



U3A Digital Mentoring Program

Improving the digital skills and competencies
of older Australians

September 2024

**Bernardo Figueiredo, Torgeir Aleti, Rachel Peile, Nguyen Luu,
Glen Wall, Anne Grigg and Mark Buschgens**



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Authored by Bernardo Figueiredo, Torgeir Aleti, Rachel Peile, Nguyen Luu, Glen Wall, Anne Grigg and Mark Buschgens

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Executive Summary

This report showcases U3A's Digital Mentoring Program and the PEER model. U3A's Digital Mentoring Program is a unique initiative designed to reduce digital exclusion and social isolation among older adults by enhancing their engagement with technology and improving digital competency. The report outlines the approach and framework developed, highlighting how positive social impact and insights were gained through the active involvement of older people in its development. The report also explains how the Shaping Connections research program, a collaboration between RMIT University and U3A Network Victoria, supported and informed the evolution of U3A's Digital Mentoring Program.

Key Findings

The U3A Digital Mentoring Program has had a significant social impact among older people, with the key finding being the innovative approach that facilitated this achievement. This report details how the program evolved organically, introducing the PEER model, which focuses on building participants' skills while identifying and supporting Digital

Mentors who have embraced a “peer-to-peer sharing of knowledge and experience” approach. The report outlines how U3A and RMIT University collaborated through the Shaping Connections program to develop a framework that supports the implementation of the Digital Mentoring Program. Throughout the report, testimonials from participants offer insights into the program’s impact.

The program timeline, research gathered, and two critical pilots in Geelong and Glenroy are discussed. The document highlights the methodology followed to develop the Digital Mentoring Program and the theoretical framework underpinning it. The Shaping Connections research program serves as the foundation for this framework, detailing the central roles that contribute to the program’s success and how these roles interact. U3A’s industry partners and service providers play vital roles in supporting the critical roles within the framework: Community Relationship Connectors, Support Mentors, Mentors and Mentees. Each of these roles is integral to establishing the PEER model, which focuses on building digital competencies while identifying and supporting mentors. The PEER acronym stands for Pioneering, Experience-based, Empowering, and Responsive. Each critical element of the framework is examined in detail with insights from participants.

The PEER model is ‘Pioneering’ as it is based on innovative co-design, making it engaging for older people and helping them become more digitally competent. It is ‘Experience-based,’ developed by the recipients of the teaching, and presented by people at the same stage of life who understand and share similar challenges. The Model is also ‘Empowering’ for older adults, acknowledging that everyone desires to continue



learning and improving their skills, regardless of age. U3A has observed that some mentees advance their skills and eventually become mentors themselves. Older people experience this opportunity to upskill and take on new roles, which empowers them and increases both their individual and collective capacity. Finally, the model is 'Responsive' to the needs of participants, industry partners, and service providers. The program has been continuously refined over the years, adapting to circumstances and the evolving needs of mentees. The PEER model provides a tested methodology for engaging with older people and can be applied by other organisations seeking to connect with this vital demographic.

Key Roles in the Framework

The report outlines the key roles within the Framework: Community Relationship Connectors, Mentors and Mentees.

- **Community Relationship Connectors** are crucial in making services more accessible and promoting communication with older people. They play a vital role in bridging health services, local government, and emergency services with the community.
- **Mentors** enjoy problem-solving, listening, and building trust, find that the program not only allows them to help others but also enriches their own social lives by connecting with interesting people. Senior mentors guide mentors in addressing technology concerns within small group settings, helping them develop a peer-to-peer approach to enhancing digital competency among older adults.
- **Mentees** are the primary recipients of the program. They are motivated to participate, learn new and valuable knowledge, stay active, and access important information and services. The program also boosts their confidence and provides opportunities for social interactions, enriching their lives.

Industry partners and service providers supporting the Digital Mentoring Program reported that it gave them access to older adults, helped them understand their unique needs, shared critical information with this demographic, and assisted in building their digital skills. The program has created synergy for all parties involved through the PEER Model.



