

Improving digital inclusion for women in regional Victoria

Insights from the Victorian Women Trust's
Rural Women Online program



January 2025

Acknowledgement of Country

The research team acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land where this research was conducted—the Wurundjeri, Yorta Yorta, and Jaitmatang people—and pay respect to their Ancestors and Elders.

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About the ADM+S

The ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S) is a cross-disciplinary national research centre that aims to create the knowledge and strategies necessary for responsible, ethical, and inclusive automated decision-making. Funded by the Australian Research Council from 2020 to 2026, ADM+S is hosted at RMIT University with nodes located at eight other Australian universities, and partners around the world.

A signature ADM+S project, the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) has provided a national measure of digital inclusion since 2016. Run in partnership with Telstra, the ADII tracks the nature and extent of digital inequalities in Australia across three dimensions (Access, Affordability, and Digital Ability) and supports digital equity policies and programs across government, industry, and the community sector, including Rural Women Online.

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Executive summary

This report summarises the outcomes and impact of Rural Women Online (RWO). RWO was a place-based digital learning program designed by and for women in regional and rural Victoria run by the Victorian Women's Trust (VWT). The program was delivered in August and September 2024 in Greater Shepparton and North East Victoria following extensive community consultation. RWO involved hands-on digital skills workshops on a range of topics, a help desk for one-on-one support, stands from local services providers, and keynotes from leading thinkers and writers on digital inclusion in Australia.

Digital inclusion for rural women: a pressing challenge

While rural women are among the most digitally excluded groups in Victoria and across Australia, improving their confidence and skills with technologies can support them to more fully participate, and take up opportunities on offer, in an increasingly digital society. Digital skills can enable women to gain better outcomes across employment, health, training and education, and disaster recovery, whilst also providing life-affirming community and familial connections.

However, women often feel digital technology is “not for them”, leaving them anxious and less likely to engage with technologies or seek out opportunities to develop digital skills. This lack of confidence is a key barrier to engagement. Recognising this, RWO sought to change the narrative on women and technology. The program was underpinned by a capabilities approach that recognised the potential of women to engage with technology to achieve positive outcomes for themselves and for their communities.

Program objectives

The overall goal of RWO was to build and foster women's resilience through place-based digital learning. To achieve this goal, the VWT worked in partnership with key community actors to establish two digital learning sites, Shepparton (a large and culturally diverse regional centre) and the town of Yackandandah (encompassing the wider North East Victoria region). Following deep community engagement, led by local Community Liaison Engagement Officers (CLEOs) in the two regions, a non-judgemental, capacity building program was developed to empower women to attain digital skills.

Place-based approach

A core strength of RWO was its place-based design, which recognised the importance of tailoring digital inclusion initiatives to the distinctive needs of each community.

Despite some overlapping themes, the focus of RWO differed across the two sites according to the concerns raised by local representatives in a series of Preliminary Community Engagement sessions. For example, the Shepparton event featured a series of multicultural sessions, with local translators and community outreach undertaken to ensure sessions met the needs of Shepparton's culturally diverse community. Meanwhile, in North East Victoria, a series of sessions were run on disaster preparedness and recovery, reflecting the increased frequency and severity of disasters across this region. Common themes across the two sites were the highly popular e-safety sessions on scams and privacy, programs on how to keep children safe online, apply for jobs online, and other topics to support women to use technology to improve their lives and those around them.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation team used a combination of surveys, interviews, and observations to evaluate RWO. 62 participants at both Shepparton and Yackandandah completed surveys about their experiences, digital skills, and background. 14 interviews were conducted with participants to hear more detailed stories about their motivations and experiences of the program, as well as in-depth interviews with 13 stall holders, facilitators, and help desk staff as well as the two CLEOs. During the workshops, the evaluation team also observed how the sessions ran and how participants engaged. This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how the program impacted rural women's digital skills, confidence, and resilience.

Key findings

- **Widespread participant satisfaction:** 74% of participants were 'very satisfied' and 26% were 'satisfied' with the program, reflecting RWO's success in meeting participant expectations and delivering a positive experience. Participants emphasised the relevance of the topics, noting that they gained new knowledge even from sessions they assumed they were familiar with.
- **Improved confidence in technology:** 43% of participants reported increased confidence in using digital technologies after RWO. Many participants, particularly those less confident or that felt unsafe online prior to the program, experienced notable improvements in their digital abilities. This highlights the program's success in addressing a core need for rural women who may not have had prior access to appropriate digital skills training.
- **Improved online safety awareness, particularly among older participants:** Over 72% of participants attended e-safety sessions, with 79% reporting they felt safer online after learning practical skills such as managing passwords, identifying scams, and making secure payments. Online safety was a particular concern among older participants (55+), with 80% in this group concerned about e-safety. RWO's

programming resonated strongly with this demographic, addressing a key barrier to participation. In doing so, it helped address the needs of older women, a group that evidence shows are disproportionately digitally excluded.

- **A need for tailored individual support:** Over half of participants (52%) sought individual assistance at the help desk on a range of topics. Queries ranged from basic device usage, such as sending texts and setting up voicemail, to more complex tasks like recognising online scams, managing passwords across multiple accounts, and navigating apps. Many came with concerns about online safety and privacy, while others sought help with practical tasks like paying bills online or using banking apps. Participants appreciated the one-on-one support, returning with lists of tasks and often bringing friends to get help.
- **Content designed with local needs in mind:** The program's place-based approach ensured that the program was relevant to each community's distinctive digital inclusion challenges. For example, in Shepparton, where around 1 in 5 residents speak a language other than English (LOTE) at home, community translators and outreach programs were used to engage culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Having local facilitators that understand the community also added a layer of relatability and confidence for participants. This community-based approach proved instrumental in overcoming barriers to participation and ensuring the content resonated with participants.
- **Informal facilitation fosters accessibility and supports learning:** The use of smaller workshops encouraged open discussions and allowed participants to voice their challenges in a non-intimidating environment. This approach enabled meaningful interaction and collaborative problem-solving. The collective, hands-on approach to learning reduced feelings of isolation and strengthened participants' confidence in their digital abilities by allowing participants to share experiences and support one another. Together, facilitators and participants turned the sessions into collaborative spaces of empowerment.
- **Diverse expectations and requirements:** Participants engaged in RWO for a range of reasons. Most participants wanted to feel more confident using technology (76%) and safer online (65%). A significant number of participants also wanted to learn about fun things to do with technology (39%), acquire digital skills to help them do their current job better (35%) and to make new connections (27%).
- **Strengths-based messaging empowers participants:** Many participants arrived at RWO with apprehension and a lack of confidence with digital tools and services. Many facilitators countered this by adopting strengths-based messaging, celebrating participants' existing knowledge and reframing digital challenges as opportunities. By emphasising participants' capabilities, sessions eased concerns and instilled confidence, particularly in addressing online safety and navigating seemingly complex challenges.

- **Supporting digitally excluded communities:** 23% of RWO participants spoke a LOTE at home across the whole program (44% of participants in Shepparton spoke a LOTE), and 55% had incomes below the state average. The program successfully reached women vulnerable to digital exclusion, empowering them to attain digital skills.
- **Addressing career development needs:** 34% of participants sought skills for their current job, and 18% aimed to gain skills that would help them pursue new employment opportunities or pursue further education or training. The program equipped these women with skills to overcome digital barriers to economic independence and inclusion.
- **Ripple effects on digital inclusion:** The program's broader impact lies in its incremental approach—building foundational digital skills while fostering a supportive learning environment. Referrals to local support and resources were embedded within the program and facilitators and stall holders were often community members themselves. This not only increased participants' immediate digital capabilities but also laid the groundwork for sustained digital inclusion for women in regional Victoria beyond the conclusion of the program.

Challenges and barriers

While the program attracted a diverse range of women to participate in multiple activities across the two sites, the attendance figures highlight an ongoing challenge in achieving widespread participation in digital inclusion initiatives. This reflects broader barriers such as a lack of confidence with technology, time constraints, and a hesitancy to engage with often unfamiliar topics with people outside immediate social networks. However, because of its community-centred design, RWO is likely to have a “ripple effect”, enabling digital inclusion to spread through community and familial networks. By embedding local resources and fostering collaboration with a range of local services and organisations, RWO helped create sustainable pathways for ongoing digital inclusion at a local level.

Conclusion and recommendations

RWO successfully addressed digital exclusion among women in regional Victoria by taking a strengths-based, community-driven approach. It empowered women to feel more confident and safer in using digital technologies, enabling them to participate more fully in a digital society. The program's emphasis on local needs, community engagement, and practical digital skills training was critical to its success.

There would be significant benefit in deploying similar initiatives across other regional areas, with a focus on digital skills that relate to the needs and concerns of diverse regional women and the communities they live in. Digital inclusion is a complex and dynamic challenge: what will work in one community or region will not necessarily work

in another. As RWO has shown, improving women's digital resilience requires listening, and responding, to the specific needs and concerns of different communities, and working with these communities to tackle these challenges in ways that are grounded in local values.

