorkVentures, a not-for-profit supporting Australian communities through technology, skills and meaningful career pathways reveals concerning findings. A staggering eight in ten (84%) students with inadequate access to a computer had trouble finishing class work and assignments. This is representative of two in five (44%) Year 6 students and a quarter (25%) of Year 10 students in Australia who do not have access to a computer outside of school<sup>1</sup>.

Access to and affordability of digital technologies are not mere luxuries but absolute necessities for students in today's society to be able to have equal access to opportunities now and in the future.

In light of the report, **Jacob Muller**, Director, IT Solutions & Social Impact at **WorkVentures** says not everyone has been afforded the same opportunities when it comes to digital technologies.

"Australia is undergoing a rapid digital transformation but despite increased connectivity, socially and financially disadvantaged families have found themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide due to affordability and confidence barriers," Muller says.

"Our report found that students, who are from schools in areas that identified as having greater relative socio-economic disadvantage, experienced reduced or no access to a computer after school. This reduced access outside of school is likely to have a negative impact on the educational outcomes for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds."

While laptop computers were commonly provided by the school (57% for Year 6 students) as they progressed their education, only a third (32%) of Year 10 students were provided with a device by their school<sup>1</sup>. This can make it incredible difficult for families struggling with the cost-of-living or suffering other financial hardships to provide their child with a device.

"We have been addressing digital exclusion by refurbishing end of life corporate laptops and PCs, and distributing these to individuals who otherwise couldn't afford them including school students. Unfortunately,

\* taking part in The Smith Family's Learning for Life education support program

there have been various hurdles to scaling this up including a lack of device donations and lack of consistent funding to support the ongoing costs,” Muller says.

The WorkVentures report also highlights the benefits to students who have access to a laptop out of school, with 83% of surveyed students experiencing improvement in their grades, and the majority (97%) indicating that their new laptop supported them in completing their homework and assignments. The findings highlight the positive impact access to digital devices can have on students' sense of inclusion, enabling them to connect, engage in online learning materials as well as support their workforce readiness.

**Caroline McDaid, Chief Executive Officer of WorkVentures,** says a key component to closing the digital divide is through the creation of a national strategy.

“Ahead of the 2024 school year, WorkVentures is urging the introduction of a National Device Bank to aid digitally excluded Australians by providing free digital devices. We want to ensure all children have access to digital learning essentials so they can make the most of their education and not miss out due to their individual circumstances,” McDaid says.

Over a five-year period, the Australian government and business sector will refresh ten million laptops, PCs, and tablets. Currently, most of these devices are diverted into international markets for profit or disposed of (recycled or sent to landfill).

“While we have had some Australian companies and government agencies donating devices for social good for a number of years, there is substantial scope to amplify this across the corporate and public sector landscape. We want to see a system where these devices are kept in Australia and redistributed for free to people who are digitally excluded. We are calling upon these organisations to get involved and for the public to advocate for a National Device Bank to help students get connected for the good of their education and their future,” McDaid says.

A National Device Bank aims to secure one million pledged devices to support digital inclusion programs within five years. It also looks to divert 2,500 tonnes of potential e-waste, promoting a circular economy while also combating its environmental impact. City of Sydney Council is a sponsor of the National Device Bank study, providing a grant to test its feasibility in Sydney. To find out more head to <https://workventures.com.au/national-device-bank/>

### **About WorkVentures**

WorkVentures is a not-for-profit and social enterprise focused upon transforming Australia through technology, skills and meaningful career pathways. They work with business, government and the for-purpose sector to bridge the digital divide, provide equitable career pathway opportunities and promote a circular economy.

### **About the Research & Citations**

1. According to the National Assessment Program – Information & Communication Technology Literacy [https://www.nap.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2022-nap-ictl-public-report-\(pdf-8-05-mb\).pdf](https://www.nap.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2022-nap-ictl-public-report-(pdf-8-05-mb).pdf)
2. <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/media/centre/releases/2023/affordability-accessibility-and-digital-skills-essential>
3. <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/-/media/files/about-us/our-finances/20-21-annual-report/2020-21-annual-report.pdf>