Recommendations

This report delivers actionable recommendations for closing the digital divide among older adults, centred around the successful implementation of the U3A Digital Mentoring Program. It advocates for the adoption of the PEER Model—Pioneering, Experience-based, Empowering, and Responsive—as a framework for digital inclusion initiatives. This model, which has been integral to the success of the U3A program, creates a supportive, peer-to-peer learning environment tailored to the specific needs of older adults.

The report also emphasises the importance of fostering collaborative partnerships with local councils, libraries, healthcare providers, and community organisations to extend the reach and impact of digital mentoring programs. Additionally, it underscores the need for flexible, experience-based program designs that resonate with older adults, empowering them to take control of their digital learning journey. By leveraging existing community networks, focusing on the social and emotional benefits of digital inclusion, and advocating for policy support, the report provides a comprehensive approach to sustaining and expanding digital inclusion efforts. These recommendations, grounded in the research and outcomes of the Shaping Connections program, offer a robust strategy for organisations committed to bridging the digital divide for older adults.

1.0

A Practice-led, Research-based Program with Social Impact

1.1 The Role of Digital Connectedness in Combatting Loneliness, Social Isolation, and Improving the Emotional, Physical, and Mental Health of Seniors

The adverse effects of social isolation and loneliness on the emotional, physical, and mental health of older adults are well-documented. Persistent loneliness—characterised by a deep sense of sadness despite the presence of others—can lead to severe health issues, including depression, anxiety, dementia, heart disease, and even premature death. In this context, digital connectedness has emerged as a powerful tool to combat these risks. By promoting social inclusion, reducing dependency on social services, and enabling older adults to remain active and engaged, digital connectedness is critical to improving the overall well-being of seniors.



1.2 The Need for a Digital Mentoring Program

While many older Australians are familiar with basic digital tools, such as mobile phones, SMS texting, email and online shopping, there is widespread ambivalence and anxiety about the ever-evolving digital landscape and its perceived risks. Recognising this gap, a digital mentoring program was needed—one that could not only introduce seniors to new technologies but also provide ongoing, personalised support to build their confidence and skills in a safe and understanding environment.

The need for such a program became even more urgent with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many daily interactions into the online space. The University of the Third Age (U3A) Network Victoria, already deeply embedded in the community of older Australians, recognised this need and took action. Drawing on both its extensive experience working with older adults and the insights provided by the Shaping Connections research program, U3A Network Victoria developed a practice-led digital mentoring program tailored to the specific needs of seniors. This program focused on peer-to-peer learning, where more experienced digital users among the seniors would mentor their peers, fostering a supportive environment for learning and growth.

1.3 The Role of Research in Building the Digital Mentoring Program

While the U3A Network Victoria program was practice-led, it was informed and supported by the research conducted under the Shaping Connections research program. This research did not dictate how older adults should use technology but rather engaged directly with them to understand their experiences, concerns, and preferences. Through interviews, surveys, and workshops, seniors shared their voices, which led to the development of co-designed projects that truly addressed their needs. A vital aspect of the research was understanding seniors' perceived risks associated with going online. The insights gained from this research guided U3A Network Victoria in shaping their mentoring approach, ensuring it was not only about teaching technology but also about addressing fears, building trust, and empowering seniors to use digital tools confidently and safely.



The collaboration between U3A Network Victoria and the Shaping Connections program resulted in several valuable resources and publications:

- **Article:** Factors influencing seniors' anxiety in using ICT, 2024.
- **Article:** Playing with persona: Highlighting older adults' lived experience with the digital media, *Convergence*, 2024
- **Commentary:** Strength-based co-design that EMPOWERS – Lessons from co-designing with older adults, *Journal of Services Marketing*, 2023
- **Article:** Digital Inclusion in Later Life: Older Adults' Socialisation Processes in Learning and Using Technology, *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 2023
- **Article:** Improving digital inclusion for seniors, *Golden Years*, 2023
- **Article:** Support clients to engage with technology, *Australian Ageing Agenda*, 2023
- **Article:** Socialisation Agents' Use(fulness) for Older Consumers Learning ICT, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2023
- **Report:** Co-designing ICT strategies with older adults, ACCAN, 2022
- **Article:** Gaining resolution when creating imagery of aging, *Frontiers in Sociology*, 2022

- **Article:** Co-Creating ICT Risk Strategies with Older Australians: A Workshop Model, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2022
- **Article:** Technology: Strengthening digital social inclusion, Australian Ageing Agenda, 2022
- **Report:** Reducing perceived risk and promoting digital inclusion, ACCAN, 2021

Additionally, a dedicated website, www.shapingconnections.org, was created to share videos, news, insights, project impacts, and further government information related to U3A Network Victoria courses. The site also provides interactive tools and free downloads for individuals, organisations, and researchers interested in digital inclusion. All the abovementioned articles and reports can be downloaded from the website for free.