Building on the outcomes and insights from this evaluation, several key recommendations emerge to sustain and expand the impact of RWO:

- **Sharing findings to support similar programs in the future:** The RWO model proved effective due to its place-based approach, which tailored content to local needs. To continue addressing digital exclusion in regional communities, other regions facing similar challenges would gain great benefit from a program like RWO. Engaging local stakeholders early and employing CLEOs (or similar) in new areas would be crucial to ensure programs are responsive to the unique needs of each community. To support this, selected program materials and findings from the evaluation should be shared and communities could consider forming a digital inclusion community of practice to tackle local challenges.
- **Strengthening partnerships among local organisations:** The program's success was partly due to strong collaborations with local institutions such as libraries, community centres, and regional councils, who were involved throughout the design and delivery of the program. Continuing partnerships between these organisations will be essential for long-term sustainability. Local organisations are well-positioned to maintain momentum by offering follow-up digital skills workshops and ongoing support to participants. Strengthening ties among educational institutions and local businesses could also help to tailor future sessions to focus on employability and skills development for regional economies.
- **Continuing to tailor programs for diverse communities:** RWO's success was grounded in its ability to cater to diverse groups, including multicultural communities in Shepparton, as well as older women across the two sites. To continue promoting inclusivity, similar programs should maintain a strong focus on tailoring content to the specific needs of different demographics. This includes continuing to provide multilingual resources, ensuring accessibility for those with disabilities, and offering targeted sessions for different age groups and skill levels.
- **Enhancing online safety and security education:** A key concern for many participants, particularly older women, was online safety and privacy. Given the rapid pace of technological change and the increasing prevalence (and awareness) of cyber threats, similar programs should place even greater emphasis on these issues. Expanding e-safety sessions and providing more detailed guidance on topics such as scam prevention, password management, and data privacy will be essential for ensuring that regional women feel confident and secure in their online interactions.

- **Measuring long-term impact:** To assess the lasting impact of RWO and similar initiatives, it will be important to track participants' progress over time. Implementing a long-term evaluation framework that includes follow-up surveys and interviews with participants could provide valuable insights into how digital skills are being applied and sustained within communities. These data would help refine future programs and demonstrate the value of digital inclusion initiatives to funders, stakeholders, and policy makers.
- **Making digital inclusion programs trustworthy:** Participants are more likely to engage when sessions are led by local facilitators and trusted community leaders, who bring familiarity and cultural relevance to the program. A place-based approach, supported by local CLEOs who have deep community ties, can help to build confidence among a network of local organisations, and by extension, the wider community. Trustworthiness has to be fostered through every stage—from program design to delivery to evaluation—in order to reach and empower regional women, especially those experiencing digital exclusion.
- **Adopting a strengths-based approach:** RWO session facilitators took multiple approaches to describing and teaching digital skills and literacies. When language used to discuss common points of concern (like scams and privacy) was fear-based, this often alienated participants, and made them doubt their own ability to protect themselves online. However, when sessions led with language that was strengths-based and focused on the capabilities and agency of women, participants emerged from these sessions with a sense of empowerment and possibility. Digital training sessions should be mindful of the value and importance of strengths-based language around the internet which focus on what users can do, rather than the myriad threats they need to protect themselves against.
- **Responding to the increasing pace of change:** Critical services are evolving rapidly, with automation and AI increasingly integrated into government, health, and education sectors. As in-person services are scaled back or removed, regional and rural communities face growing reliance on digital services, making it essential to equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate an evolving digital landscape. At the same time, shifting modes of internet access and the proliferation of digital devices are reshaping what it means to be digitally included. In this context, digital inclusion remains a pressing and ongoing challenge. Programs like RWO offer significant potential to support regional communities in adapting to these changes and thriving as technologies and services change.

By building on the foundation laid by RWO, these recommendations aim to further reduce digital exclusion in regional communities, ensuring that all women, regardless of their location and life circumstances, have the opportunity to thrive in a digital society. Through continued investment in place-based, community-driven approaches, programs like RWO can bolster digital inclusion and support women's empowerment across regional Australia.

Introduction: the pressing challenge of digital inclusion for rural women

Increasing social isolation, together with limited opportunities to learn digital skills, means that rural women are among the most digitally excluded groups in Victoria¹ and across Australia.² However, improving women's confidence and skills with digital technologies can support them to more fully participate in, and take up opportunities on offer, in an increasingly digital society.³ Digital skills can enable women to gain better outcomes across employment, health, training and education, and disaster recovery, whilst also providing life-affirming community and familial connections.⁴

Women often feel digital technology is “not for them”, even if they think that it could be useful in their lives. Not feeling competent results in people anxious and less likely to engage with technologies, nor seek out opportunities to develop digital skills.⁵ This is reflected in research that shows that men tend to overrate their digital skills, and women tend to underrate them.⁶ This lack of confidence is a key barrier to engagement.

When people lack confidence, they are less likely to take risks or experiment with technology, which is essential for learning.⁷ Research suggests that supportive and familiar environments can be crucial in addressing this gap, as they help people feel safe to ask questions, make mistakes, and build their skills incrementally.⁸ Programs that focus on women's lived experiences and align digital skills with their immediate needs and diverse lived experiences are more likely to succeed in fostering engagement and confidence.⁹

Recognising the gendered nature of barriers to digital participation, Rural Women Online (RWO) sought to change the narrative on women and technology. The program was underpinned by a capabilities approach that recognised the live and latent potential of women to engage with technology to achieve positive outcomes for themselves and for their communities.

The approach was underpinned by 10 core values:

- Integrity
- Kindness
- Fun and adventure
- High quality endeavour
- Fairness
- Realism
- Inclusion
- Respect
- Exemplary feminism
- Encouraging opportunities

These core values underpinned the creation of a supportive, non-judgemental environment where participants felt empowered to ask questions and share their own experiences with technology. The combination of respect, inclusion, and kindness created a space where women could feel safe to acknowledge their own digital challenges without fear of embarrassment or judgement. These values were evident throughout the program, shaping everything from how facilitators approached their teaching to how participants supported one another in the learning process. This helped create an atmosphere that allowed participants to engage with material that might otherwise have felt intimidating or irrelevant.



Above: RWO was held in multiple venues in Yackandandah over a week, including the Yackandandah Public Hall (pictured) (photo by Jason Robins courtesy of VWT).

The Rural Women Online model for addressing digital exclusion among women in regional Victoria

“We need to recognise that the internet is always local. We often talk about the online world as global, or placeless — but it is actually always grounded in where we are, in the technical and social and cultural infrastructures available to us, in the places we live, work and learn.”

– ADM+S Director Professor Julian Thomas RWO keynote in Shepparton, 8 August 2024

To improve digital inclusion across local communities, it is critical to work with these communities to identify key challenges and barriers to digital inclusion. Digital inclusion is a complex and dynamic challenge: what will work in one community or region will not necessarily work in another. Recognising this, RWO was underpinned by an innovative model for ensuring the program was suited to local needs and concerns.

Digital inclusion is a complex and dynamic challenge: what will work in one community or region will not necessarily work in another.

This Phase II design built on Phase I of RWO, which involved Open Days in 12 rural locations from July to October 2022, where women were able to call or drop in for support, as well as a mentorship program to sustain digital inclusion beyond the program. To further sustain digital inclusion after the Open Days, the RWO team also co-designed digital resources – including a Keep Safe Online e-safety course and a series of handy How-To-Guides – to assist women in pursuing their own digital learning.¹⁰

Phase II of RWO built on Phase I and involved sustained community engagement through:

- **Community Liaison Engagement Officers (CLEOs):** The recruitment of two CLEOs to support local ownership and involvement.
- **Preliminary Community Engagement:** A series of community engagement sessions with a diverse range of local stakeholders to understand the needs of local communities in two parts of regional Victoria: Greater Shepparton and North East Victoria.



Above: Bree Nightingale from Startup Shakeup and Click Region delivering a session for women in business at RWO in Shepparton (photo by Natalie Campbell, ADM+S).

- **Place-Based Intensives:** Two week-long series of events in Shepparton and Yackandandah in August and September 2024, featuring hands-on workshops, a help desk for tailored support, local stalls and keynotes.

A place-based approach: Community Liaison Engagement Officers (CLEOs)

The CLEOs were pivotal to the success of RWO. By acting as on-the-ground representatives in Greater Shepparton and North East Victoria, the CLEOs ensured deep engagement with local communities, fostering trust and involvement that were critical to the delivery of the program's Place-Based Intensives.

