



Online WA Multicultural Communities

Using ICT to enhance communication, understanding and relationships across multicultural and mainstream organisations

The Online WA Multicultural Communities gateway (OWAMC) enables incorporated ethnic community organisations and nonprofit community organisations to set up and administer their own websites in-house.

An online community gateway project

The gateway is a joint initiative of the Government of Western Australia's Office of Multicultural Interests (OMI) and the Ethnic Communities Council of Western Australian (ECCWA). It provides free site hosting, support and site administrator training, and offers bulletin boards, mailing lists and chat and conference facilities via any computer with an Internet connection.

The state government's definition of multiculturalism refers to all communities, not just ethnic communities. This has provided mainstream incorporated organisations and Indigenous groups with full access to the gateway—subject to membership and usage conditions comparable with those across the Internet for public or community organisations.

In July 1999 a preliminary pilot study for the gateway project began with a simple five-page web format. This formed the basis for community consultations to develop a scoping statement and draft of the current structure for further

consideration. In May 2000 there was a very strong response when organisations were invited to participate in the pilot project.

Fifty ethnic communities were allocated a website during phase 1 (pilot) of the project. Phase 2 has provided an additional 400 sites, all username and password protected. There are no joining or establishment fees, but there is a minimal annual membership fee of \$110 including GST. Organisations and associations that do not receive funding, or do not have paid employees, qualify for a 50 per cent discount.

With some 100 incorporated community organisations already involved, and many more seeking membership, current indications are that the project is considered to be both viable and worthwhile.



The gateway has a seven-member steering committee comprising a representative from OMI, three representatives from ECCWA and three community representatives. All the members have technical expertise and appropriate community involvements. The steering committee monitors project development and the conduct of community information sessions that lead to applications from groups wanting to become members. When a group is accepted, a training session is arranged to help the group establish and maintain a website to its preferred design.

The *Multicultural Communities Online* newsletter, currently a quarterly, has received very favourable feedback for communicating broadly across the state. The newsletter has recently published items on a broad range of topics: the Sikh, Tanzanian, Greek, Dutch, Irish, and Muslim (Port Hedland) communities

have been covered, as well as Harmony Day, the Catholic Migrant Centre, the Noongar people, Indigenous art, the Indigenous Leadership Centre, the Berndt Museum of Anthropology and the Ethnic Child Care Resource Unit. There have been articles about the migrant experience, aged care, disabilities and parenting, ethnic broadcasting (6EBA), and an article on WestOne, outlining the development of learning materials and the application of media technology to teaching and learning.

The OWAMC gateway was a finalist in two categories of the NSW Community Relations Commission's 2003 National Multicultural Marketing Awards, nominated for developing and adapting services for a culturally diverse society and, under the Technology Award, for developing online information about services in community languages.

Benefits

There are strong indications that the keen support for OWAMC from OMI and ECCWA will continue as the number of member communities continues to grow.

The gateway has a potential maximum membership of 450. Once this is reached, the annual membership fees should be sufficient to meet Internet network charges, hosting and Internet service provider charges. OMI and ECCWA support would still be required, though, so that project liaison officers and training can be provided to help member organisations. The smaller, volunteer-based



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organisations, in particular, will need help to continue to maintain and update their websites.

The levels of understanding and trust between OMI, ECCWA and the management committees of the current member communities have been high and remain so. Understanding and trust across the member communities also appears to be growing.

A reading of the listing of the member organisations indicates the range of community interests currently involved. They include the Preston Beach Progress Association, Amputees in Action, the Vietnamese Community in Western Australia, and the Polish Multicultural Aged Centre. Having its own website allows each community to showcase its achievements, interests, enthusiasms and events to others with whom they might not normally communicate.

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The gateway readily handles movement from one community website to another, and on to others or back a few steps. Each website has a visitors counter, and indications are that several of the websites are attracting a good deal of attention.

Although the online newsletter has had relatively little promotion, 1600 people have accessed recent editions. Another indicator of the gateway's use is that search results on 'multicultural communities' in major search engines routinely feature OWAMC prominently.

Informal advice suggests that, while a number of the websites have done much for bonding within communities, there has also been considerable bridging across communities,



as well as a linking of the various communities more directly to infrastructures of influence. The state government's strong support for the gateway and the encouragement of prominent citizens also reflects these achievements in linking social capital.

Barriers

Of course, the progress made by different member communities in establishing, maintaining and enhancing their websites varies. Some have made remarkable progress, drawing on the expertise of key members, while a lack of ICT expertise or experience or facility in use of ICT equipment and software may contribute to limited progress in other cases.

Some participants at community information sessions have expressed concerns about misuse and distrust of technology, while others are more than ready to embrace ICT. Managing both the enthusiasms and the concerns as the communities develop their showcases will continue to be a matter for leadership.

In the case of some of the smaller community groups who rely entirely on volunteers, or whose management committee membership changes almost entirely from year to year, problems of continuity may occur and further training sessions for new participants may be needed.



Lack of available expertise in website design or content upload has been a problem in some cases.

Although consideration was given initially to setting up a default template for websites where the community chose not to have a unique design, this proposal did not proceed. However, this possibility is being considered again due to the considerable advances in website design support tools.

Key lessons

- The OWAMC gateway development has been relatively recent, with strong state government financial support and Ethnic Communities Council support and encouragement.
- The project took shape with community consultations and the piloting of relatively simple approaches before committing to a more comprehensive project in manageable stages, and added functionality as there was demand for it.
- This seems to have been a successful implementation of project management principles in building the bonding, bridging and linking types of community capital.

References:

Online WA Multicultural Communities www.multicultural.online.wa.gov.au

COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006 emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

For more information visit the DCITA website www.dcita.gov.au or email community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au.

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