The Social Impact of the Digital Mentoring Program

The social impact of U3A Network Victoria's Digital Mentoring Program has been profound. The co-created, co-designed approach has highlighted U3A's important role in the digital inclusion of older adults. It has expanded its activities to over 200 mentors from 45 U3A groups, now providing digital mentoring to their peers. This mentoring has not only improved digital skills among seniors but also fostered a stronger sense of community and connectedness.

Geelong Council, in partnership with NBN Co., U3A Network Victoria, Whittlesea U3A and U3A Geelong initiated a successful Digital Mentoring program in Geelong. This program operated weekly pop-up sessions



in three local libraries with local media coverage and the positive feedback from participants, which underscored the program's effectiveness in meeting the digital needs of older adults. Moreover, NBN co. has recognised the value of collaborating with U3A Network Victoria and has utilised this partnership to deliver its community program, aiming to promote digital inclusion on a national scale. This partnership with U3A Network Victoria has allowed NBN co. to effectively reach a wider audience of older Australians, ensuring no community is left behind in the digital world.



The Digital Mentoring program and the Shaping Connections' digital tools and resources have been showcased to several organisations, councils, and individuals involved with older adults and technology, including:

- **Research institutions:** National Ageing Research Institute (NARI), University of Melbourne, University of Western Australia
- **Government departments and services:** Emergency Management Victoria, Victoria State Emergency Service, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Adult and Continuing Further Education (ACFE)
- **Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) services:** Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, Multicultural Consulting Services
- **Local councils:** Banyule, Merri-bek, Mitchell Shire, Croydon, Bayside, Boroondara, Casey, Hepburn, La Trobe, Manningham, Maroondah, Melbourne, Melton, Moorabool, Wellington, Wyndham, Geelong and Whittlesea
- **Aged care services:** DPV Health, Estia Health, Lifestyle Communities, Halley Assist, Proactive Ageing
- **Community services:** Football Victoria, Brotherhood of Saint Laurence and DPV Health

In addition, the Digital Mentoring Program has been instrumental in facilitating digital and social connectedness within local councils. For

example, the Tech Café program at Glenroy Library, in collaboration with Whittlesea U3A and U3A Network Victoria, provided critical digital support to 181 seniors. It received positive feedback for its personalised guidance and the welcoming environment it offered participants seeking to enhance their digital skills.

Importantly, roundtable discussions were held with the Commissioner for Senior Victorians, and the Council on the Ageing Australia (COTA) and “Awareness presentations” to Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) providers across Australia on “digital connectedness for seniors”.

As a result of these efforts, the program’s insights have contributed to policy development within the Victorian state government; influenced the practices of home support providers for older adults; shaped how businesses such as NBN co. and Telstra communicate with older adults; and guided the development of digital and social connectedness programs within Victorian councils, including Digital Skills Mentoring programs for Casey Council, Merri-bek Council, and the City of Whittlesea.

The Importance of Documenting the Program’s Development

As the digital mentoring program continues to evolve, it is crucial to document the journey that led to its success. One of the Shaping Connections research program outcomes was the consolidation of U3A Network Victoria’s perception of their own strength as agents of socialisation into digital competencies. This consolidation harnessed the collective efforts of digital mentors, reinforcing and validating the emergence of a grassroots model of knowledge transmission and social relationships for digital inclusion: the U3A Digital Skills Mentoring Program.