CLEOs were recruited to establish strong community ties from the outset.¹¹ Leanne Mulcahy, the CLEO for the North East, offered extensive experience in local governance and mediation, and Bim Rutherford, in Shepparton, had deep-rooted connections within the community, having worked on several local engagement projects, including the Community Connector program that supported new residents and their families in regional areas.¹² These pre-existing relationships were crucial for creating the momentum and trust necessary to make RWO a success.

The CLEOs played an integral role in ensuring the program was directly relevant to community needs. This included:

- **Stakeholder engagement:** CLEOs built on existing networks, working with key local agencies, community leaders, and grassroots organisations to identify local digital inclusion challenges. Leanne and Bim engaged stakeholders from various sectors, including health, education, agriculture, and local government, in a series of Preliminary Community Engagement sessions which helped shape the content of the week-long RWO program.
- **Tailoring program content:** Community-specific issues surfaced through these preliminary discussions, as well as concerns that spanned across the two regions. For instance, across Greater Shepparton and North East Victoria, scams and digital safety were identified as critical concerns, leading to the inclusion of sessions on E-Safety and Staying Safe Online which resonated strongly with local attendees. These were delivered alongside community-specific sessions, such as multicultural sessions in Shepparton, which featured local translators and culturally appropriate delivery, and disaster preparedness sessions in the North East.
- **Promoting the program:** Both CLEOs were involved in promoting the program locally through multiple channels. They used word-of-mouth, community conduits, and local community social media, and drew on their local connections and visibility to encourage participation.

CLEOs were instrumental in creating safe, welcoming environments for participants, particularly older women and those less familiar with digital technology. In Shepparton, for instance, a “chat corner” was set up with couches and armchairs, allowing participants space to relax, chat, network, and have a cup of coffee, tea, or home-made soup between sessions. After positive feedback, the “chat corner” was



Above: The “chat corner” at RWO in Yackandandah, which was used to facilitate informal discussion before and after participating in sessions (photo by Jason Robins courtesy of VWT).

replicated for the North East program. These informal spaces encouraged women who may have initially come for only one session to stay longer, ask questions, and engage more deeply with the program.

Engagement with the unique needs of each community required deep community knowledge and engagement. For example, in Shepparton, CALD participants often did not respond to traditional marketing or email invites. Instead, CLEOs worked closely with community leaders to spread information through trusted networks. Translators were also engaged for the program's multicultural sessions, and sessions were adapted based on community feedback to ensure that key topics—such as e-safety—were communicated in a way that resonated with local cultural contexts. Additionally, buses were provided to transport participants to the venue, addressing one of the key barriers to attendance—lack of transportation. Similarly, the program was flexible in its registration process, allowing participants to attend without booking ahead, which reduced the stress of having to navigate unfamiliar digital tools.

The role of CLEOs was not only to facilitate the logistics of the program but to act as the drivers of community involvement, ensuring that the content, delivery, and promotion of the program were attuned to local needs. Their involvement fostered a deep sense of ownership within the community, increasing the likelihood of local ownership of, and responses to, digital inclusion challenges.

With communities, for communities: Preliminary Community Engagement

Preliminary Community Engagement was conducted in Greater Shepparton and North East Victoria and featured local representatives from health, education, government, business and the community sector. These sessions were designed to ensure that the program responded directly to the needs and concerns of the communities it aimed to serve. The sessions allowed local community members to voice the specific challenges they faced in accessing and using digital technologies, and these insights became critical in shaping RWO's Place-Based Intensives in Shepparton and Yackandandah.

Trust and positive messaging emerged as crucial factors to increase engagement, with participants stressing the importance of trusted community leaders and locations in encouraging participation. Participants emphasised that engagement would only succeed if it was facilitated by “a trusted person in a trusted location”. These insights were integral to selecting local community leaders and safe, trusted spaces to hold sessions.

Across both Shepparton and Yackandandah, participants were clear that a one-size-fits-all program would not work, given the diverse needs of different communities. Instead, they called for a flexible, locally-driven approach that could be tailored to the unique social, economic, and cultural contexts of each area.

*“Country people want to see country faces,
it’s as simple as that.”*

- Participant in a Preliminary Community Engagement Session for
Greater Shepparton

Insights from the preliminary sessions were directly incorporated into the design of the second phase of the RWO program. In response to community concerns, there was a strong focus on e-safety and family safety across the two sites, along with programs on skills for women in business, job readiness, and enjoying technology. The program was also targeted for local community needs, including engaging translators for sessions targeting CALD communities in Shepparton and sessions on disaster preparedness and recovery in North East Victoria. Efforts were made to ensure that the program was accessible to a broad range of women by engaging communities through trusted local figures. By grounding the program in the lived experiences and concerns of local communities, RWO was able to address digital exclusion and empower diverse rural women to thrive in an increasingly digital world.

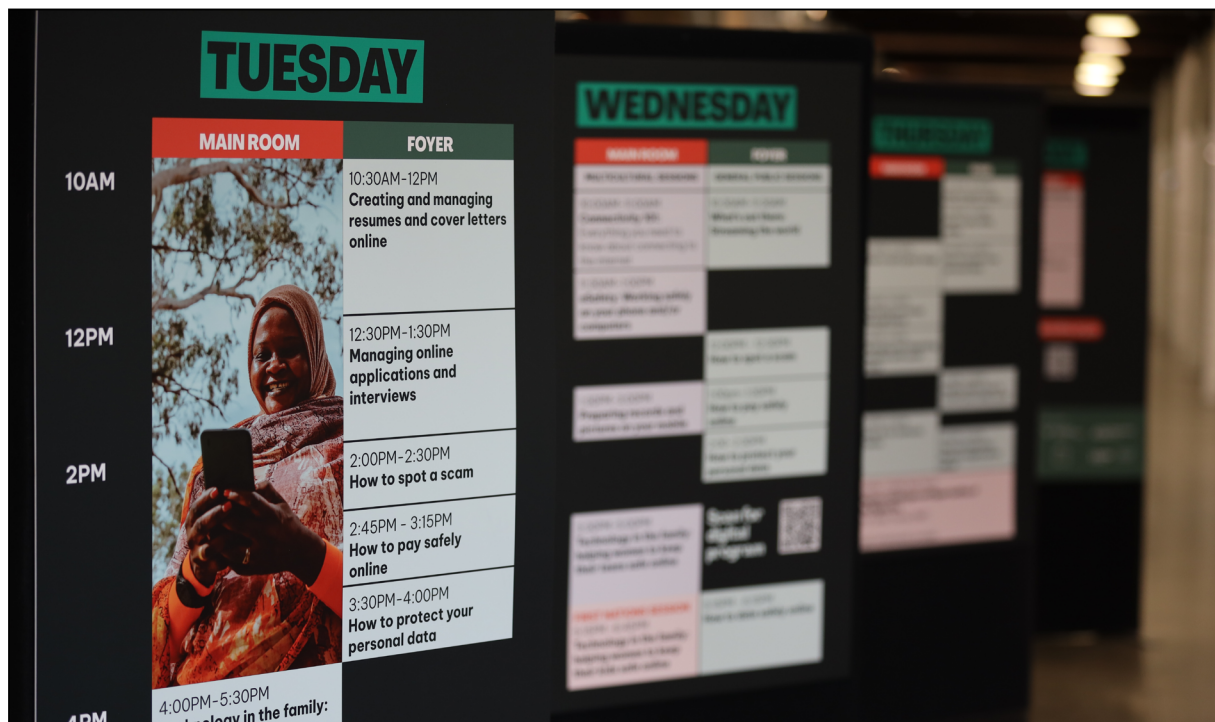
Empowering regional Victorian women and their communities: Place-Based Intensives

The Place-Based Intensives featured distinct events in Shepparton and North East Victoria, reflecting local digital inclusion challenges and cultural contexts. Although both programs shared the overarching goal to build and foster women’s resilience through a non-judgemental, capacity building program, these programs were tailored to meet the unique characteristics of the communities they served.¹³

The Shepparton program (5-9 August 2024) was tailored to the region’s socio-economic and digital inclusion challenges and its diverse population. With 35% of the population not engaged in the labour force and lower-than-average income and education levels, Shepparton is particularly vulnerable to digital exclusion.¹⁴ The ADII shows that the town’s overall digital inclusion score is lower than metropolitan areas, with significant gaps in access, affordability, and digital ability.¹⁵

Recognising Shepparton’s large CALD community, the program included dedicated multicultural sessions with translators and multilingual materials. The content and style of sessions run throughout the week were tailored so that they were relevant to the needs of CALD communities.

The Shepparton program also heavily emphasised e-safety, a top concern for participants in the Preliminary Community Engagement across multiple sectors. Sessions like *How to Spot a Scam* and *How to Protect Your Personal Data* ran throughout the week, helping women feel more secure in their online interactions.



Above: Participants in RWO were welcomed to the event by staff and volunteers, along with a series of panels with details of the program (photo from Shepparton by Natalie Campbell, ADM+S).

