Empowering communities to ensure digital literacy access for youth

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2021 Federal Budget

Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship

- **Recommendation 1:** The federal government should support broadly accessible digital literacy education that is free to participants and reaches under-served or barriered populations. To do so, the government should make funds devoted to digital literacy and coding education available to networks of community organizations and libraries. These organizations can help fill geographic, content, and skill gaps in program access across the country, and that have established and trusted relationships with existing service users and local communities.

- **Recommendation 2:** To and ensure equitable access to programming, funding for community organizations and libraries should include support to fully subsidize program tuition with wraparound supports where needed (e.g., transit tickets, food, etc.); modern hardware, software, and internet infrastructure with access to tech support; competitive wages and training for instructors that take technology know-how and expertise with youth engagement into account, and incentives for community organizations, K–12 schools, and digital literacy program instructors to collaborate and share lessons learned.

- **Recommendation 3:** Funding for digital literacy programs should include requirements for the development of open source curricula that digital literacy program delivery organizations, K–12 teachers and school boards, and community organizations and libraries can adapt to meet the needs of various communities.

- **Recommendation 4:** The federal government should create coordinated centralized support—within government or in the form of a small, focused, dedicated centre of expertise. This unit or centre would enable efficient and effective scaling of a community-based model for digital literacy and coding education and provide centralized advice and content which will help enable community sites to adapt their program models to the needs of local youth.

Digital literacy education in a pandemic

Digital skills, and access to digital literacy education, training, and learning, has never been more important. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has put the digital divide into sharp relief, significantly increasing the need for digital access and literacy to support online learning, remote work, social connection, civic engagement, and public health information and services.

The digital divide—the gap between those who have access to Internet and digital devices and those who do not—was already a significant challenge before COVID-19. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission declared the internet a basic service in 2016[1], but secure connectivity is still plagued by acute disparities that often map onto other socioeconomic inequalities[2]. In 2017, 69% of lower income households in Canada had Internet access at home compared to 98.5% of higher income households.[3] A recent study conducted in mid-May 2020 by the Ryerson Cybersecure Catalyst found that 7% of Ontario households did not have access to a smartphone—while that figure jumps to 26% of Canadian households with income under $20,000 and 20% for those aged 60+.

The Digital Literacy + Coding Pilot

In 2017–2019, the Brookfield Institute's Digital Literacy + Coding Pilot tested a flexible, scalable model for delivering effective and accessible digital literacy and coding education in after-school settings, in partnership with schools, libraries, and community spaces across Ontario. It engaged a number of participants who lacked reliable home internet and devices, or safe and quiet spaces to learn at home. With the support of the Government of Ontario, the program reached over 2,400 youth across the province, many of whom were underserved by, disengaged from, and/or experiencing barriers to accessing formal digital literacy education including K–12 classes and for-fee after-school and summer camp models.

Our new report, *Plugging In: Empowering communities to ensure digital literacy access for youth*, documents lessons learned and recommendations for in-person and on-site delivery models, and emphasizes the value of these spaces for digital access, learning, and peer connection. Perhaps paradoxically, our pilot demonstrated that in-person, informal, learning is critical for the development of applied digital skills for problem solving. Though in-person support and learning is not currently possible in the pandemic, we believe that this focus will be applicable when we are able to gather in community spaces once again.

Lessons for designing and delivering accessible digital literacy programming

With the right additional financial support, there is significant capacity in community organizations and libraries to deliver high-quality and low-barrier digital literacy and coding programming through informal

[1] Kupfer, Matthew. 2016. "CRTC declares broadband internet access an essential service." *CBC News.* https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/crtc-internet-essential-service-1.3906664

[2] Smthe, Suzanne and Sherry Breshears. "Complicating Access: Digital Inequality and Adult Learning in a Public Access Computing Space." *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, *29*(1), 67-81. Retrieved from https://cjsae.library.dal.ca/index.php/cjsae/article/view/5362

[3] CRTC. "Communications services in Canadian households: Subscriptions and expenditures 2013-2017," CRTC, 2018.

after-school spaces, with the potential to reach millions of children and youth across the country who might not otherwise have access.

Equitable access to digital literacy and coding education that cuts through barriers and meets the needs of all youth in Canada will require a concerted and collaborative effort, along with funding support. Fully integrated digital literacy education for youth across the country must include closely networked participation from the federal government—as well as governments at all levels—community organizations and libraries, K–12 schools, and program delivery organizations. Each of these partners has an important role to play in supporting the development of youth digital literacy. Partnerships with organizations specializing in digital literacy programs can provide cutting-edge expertise, K–12 schools have a wide reach and extensive structures to engage youth in formal settings, while community organizations and libraries are in unique positions to deliver accessible informal programs to local underserved youth.

Community-based after-school spaces present a unique opportunity to drive increased access to digital literacy and coding education for youth. They excel at providing interest-driven learning opportunities and engaging youth who might otherwise not have access. They also offer a higher degree of flexibility in instruction, format, and modes of engagement than formal classrooms. To make the most of the opportunity presented by community-based programs, federal government funding and support for community-based digital literacy programming is vital in order to extend access and engage youth from across regions and demographic groups. This funding should include providing the right resources to empower community organizations and libraries across Canada to deliver digital literacy and coding programming in safe spaces, cultivate instructor talent, access and share learning materials, and create communities of practice with K–12 schools and program delivery organizations. Doing so will put us on the path to an educational landscape that meets the needs of all youth who experience barriers to accessing existing digital literacy learning opportunities.