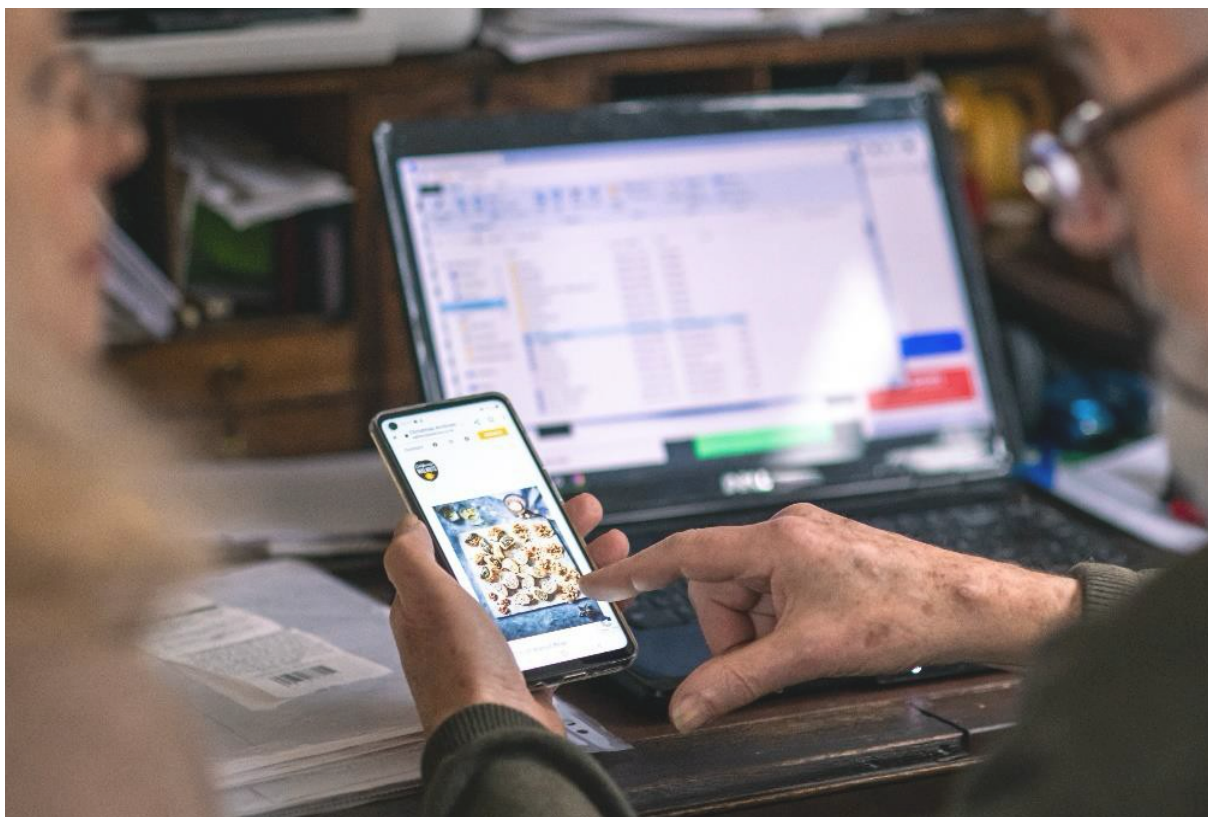
The methodology developed through this program offers a valuable framework that can be adapted and applied in other contexts to empower collaborations and address complex social issues. By documenting and sharing these processes, U3A Network Victoria and its partners can provide a roadmap for others seeking to replicate the program’s success in closing the digital divide for seniors and fostering greater social inclusion.

2.0

Program Development

The long-term collaboration between RMIT and U3A through the Shaping Connections initiative has developed and evolved. In this section, the report highlights the central milestones in the partnership, the initiatives and events that led to the milestone, and the insights gained from each part of this shared journey. Out of this, the U3A model for peer-to-peer digital mentoring programs emerged.

Established in 1984, U3A Network Victoria has grown to 104 groups across metropolitan and rural Victoria, with 38,064 members in 2024. The University of the Third Age (U3A) Network Victoria is a key organisation within the broader U3A movement, which is dedicated to providing learning opportunities for older adults who are no longer in full-time employment. U3A Network Victoria is the peak body representing the various U3A groups across Victoria, Australia. It supports these local U3A groups by offering resources, coordination, and advocacy to enhance



their operations and ensure that older adults can access a wide range of educational, social, and recreational activities. Although U3A had been active in training older adults with digital skills, these initiatives were conducted individually by each U3A group and were not coordinated at the state level until 2017.