Meanwhile, family-focused sessions, such as *Technology in the Family*, aimed to help women keep their children safe online. Sessions on graphic designing using Canva and using AI for communications catered to existing and aspiring local business owners, supporting economic participation and business development through the development of digital capabilities.

Meanwhile, the North East program (delivered in Yackandandah from 11-15 September 2024) reflected the rural nature of North East Victoria and local concerns raised in the Preliminary Community Engagement, such as exposure to natural disasters. This focus on environmental preparedness shaped the program's content, along with a strong emphasis on building digital confidence in a smaller, close-knit community. For example, in response to the area's heightened risk of bushfires, sessions like *Apps: Be More Prepared for Emergencies* provided practical skills for using technologies to improve disaster preparedness. The VWT also partnered with Indigo Shire Council to host two *The First 72 Hours* sessions, focused on securing immediate needs during an emergency. Additionally, with an older population than the Victorian average,¹⁶ the program focused on building digital confidence among older women with sessions on online safety and basic connectivity.

Case study: The role of digital mentors

Digital mentors provided invaluable, personalised support to RWO participants, supporting them to overcome barriers to digital inclusion. These mentors, who were embedded within the communities of Shepparton and North East Victoria, helped create an inviting, non-judgemental environment that encouraged participants to ask questions and engage with technology. Their approach was key to helping many women build confidence with digital skills that previously felt intimidating or inaccessible.

At the digital help desk, mentors offered one-on-one assistance tailored to each participant's needs, whether it involved setting up a smartphone, navigating essential apps, or learning how to manage online safety features. Over half (52%) of RWO participants sought individual support from the mentors, addressing practical tasks such as sending texts, recognising online scams, and managing passwords. By meeting each participant where they were and guiding them through specific challenges, mentors transformed unfamiliar digital tasks into manageable, achievable steps.

“We don’t know everything but we’re just a bit more confident about figuring it out”

- RWO mentor in Shepparton, in an interview



Above: Two mentors at RWO in Shepparton supporting a participant to solve their digital challenges (photo by Natalie Campbell, ADM+S).

The program demonstrated that digital mentorship doesn't require high-level technical expertise. It was more important that mentors were relatable to participants and had a genuine willingness to meet participants where they were in their digital journey. Digital mentors at the help desks were not necessarily "tech experts", but they were skilled in creating a relaxed, friendly and non-judgemental space where participants felt comfortable asking questions and exploring digital skills at their own pace.

This approach made digital skills-building accessible and approachable, and challenged the common assumption that digital mentors must be highly skilled technicians. Mentors highlighted that, while more detailed technical knowledge is sometimes necessary, most digital support involves helping participants set up phones or navigate basic online tools—tasks that anyone with day-to-day familiarity with technology could manage. This shift in understanding enabled participants to view digital mentorship as something within reach, whether from family members, friends, or community members.



Above: The digital help desk in Yackandandah was designed to help with practical tech problems and create a comfortable space to have a go at solving digital problems (photo by Jason Robins courtesy of VWT).

Program evaluation

Evaluation design

The evaluation team used a combination of surveys, interviews, and observations to evaluate RWO. 62 participants across Shepparton and Yackandandah completed surveys about their experiences, digital skills, and background. 14 interviews were conducted with participants to hear more detailed stories about their motivations and how they found the program, as well as interviews with 13 stall holders, facilitators, and help desk staff. During the workshops, the evaluation team also observed how the sessions ran and how participants engaged. This range of methods allowed a comprehensive understanding of the program's impact beyond participant numbers to capture the broader influence on participants' households, networks, and the wider community.



Above: Associate Professor Jenny Kennedy from the ADM+S interviewing a RWO participant in Yackandandah (photo by Jason Robins courtesy of VWT).

Who participated in Rural Women Online and why?

RWO engaged a diverse group of participants, reflecting a wide range of ages, cultural backgrounds, educational levels, and income brackets.

Age and employment status

The majority of participants (66%) were aged 55 and over. This focus on older women

reflects the program's aim to engage those who are more likely to be digitally excluded.

Older participants tended to focus on improving their confidence in using digital technologies, particularly around online safety and everyday digital skills. Digital safety was a primary concern for 73% of participants, particularly older women, who saw the program as a crucial step in protecting themselves from online scams, fraud, and data breaches. Younger participants, especially those who were employed, were more interested in improving their digital skills for career advancement and professional development (see Figure 1).

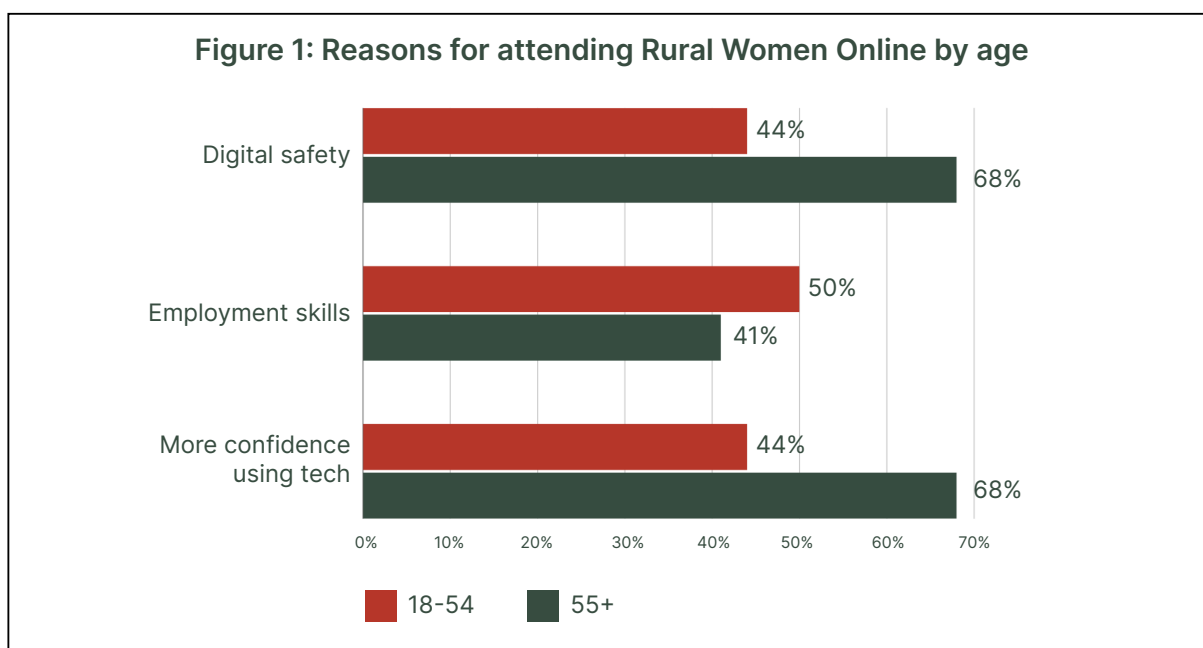


Figure 1: Reasons for attending digital skills sessions by age, showing older participants (55+) prioritised confidence and safety, while younger attendees (18-54) focused more on employment skills.

Apart from these points of contrast, there were areas of the program where younger and older participants shared a common interest. These included the Healthy Habits and Family Safety sessions. Although these sessions were attended more by parents with children at home, they were also attended by grandparents, which represents the shared parenting responsibilities between generations and a common interest in keeping children safe online.

Education and income

The educational background of participants ranged from those who had not completed secondary school to those with bachelor's degrees or higher qualifications. 4% of participants had not completed secondary school, 55% of participants held a bachelor's degree or higher, and 26% had completed vocational qualifications.

Income levels also varied significantly, with a substantial portion of participants coming

from lower-income brackets. Around a third of participants (31%) reported earning less than \$33,800 per year, highlighting the program's success in engaging women with limited financial resources. In contrast, 35% of participants earned between \$52,000 and \$90,999, and 18% earned more than \$91,000 annually.

Motivations varied by income, with those on middle and higher incomes seeking fun things to do using technology and skills to help do their current job better. Meanwhile, those on lower incomes were looking for new connections, skills to help them get a different job, and to understand how their children use technology. All income groups had an interest in gaining more confidence in using technology and feeling safer online (see Figure 2).