2.1 Phase 1: Shaping Connections Formation

In 2017, the Victorian state government recognised the need to improve its approach to digital competency training for older adults. As the state-level peak body for the U3A groups in Victoria, U3A Network Victoria committed to developing more robust engagement with local communities and obtained funding from the Victorian state government to launch state and local initiatives aimed at improving the social and digital inclusion of older adults.

Since the start of 2018, the Victorian government has been developing toolkits to help seniors navigate the online world in partnership with U3A. Local community group leaders began building partnerships with key stakeholders to support digital training for seniors. For example, the Whittlesea Seniors Linkup program was launched in collaboration with the local government and U3A. Other “Building Community Engagement” programs are also starting locally, focusing on using technology to strengthen seniors’ inclusion and participation in local communities. Public Libraries Victoria started the “Social Seniors” program for digital competency training at the state level, funded by Telstra and the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. U3A Network Victoria was



subsequently invited to participate to extend its reach. These initiatives were important but scattered, highlighting knowledge gaps in training seniors in digital competencies and identifying the central roles and functions needed to support such training.

In November 2018, researchers from RMIT University approached U3A Network Victoria with an interest in better understanding older adults and their relationship with technology. RMIT and U3A discovered a shared interest in what 'connectedness' means to older adults and created the Shaping Connections program together to bridge the technology gap and mitigate social isolation in older adults. A core purpose of the partnership was to think more strategically and long-term about the digital inclusion of seniors. From the state government funding, U3A directed \$18,000 towards the program, and RMIT University supported the initiative with seed funding of \$5,000 to investigate connectedness.

Through interviews and focus groups with U3A members, RMIT researchers discovered that connectedness is a central motivating factor in digital engagement, extending beyond learning technology for its own sake. Instead, the use of technology serves as a means to broader goals of social connectedness and for the purpose of attending to older adults' specific needs. Researchers collected video data from older adults and curated it into vignettes highlighting the central components of connectedness, hosted on a YouTube channel and a program homepage: www.shapingconnections.org. Together, the leaders of the project formulated the Shaping Connections mission:

Shaping Connections is a research program bringing together academics from RMIT and stakeholders from the University of Third Age (U3A) Network Victoria. It seeks to understand how technology use supports seniors' connectedness and enhances social inclusion and participation. Connectedness enhances an older adult's well-being and has a positive effect on physical and mental health.

RMIT highlights the Shaping Connections Program as an 'impact program' where the research aims to create social change beyond discovering new (academic) knowledge. An impact plan is formulated to ensure research findings can be used and reach end-users through dissemination, that evidence is collected from end-user experiences and fed back into the program. To create a significant and lasting impact, shaping connections sought to engage in a larger research project. The team reached out to potential new partners and started applying for funding (e.g. to ARC Linkage and AXA Research Fund).



2.2 Phase 2: Funded 2-year co-design project about perceived risk

In 2020, Shaping Connections secured a substantial grant from the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN, \$98,000) and the City of Whittlesea (\$10,000) for a project named **Co-designing Participatory Strategies with Older Adults to Reduce Perceived Risk and Promote Digital Inclusion**. The project aimed to discover the perception of risk older adults had with digital technology and, through co-design with end-users, learn what strategies they used to overcome risk perceptions.

The project was built on several phases, including in-depth online interviews during the COVID lockdown period. From there, the researchers distributed a large-scale survey with nearly 1000 participants from U3As across Victoria. These broad insights helped them understand how older adults across the state perceive the risk associated with digital technology. From this understanding, Shaping Connections created activities for co-design workshops with older adults to help develop strategic solutions for overcoming perceived risk based on their lived experiences. Co-design workshops were organised online, in person, and with different groups of older adults, including those culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD).