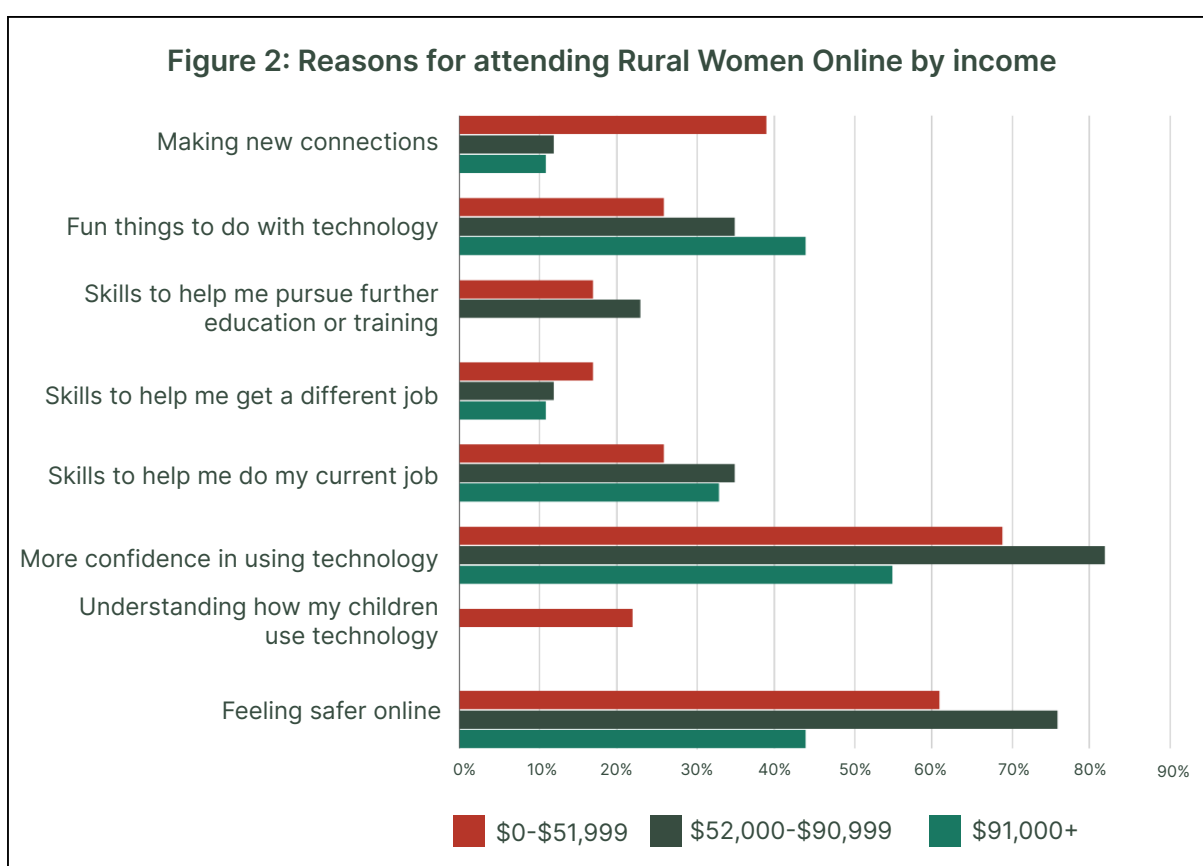


Figure 2: Reasons for attending digital skills sessions by income, showing low income earners were more likely to be looking for new connections and to better understand how their children used technology, while those high income earners were more likely to be interested in fun things to do using technology. Increasing confidence levels and feeling safer online were common motivations across income groups.

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) participants

RWO successfully engaged participants from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, with 23% of participants reporting that they spoke a language other than English at home. Languages spoken included Nepali, Gujarati, Hindi, Dari, Hazaragi, Swahili, French, Tongan, Samoan, Kurdish, Arabic, and Urdu. The highest representation of CALD participants was in Shepparton, with 44% of participants



Above: Participants at RWO in Shepparton attending an afternoon session (photo by Natalie Campbell, ADM+S).

in Shepparton speaking a language other than English at home. To accommodate this diversity, the program tailored sessions to meet the specific needs of CALD communities, including providing translators and multilingual resources.

There were some significant differences in motivation for attendance depending on whether participants spoke a language other than English at home. Participants who spoke a LOTE at home stated they were more motivated to attend sessions for employment and/or training reasons than other groups. This may reflect a perceived need to translate already existing digital skills in a primary language into a different context. Additionally, 58% of LOTE respondents attended family safety sessions compared to only 13% of non-LOTE respondents, reflecting a demand for strategies on how to proactively engage with their children's use of digital devices and platforms.¹⁷

What did women get out of attending?

High participant satisfaction

The Rural Women Online program achieved very high levels of participant satisfaction, with 74% of participants reporting that they were very satisfied and 26% stating they were satisfied with the program. No participants reported being neutral or dissatisfied, indicating that the program is largely meeting, if not exceeding, participant expectations (see Figure 3).

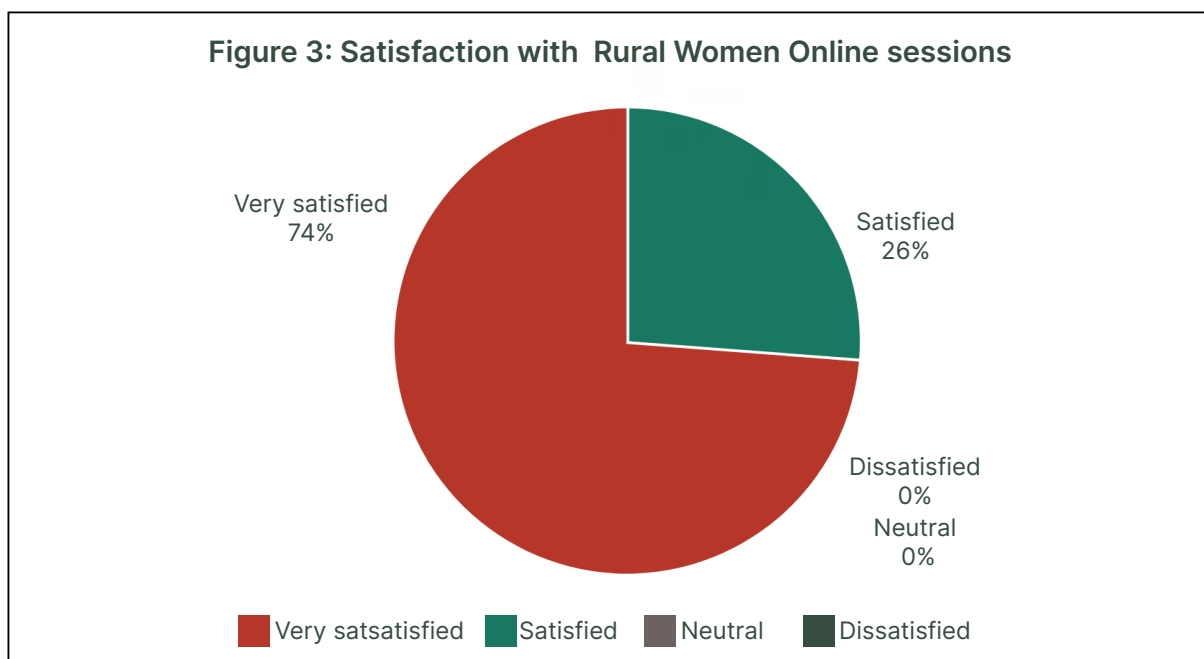


Figure 3: Reported satisfaction with RWO program, showing 3 out of 4 were “very satisfied” and 1 in 4 was “satisfied”. No participants reported dissatisfaction, suggesting the program met, if not exceeded, expectations.

Participants were particularly impressed with the breadth and relevance of the topics covered. The format and delivery of the sessions were also highly praised. Attendees appreciated the interactive, welcoming, and supportive atmosphere created by facilitators, which helped make the learning process more engaging and less intimidating. Informal facilitation styles also made unfamiliar digital topics feel more accessible, with a participant from Yackandandah explaining that having a more informal event “makes it so much easier and gives people more confidence” in the content of the session.

The program’s thoughtful organisation and participant-centred design also stood out. Attendees in Yackandandah appreciated how the event was structured. This positive feedback highlights the program’s success in delivering an impactful, inclusive, and empowering digital learning experience for rural women in Victoria:

I just think it was just brilliantly organised... Because from my perspective it just seemed really well timetabled, so you can go to lots of different [sessions] and catch all of them... because they’ve got double ups. And... people are really friendly and inviting... I thought it was brilliant. Ten out of ten from my perspective.

The high levels of participant satisfaction and strong relevance to local needs position RWO as a unique and valuable digital inclusion initiative for women in regional Victoria. The program’s values, its ability to cater to diverse needs and its participant-centred design were key elements that led to very high rates of participant satisfaction.



Above: Participants attending an activity-based RWO session in Shepparton (photo by Natalie Campbell, ADM+S).

Significant confidence gains

The program effectively boosted participants' digital confidence, with 43% reporting an increase in their confidence using the internet after attending. Many participants, particularly those who were less confident or that felt unsafe online prior to the program, experienced notable improvements in their digital abilities. This highlights the program's success in addressing a core need for rural women who may not have had prior access to digital skills training.

Participants consistently spoke about how the program helped them feel more comfortable and capable. One participant in Yackandandah said, "I don't feel so silly anymore. I feel a lot more confident". This sentiment was echoed across the two locations, with participants noting that they had previously felt "embarrassed" by their lack of digital knowledge but were now "more willing to engage with technology".

The program's ability to build confidence was further evidenced by the results of a confidence index used to measure self-reported confidence with digital technologies before and after RWO. Before the program, participants had an average confidence score of 76.0, which indicated a moderate level of comfort with digital technologies. After the program, this score increased to 85.75—an improvement of 9.75 points.

This increase in digital confidence is significant when considering participants' concerns about new technologies upon arrival at the RWO event. It was common for participants to recount how fear had prompted avoidance of things like online shopping, social media, paying bills online, and opening emails. This avoidance was



Above: A RWO participant receiving assistance from a digital mentor at the help desk in Shepparton (photo by Natalie Campbell, ADM+S).

usually connected to dangers around scams and e-safety concerns, coupled with an uncertainty of how to manage such threats.

For RWO participants, the community-focused, welcoming tone of the Shepparton and Yackandandah events helped to generate an openness and comfortability around learning new skills. This non-threatening environment was an important enabler for those who felt left behind as the world seemed to become more and more digitised around them.

There were multiple reasons for participants feeling “in the dark”. For example, not being involved in the education system for a number of years saw many participants feel a decline in their confidence levels.

Being out of the workforce was also a contributor towards feelings of low digital confidence, with many participants reported challenges related to this. A Shepparton participant spoke of the missed opportunities for digital skills training that accompanied being outside of workplace environments where digital skills are often developed and sustained:

You get updates about new technology and scams and all that kind of stuff all the time. So if you're not in the workforce, you don't get those updates and you're not as aware of things. It's the same with everything else.

For another participant, caregiving duties precluded full participation in the workforce. They explained that they “kind of got lost in the process in keeping up with career skills and... [different] digital skills for day-to-day things. The consequence was a perpetual

feeling of needing to make up for lost time, and keep up with the momentum of a digital environment where “everything is changing so fast”. Given these realities, the opportunity to attend RWO was incredibly valuable, with a participant explaining that “I feel like I’ve been lost in the dust for a lot of years and... the sessions this week... I’ve been able to keep out of the dust a little bit”.

“I felt like I’ve been lost in the dust for a lot of years and... the sessions this week... I’ve been able to keep out of the dust a little bit”

- Participant in RWO in Shepparton, in an interview

These quotes provide important insights into how women saw themselves before attending RWO. Having space to experiment culminated in improved confidence to try out new tools, with participants feeling more ready to “have a play” with various apps and websites as a result of participation in RWO.

The tailored support provided at the help desk also provided a confidence boost. Receiving help with setting up their devices or new apps was enough to bolster confidence to start using them, with a participant in Yackandandah explaining that “this is my new phone [that was] not properly set up, [but] now it’s been properly set up by the guys here... I feel more confident”. This demonstrates how a little digital mentoring can go a long way.



Above: Participants share their experiences with each other during an RWO session in Shepparton (photo by Natalie Campbell, ADM+S).

Migrant experiences

Migrant women face complex and intersectional barriers to taking advantage of digital skills-building opportunities in unfamiliar contexts.¹⁸ The task of integrating into a new culture alongside raising a family and pursuing educational and employment opportunities can leave little room for building digital skills. There were also confidence barriers for these women, particularly in relation to using English for the first time in front of new fellow community members. A staff member from a multicultural organisation in Shepparton explained that “one of the most important barrier[s]... is the language barrier and they’re scared to confront [that] with the whole mass [of people]”.

The RWO team went to great lengths to ensure accessibility and inclusion for these community members, with staff from local not-for-profits resourced to facilitate the attendance of a group of local women from migrant backgrounds and act as translators. Women attended the multicultural sessions alongside staff known to them at their organisations, making them more comfortable in what for many was an unfamiliar environment. Attending RWO was a valuable opportunity for this group, particularly for older community members who were still obtaining basic skills. One of the women supporting participants to attend the Shepparton multicultural sessions observed that:

The ladies that haven’t been here for long... they’re still getting used to how to use the laptops and iPads and stuff like that. [They] know how you use WhatsApp to call family, but they don’t know how to use a laptop... paying bills and stuff like that online, it’s something new for them.

In Shepparton, staff members from the various community organisations were passionate about bringing community members to RWO, and understood the importance of digital inclusion for their communities. This convinced many community members to attend due to their nervousness around English language limitations. Staff shared the challenges they had to overcome to convince individuals of the benefits of attending:

Sometimes it is hard but the groups that I work with, I tell them: listen, if you trust me, I’m trying to do my best for you guys. I’m not trying to take something away from you guys. If you trust me enough, come to the session so I can teach you a bit more, so if you want to go to TAFE and whatnot, this is something you can use.

While a sizable group of multicultural participants attended RWO in Shepparton, staff were aware that many more could have benefited from attending. As such, they explained that they had a dual purpose of supporting attendees and collecting lessons to pass on to the broader community: “I would love to share that skill and knowledge, whatever I learn from here”.

However, staff who participated in the multicultural sessions also observed difficulties with participant engagement due to language barriers. This occurred when interpreters were not able to translate the content when it became too complex. In these moments,

they observed that participants disconnected from the session because they could no longer follow along:

There are some ladies who have really limited language. They are trying to provide them all with an interpreter but that... doesn't cover most of the things. So since the beginning I observe them, they were giving lots of interest but in the session might be they get confused and they lose their interest. They nodded their head and start to talk with each other rather than focusing on the presentation.

Moreover, the same staff member shared that attending multiple sessions was difficult for migrant communities due to family commitments. They regretted that there were likely many more women who would have liked to attend, but were unable to due to these commitments. They explained that having sessions spread over consecutive weeks, especially after hours, could potentially support greater participation.

Inviting staff from local multicultural organisations to attend alongside community members created opportunities to generate knowledge around what was and wasn't working for women during the sessions, based on close familiarity with these communities. These sorts of insights are important in generating a stronger knowledge base around creating place-based, inclusive digital learning spaces for migrant communities who face unique challenges.

Social connection through digital learning, digital learning through social connection

Digital challenges are often faced in isolation, compounding feelings of loneliness and frustration. Many participants lacked social support networks to help them with digital tasks, making the program's emphasis on community learning especially valuable. Participants were able to share their experiences and frustrations during the sessions, which reduced feelings of being overwhelmed felt when facing these issues alone.

Sessions were not just about learning new skills; they became spaces for community members to share tips, advice, and personal stories. The collaborative nature of the sessions played a crucial role in helping participants process what can be complex and overwhelming information about digital tools and systems. On a broader level, continuous community sharing across the week of RWO produced opportunities for participants to build networks around digital skills development which they had previously not had access to.

During the sessions, the research team observed participants often helping one another to navigate unfamiliar concepts like setting up multifactor-factor authentication or managing passwords. Community sharing, therefore, became an essential tool for digital skills-building, as it helped reinforce learning and build collective confidence. As the sessions progressed, participants were not only absorbing information from facilitators but also learning from one another. This mutual support illustrates how digital learning can play a key role in enhancing social connection and community belonging.



Above: Participants connecting with each other after a session at RWO in Yackandandah (photo by Jason Robins courtesy of VWT).

What can we learn from Rural Women Online about how to build and foster women's resilience through place-based digital learning?

The RWO events in Shepparton and Yackandandah produced invaluable learnings about the dynamics of effective place-based digital inclusion initiatives. The number of sessions and breadth of topics, coupled with high levels of community engagement, generated insights about how to design and deliver digital skills programs successfully at a local level. This was in alignment with a key goal of RWO to not only deliver a standalone opportunity for place-based digital learning, but act as a springboard for an ongoing project of bolstering digital inclusion initiatives locally.

The research team collected useful insights how to build and foster women's resilience, including the importance of local delivery, informal content delivery, the function of strengths-based messaging, and how digital empowerment can lead to lasting change across communities. The following sections will explore these learnings in more detail.

The importance of local delivery

Regional communities face unique barriers to digital inclusion, making programs like RWO essential. Geographic isolation, limited access to technology, and a lack of local services can leave women in these communities particularly vulnerable to digital exclusion.¹⁹ For instance, being located regionally brought with it the threat of

encountering disasters. A representative from a multicultural community organisation commented that the recent Shepparton floods intensified feelings of isolation for the multicultural community, and in turn, compounded a sense of digital exclusion:

Living in [a] regional area, especially in Shepparton, what I found especially during... Covid and [the] recent... flood in 2022, most of the women are struggling to get access about networking, digital system, and they feel isolated... Not because they [don't] have given an opportunity [to] access, just because they were... not confident enough to trust the digital accessibility.

For others, working in regional settings brought about its own challenges around digital inclusion. Another participant in Shepparton explained that coming to an event like RWO was an important opportunity for expanding digital skills that may otherwise have been unavailable to them in a farm setting:

I'm on a farm and I do all the digital work for the farm. You learn what you're comfortable with but sometimes it's good to learn new ways. Because you're not involved with other people, you don't know all of the shortcuts or the latest ways of doing things. So it's good to try and see if there's any new ways of learning or doing things.