Insights from the risk perception project led to interactive resources on the website aimed at reducing perceived risk, video vignettes of older adults



discussing different types of perceived risk, several reports and booklets about strategies for reducing perceived risk (Aleti et al., 2022; Figueiredo et al., 2023; Hjorth et al., 2021), and several academic papers (e.g., Aleti et al., 2023a, 2023b; Sheahan, 2022; Sheahan et al., 2022). The project's digital tools and resources were showcased to several organisations, councils, and individuals involved with older adults and technology. In 2022, Shaping Connections was part of roundtable discussions with the Commissioner for Senior Victorians. Council on the Ageing (COTA) hosted two seminars on “digital connectedness for seniors” to showcase this work for Commonwealth Home Support Program providers across Australia. Consequently, the program's insights have contributed to policy development within the Victorian state government, influenced the practices of providers of home support for older adults, shaped how businesses such as NBN co. and Telstra communicate with older adults and influenced the development of peer-to-peer based digital and social connectedness programs within Victorian local councils.

2.3 Phase 3: U3As Tech Corner – establishing a community of practice

In parallel with the Shaping Connections research program, U3A Network Victoria needed to adapt its offerings in response to the COVID pandemic. With ongoing lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, there was an increased need for U3A to upskill its members in technology and run classes online. In early 2020, Public Libraries Victoria and U3A Network Victoria collaborated to deliver the “Social Seniors” in local libraries. To assist U3A groups in

Victoria in delivering the program online, Public Libraries Victoria funded Zoom licenses for most Victorian U3As. Based on emerging insights from Shaping Connections, U3A Network Victoria launched a Zoom Mentoring Program to train U3A groups in running their own sessions to keep seniors connected during COVID. Throughout the pandemic, various U3A groups then rolled out digital programs across Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, utilising local public libraries with the support of local councils.

With its consolidated expertise of upskilling older adults, U3A Network expands its networks of partners and collaborators to launch further digital competency programs. For example, in collaboration with Telstra, Public Libraries, and Seniors Card, U3A Network helped extend the pre-pandemic Social Seniors program. They participated in the delivery of a six-week program in mid-2020 called “Social Seniors - Social Media & Digital Storytelling for Seniors”. The program aimed to introduce members to existing support initiatives to gain digital competencies, such as the Australian eSafety Commissioners “Be Connected” website. This was a digital extension run via Zoom of the Social Seniors initiative from 2018 (pre-pandemic), based on self-help to digital competency via the internet.

Further into the pandemic in mid-2021, the Social Seniors program was put on hold as it did not meet the low digital competency level of many U3A members. Through Shaping Connection research findings and U3As’ experiences with older adults with lower levels of digital competency, it was discovered that a certain threshold level of digital competency is needed for self-help initiatives to be successful. For example, U3A facilitated digital mentoring support for Estia Health South Morang residents from February 2020. The program utilised a peer-based mentoring approach to support residents in maintaining connections with family and friends through COVID restrictions. The program continues into 2024, as the residents enjoy learning with their peers and being mentored by older adults from U3A.

With the help of Shaping Connection’s systematic co-design work, U3A Network further realised that their peer-to-peer approach to teaching older adults was central to their success. For example, U3A Whittlesea launched weekly Zoom sessions called “The Digital Literacy Workspace” in collaboration with the local council. This program was an informal opportunity for older adults to discuss anything digital and topical. At a state level, U3A Network launched a program involving peer-to-peer sharing of knowledge and experience called “More than just a phone”. The program’s purpose was to support mentors to respond effectively to members’ technology concerns in small group settings – recognising

a need to consolidate insights for utilising a mentorship approach to disseminate digital competency in a peer-to-peer setting of older adults.

Towards the end of 2021, there was growing awareness of various approaches to peer-to-peer learning about technology across the state, with varying degrees of success. This highlighted the need to establish a community of practice for ‘social connectors’ interested in technology to explore ways of creating digital inclusion programs. Drawing on strategic recommendations from research insights on the importance of creating communities of practice to catalyse expertise and empower connectors, U3A Network Victoria launched “Tech Corner”—a state-wide closed Facebook group for mentors and connectors. This platform was designed to coordinate activities and share insights, enabling the co-design of solutions with U3A members across Victoria. Glen Wall, former vice-president of U3A Network, noted:

“The Shaping Connections program has reinforced our peer-to-peer learning, and thanks to this, we developed the ‘Tech Corner’ as a community of practice that now has over 200 mentors from 45 U3A groups who provide various levels of mentoring to other U3A members”.