Bringing programs like RWO into regional communities offers opportunities for learning and engagement that would otherwise be out of reach, as this participant in Yackandandah reflected:

*I think that's what I liked about it, the fact that it is **Rural Women Online**. It's actually sharing things that are a bit more easily accessible in city areas to people who might miss out. And the tyranny of distance is such that if you bring it here, people can come and do it.*

In this way, RWO shows both the need and demand for digital skills programs in regional areas, and their potential in reducing urban-regional digital divides.

Meanwhile, learning about digital devices and systems was daunting for many participants, and filled with the unknown. For this reason, knowing where new information about digital topics came from, and that it could be trusted, was a priority. Having locally-based facilitators deliver content was central to establishing this trust.

The need for this trust was tied to the deeply personal nature of digital skills that participants were in search of. Participants listened eagerly to advice on how to connect with loved ones they had not seen in some time, how to grow an presence for their online business, resolve personal billing issues and stay protected from scams while shopping online. In one particularly moving case, one woman sought out assistance from the digital mentors to learn how to retain a voicemail from a deceased family member. Another wanted to create a social media post in memory of a loved one who had passed away. These examples demonstrate that for many, learning new digital skills held great sentimental importance. This required high levels of trust.

“It’s about showing the region that there are people and organisations out there that you can trust and they’re here to raise you up and not identify you as lacking in any way”

- RWO session facilitator Bree Nightingale from Startup Shakeup and Click Region

Whatever participants’ digital needs were, knowing locally-tailored, trusted content was available was an important motivator for attendance. Hearing from a trusted, local voice reassured community members with doubts or nerves about attending that the sessions would be worthwhile for them. This was important—while there was strong motivation to learn new digital skills, attending brought with it a certain sense of vulnerability. Not knowing where participants stood in comparison to others in their community with digital skills, or how they would be perceived, was a hurdle to participation. This was widely understood amongst facilitators and digital mentors at Shepparton and Yackandandah, who commented on the need for trusted local presenters to motivate community attendance.

The power of informal approaches to facilitation

For the most part, participants were not interested in formal, didactic content delivery. Sessions that felt informal and relaxed resonated strongly with participants, helping to calm nerves, as well as making sessions more flexible and accessible for participants with different levels of digital ability. Rooms were set up to reflect this intention. For example, rows of chairs were replaced with clusters of tables. Groups of women sat around them with cups of tea, sharing in discussions, questions, and problem-solving.

Aside from the informal setup, the content and delivery style of the sessions also contributed to a sense of community-led, informal sharing. Facilitators adapted to smaller group numbers, making a concerted effort to engage with each participant, creating space in presentations for individuals to share their stories, share concerns and ask questions. Informal, tailored workshops which could address both individual and shared problems departed from larger, one-size-fits-all presentations. It was clear that this approach helped allay fears some participants had about attending.

An important outcome of informal approaches to digital learning was that it helped participants to build digital skills more easily and made this process more accessible. This was reflected by a participant in Shepparton who talked about their experience participating in a number of the sessions, “they’ve got a good balance between informative and practical... it’s interactive instead of just being talked at for an hour”. The same participant explained that facilitators would “encourage interaction, they’ll walk around the room and help you. It reinforces your learning”.

The effectiveness of strength-based messaging

It was common for participants to attend events with a level of shame, trepidation, or nervousness about venturing into unfamiliar digital worlds. These feelings about digital devices and online services had multiple origins. For some, they were based on previous experiences using the internet, or learning to use new digital tools themselves and feeling as though they had made mistakes, or didn't know enough. These feelings were sometimes compounded by the delivery approach of facilitators, who used language centring heavily on threats and the need for vigilance online. Within these discussions, the focus was on participants needing to do more to protect themselves and their families and to "trust nobody" when interacting on and through the internet. These messages were ultimately demotivating for participants, and generated confusion around who, and what, to trust when learning about new digital opportunities.

Other facilitators at the RWO event were sensitive to this need for balance, and wove it into their facilitation approach. For example, Bec Martin from Evolve Education observed the importance of this approach when delivering digital skills training for parents. Rather than highlight parents' lack of knowledge about online dangers, it was instead important to help them realise their own capabilities in applying their "offline parenting smarts in an online setting".

Strengths-based messaging helped transform how participants saw themselves as digital users—from vulnerable, to capable.

Strengths-based messaging around digital skills and new technologies, particularly in relation to scams and e-safety, engaged participants and put their minds at ease. A strengths-based approach recognised the positive things participants were already doing with technology, focusing on their capabilities and agency and the message that support was readily available in the community. This departs from fear-based messaging mentioned which tends to focus on individual responsibility. Strengths-based messaging helped transform how participants saw themselves as digital users—from vulnerable, to capable.

The case study below details the experience of one of the e-safety workshops in Shepparton where this approach supported empowerment for regional women.

Case study: The importance of a strengths-based approach to collective digital learning

On the second day of RWO in Shepparton, a group of 8 local women attended an e-safety session. At the beginning of the session, the facilitator emphasised that this was an informal space for sharing and collaboration, rather than a formal training environment. To begin the session, each participant was invited to share what brought them to the session and what their key e-safety concerns were. A wide breadth of e-safety related topics were shared. It quickly became clear that the overall orientation toward the internet and new digital tools and devices was based on fear and avoidance. One woman needed to pay bills online, but was scared of making themselves vulnerable because of their isolation and low level of digital confidence. Other participants were unsure of how to store passwords safely, or distinguish online scams from genuine messages. Others were nervous about knowing which antivirus software to download, using public Wi-Fi, and other everyday tasks like whether or not to click on a link in a message received from a doctor's clinic. This sharing was usually accompanied by a concern that participants were not doing "enough" to protect themselves online.

After each participant's story, the session facilitator made a concerted effort to identify what the participant had done well and reframe online threats as opportunities for empowerment.

The facilitator was sensitive to this, and after each story, made a concerted effort to identify what the participant had done well and reframe online threats to opportunities for empowerment. Small wins were identified and celebrated by the facilitator. These included not opening a suspicious email, or choosing not to buy something on Facebook Marketplace for fear it looked "sketchy". Following these moments of recognition, the facilitator would remind the participant of the digital tools they had available to them. Referrals were particularly crucial for one of the participants, who was older and felt as though they were "in the dark with absolutely everything". When conversations moved onto more complex discussions around multi-factor authentication and updating banking apps, the facilitator reminded her that her specific concerns could be addressed at the help desk in between sessions.

Sessions were most effective when facilitators met participants where they were on their digital journeys.

The facilitator focused on meeting participants where they were at on their digital journeys, rather than introduce technical detail about certain systems or discussing programs that participants were unfamiliar with. Instead, general rules of thumb which were relatable to all digital levels were used. This included messaging such as "knowledge is power", or encouragement to "stop, think, protect" during moments of uncertainty when attempting to identify scams. Through these simple and motivating



Above: A group of RWO participants engaging with a facilitator in an informal learning session in the chat corner in Yackandandah (photo by Jason Robins courtesy of VWT).

tips, the facilitator encouraged participants to re-imagine themselves as capable of protecting themselves online, stating that through basic steps, “you become empowered to become in control of your digital world”.

The facilitator also effectively used metaphors to demystify the overwhelming and seemingly complex task of practicing e-safety. They explained that they taught self-defence classes outside of their facilitation work, and saw e-safety workshops as an extension of this work—empowering people to “defend themselves” in multiple spheres of life, including the digital realm. The informal, friendly setup of the workshop also created opportunities for participants to offer words of support to each other and empathise with each other’s experiences. There was a sense of solidarity borne out of group sharing that helped reframed digital threats to manageable risks which could be tackled through collective learning. Together, they moved from “risk” to “resilience”.²⁰

Following the session, participants beamed about the strengths-based, agency-focused language used by the facilitator. Due to the informal, inclusive, and accessible approach of the facilitator, the language used, and the community-based environment and feel of the room, participants left the session with a sense of empowerment and possibility, rather than feeling overwhelmed or fearful of further engagement. One participant exclaimed that they, “loved the metaphor of self-defence! [It’s] fabulous. [I] can relate to it”. This case study demonstrates the value and power of creating accessible, inclusive community-led workshop environments which use agency-focused language intended to empower, rather than overwhelm, participants.

The “ripple effect” of digital empowerment

“Digital inclusion takes place—is fostered and developed—within households, families, within friendship groups, and within communities.... Digital inclusion initiatives benefit the individual and the broader household, and that then impacts how household members are participating in or influencing the broader community.”

– ADM+S Director Professor Julian Thomas RWO keynote in Shepparton, 8 August 2024

While the program successfully engaged several hundred women across the two sites, achieving widespread participation in digital inclusion initiatives remains a challenge. This reflects barriers such as a lack of confidence with technology, time constraints, and a hesitancy to engage with often unfamiliar topics with people outside immediate social networks. However, the influence of RWO on participants extended well beyond the workshops, as they shared their newfound skills and knowledge with family members, friends, and their broader networks.

This “ripple effect”—spreading digital inclusion through community and familial networks—helped enhance the program’s reach and impact. By embedding local resources and fostering collaboration with a range of local services and organisations, RWO helped create sustainable pathways for ongoing digital inclusion at a local level. This illustrates how RWO’s impact extended beyond individual attendees, supporting wider community change and creating a lasting foundation for addressing local digital inclusion challenges.

The ripple effect of RWO goes beyond the immediate skills participants gained during the workshops; it extends into their everyday lives and communities, creating a broader, sustained impact. This ripple effect is evident in several key areas:

- **Family and community sharing:** Many participants planned to share their newfound knowledge with family and friends. A participant in Shepparton said:

... I've made a lot of notes... for each demographic in my family, I'll go back and say, "Look, you might want to be aware of this," or, "you might want to take advantage of this".

The stuff I've learnt, taking it back to my family, that's my direct family. And then my wider family, we've got a very large wider family... so I'm going to be letting them know... because now I know what's relevant for people.

This multiplier effect means participants' influence on others significantly increases the reach of the program. Participants felt empowered to teach their wider networks, sharing lessons on online safety, privacy, and other critical digital skills.

- **Sustained digital inclusion:** The program embedded local resources and support networks into its design, ensuring participants could continue to access help after the workshops ended. By connecting women with local service providers and support systems, RWO laid the groundwork for ongoing digital inclusion. This ensures that even as digital tools evolve, women in these communities can continue to build on the skills they acquired, promoting “digital resilience”—learning from past positive and negative experiences online—which leading digital inclusion researchers have described as “the most important consequence of digital literacy”.²¹
- **Economic and employment benefits:** Participants reported that the digital skills they gained are likely to help them in their current jobs and provided them with the confidence to pursue new opportunities. For many, particularly younger women, these skills opened doors to career advancement, further education, or more secure online financial management. The program empowered participants to overcome the digital barriers that had previously hindered their economic independence, contributing to broader community development.
- **Constructing digital exclusion as a problem which can be addressed with current institutions and services:** By inviting place-specific services and encouraging a degree of interprofessional collaboration between community services such as regional libraries, emergency services, banking representatives and other organisations, RWO demonstrated that the power to boost digital skills and facilitate digital inclusion already sits within regional communities. Events such as RWO have a ripple effect by linking up these networks of community services to recognise and address digital exclusion in a place-specific manner. Additionally, it can help service providers understand the needs and challenges of digital inclusion in regional areas. For example, a representative from a regional service provider explained that until they participated in RWO, “they weren’t aware of some of the challenges in regional areas”.

The ripple effect of RWO highlights the importance of small, positive digital experiences to catalyse broader changes. By building participants' confidence and equipping them with practical skills, the program not only impacted individual women but also strengthened digital inclusion across entire communities in regional Victoria.

Recommendations

The success of RWO highlights the ongoing need for place-based digital inclusion initiatives in regional Victoria.

There would be significant benefit in deploying similar initiatives across other regional areas, with a focus on digital skills that relate to the needs and concerns of diverse regional women and the communities they live in. Digital inclusion is a complex and dynamic challenge: what will work in one community or region will not work in another. As RWO has shown, improving women's digital resilience requires listening, and responding, to the specific needs and concerns of different communities, and working with these communities to tackle these challenges in ways that are grounded in local values.

Building on the outcomes and insights from this evaluation, several key recommendations emerge to sustain and expand the impact of RWO:

- **Sharing findings to support similar programs in the future:** The RWO model proved effective due to its place-based approach, which tailored content to local needs. To continue addressing digital exclusion in regional communities, other regions facing similar challenges would gain great benefit from a program like RWO. Engaging local stakeholders early and employing CLEOs (or similar) in new areas would be crucial to ensure programs are responsive to the unique needs of each community. To support this, selected program materials and findings from the evaluation should be shared and communities could consider forming a digital inclusion community of practice to tackle local challenges
- **Strengthening partnerships among local organisations:** The program's success was partly due to strong collaborations with local institutions such as libraries, community centres, and regional councils, who were involved throughout the design and delivery of the program. Continuing partnerships between these organisations will be essential for long-term sustainability. Local organisations are well-positioned to maintain momentum by offering follow-up digital skills workshops and ongoing support to participants. Strengthening ties among educational institutions and local businesses could also help to tailor future sessions to focus on employability and skills development for regional economies.
- **Continuing to tailor programs for diverse communities:** RWO's success was grounded in its ability to cater to diverse groups, including multicultural communities in Shepparton, as well as older women across the two sites. To continue promoting inclusivity, similar programs should maintain a strong focus on tailoring content to the specific needs of different demographics. This includes continuing to provide multilingual resources, ensuring accessibility for those with disabilities, and offering targeted sessions for different age groups and skill levels.

- **Enhancing online safety and security education:** A key concern for many participants, particularly older women, was online safety and privacy. Given the rapid pace of technological change and the increasing prevalence (and awareness) of cyber threats, similar programs should place even greater emphasis on these issues. Expanding e-safety sessions and providing more detailed guidance on topics such as scam prevention, password management, and data privacy will be essential for ensuring that regional women feel confident and secure in their online interactions.
- **Measuring long-term impact:** To assess the lasting impact of RWO and similar initiatives, it will be important to track participants' progress over time. Implementing a long-term evaluation framework that includes follow-up surveys and interviews with participants could provide valuable insights into how digital skills are being applied and sustained within communities. These data would help refine future programs and demonstrate the value of digital inclusion initiatives to funders, stakeholders, and policy makers.
- **Making digital inclusion programs trustworthy:** Participants are more likely to engage when sessions are led by local facilitators and trusted community leaders, who bring familiarity and cultural relevance to the program. A place-based approach, supported by local CLEOs who have deep community ties, can help to build confidence among a network of local organisations, and by extension, the wider community. Trustworthiness has to be fostered through every stage—from program design to delivery to evaluation—in order to reach and empower regional women, especially those experiencing digital exclusion.
- **Adopting a strengths-based approach:** RWO session facilitators took multiple approaches to describing and teaching digital skills and literacies. When language used to discuss common points of concern (like scams and privacy) was fear-based, this often alienated participants, and made them doubt their own ability to protect themselves online. However, when sessions led with language that was strengths-based and focused on the capabilities and agency of women, participants emerged from these sessions with a sense of empowerment and possibility. Digital training sessions should be mindful of the value and importance of strengths-based language around the internet which focus on what users can do, rather than the myriad threats they need to protect themselves against.
- **Responding to the increasing pace of change:** Critical services are evolving rapidly, with automation and AI increasingly integrated into government, health, and education sectors. As in-person services are scaled back or removed, regional and rural communities face growing reliance on digital services, making it essential to equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate an evolving digital landscape. At the same time, shifting modes of internet access and the proliferation of digital devices are reshaping what it means to be digitally included. In this context, digital inclusion remains a pressing and ongoing challenge. Programs like RWO offer significant potential to support regional communities in adapting to these changes and thriving as technologies and services change.

By building on the foundation laid by RWO, these recommendations aim to further reduce digital exclusion in regional communities, ensuring that all women, regardless of their location and life circumstances, have the opportunity to thrive in a digital society. Through continued investment in place-based, community-driven approaches, programs like RWO can bolster digital inclusion and support women's empowerment across regional Australia.



Above: Participants sharing a cup of tea at RWO in Yackandandah (photo by Jason Robins courtesy of VWT).

Conclusion

The RWO program successfully addressed the pressing issue of digital exclusion among women in regional Victoria. Through a place-based, community-driven approach, the program empowered participants by boosting their digital confidence, improving online safety awareness, and fostering connections between women who had previously felt isolated or overwhelmed by changing digital technologies and online services.

Participants across both Shepparton and Yackandandah reported high levels of satisfaction with the program, noting that the workshops were relevant, inclusive, and provided them with practical skills they could immediately apply in their daily lives. The significant increase in participants' digital confidence underscores the effectiveness of the RWO model.

The success of RWO highlights the importance of continuing and expanding similar place-based digital inclusion initiatives, particularly in a rapidly evolving landscape of digital services and technologies. By listening to the specific needs of communities and addressing local challenges collectively, programs like RWO can continue to develop digital inclusion and foster resilience among rural women, enabling them to more fully participate and thrive in an increasingly digital society.



Above: Facilitator Lisa Lorenz from Tangambalanga Police and Alana Johnson of the Victorian Women's Trust at RWO in Yackandandah (photo by Jason Robins courtesy of VWT).

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