The Tech Corner helped accelerate feedback on the success of various programs across the state. As a result, Shaping Connections learned



more about how to empower older adults to engage with technology. Based on these emerging insights, Shaping Connections discovered a framework for co-designing research with older adults that empowers participants and other users of the research outcome (Figueiredo, Aleti, et al., 2023).

During this phase, the Tech Corner played a crucial role in facilitating the sharing of important information among members. This included knowledge about hybrid meetings, Zoom setups, and various technology needs. The platform also provided a space to discuss challenges and explore opportunities, enabling mentors and social connectors to exchange best practices and innovative solutions. This collaborative environment helped to address the unique technological challenges faced by older adults and ensured that the digital inclusion programs were both effective and responsive to the evolving needs of the community.

At the same time, the Shaping Connections research program expanded to include more academics and industry partners, broadening its scope and impact. Significant investment was made to recalibrate the website to make it more comprehensive and user-friendly, including the creation of a bloggers' page to document and showcase the partnership's progress. This platform became a valuable tool for sharing the success of the partnership with national and international stakeholders, allowing for the exchange of feedback and ideas.

The expansion also fostered the development of more strategic partnerships and specific programs. Through Shaping Connections, RMIT launched resources such as the digital mentoring e-book and the self-assessment tools to support ongoing learning and provide a structured framework for digital inclusion efforts. U3A continued developing initiatives such as the "train-the-trainer" programs. These developments not only strengthened the partnership but also ensured that the program's impact could be sustained and scaled across different regions and contexts.

2.4 Phase 4: Emergence of a successful model for replicable Digital Competency Mentoring Programs

From the consolidated experiences shared in the Tech Corner, U3A Network Victoria discovered that a peer-to-peer approach to improving

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In collaboration with [Geelong Regional Library Corporation](#) and University of the Third Age (U3A), we created a program called 'Live Life Connected' to help older community members improve their digital skills.

Throughout September-December, we held a series of sessions where we met with seniors within the Geelong community to discuss the importance of being digitally connected and to help them discover the benefits of smart devices in their homes. The sessions were a great success, and everyone left with important tips on banking, email use, and spotting possible scams 🍷

[#Geelong](#) [#digitalconnectivity](#)



older adults' digital competency was effective. In particular, a mentor/mentee approach based on small groups or even one-to-one and directly related to the users' problems and devices seemed to be effective. Consequently, several pop-up peer-to-peer mentoring initiatives were launched starting in mid-2022. NBN co. facilitated a collaboration between U3A Network Victoria, Geelong Regional Library Corp and 'Healthy Ageing', City of Greater Geelong, to pilot the 'Live Life Connected' pop-up peer-to-peer mentoring initiatives in Belmont, Leopold and Ocean Gove Libraries.

U3A supported the program with ten volunteers trained in mentoring seniors about technology. Through the insights and resources gathered in the Shaping Connections program and the Tech Corner, the mentors gained experience in the peer-to-peer approach to sharing knowledge. The mentors were provided with the necessary digital equipment

and access to resource material. They had regular Zoom discussion sessions to share the participants' needs and indicative responses to their questions.

From the needs of the mentees, they covered topics such as how to use their smart devices, how to stay safe online and avoid scams, home internet optimisation, and guidance on how to do essential tasks online such as government services, banking, installing apps, password management, and email services. In total, 139 participants were assisted

Online help for seniors

Senior Ocean Grovers were able to improve their online skills at a free information session at Ocean Grove Library on November 29.

The sessions were part of nbn's commitment to improving digital capability for seniors.

In collaboration with University of the Third Age (U3A) and the Geelong Regional Library Corporation, nbn community ambassadors have been hosting the sessions in Greater Geelong to provide tips to choose an internet provider and how to connect to the internet, helpful information about how they can use connected devices to make life more convenient, how to stay safe online from scams and how to help stay connected in an emergency.

Insights from nbn's Online Skills Check and Resources (OSCAR) tool shows that almost three-quarters of seniors who used the tool rate their digital skills as important and more than

half regularly communicate with others online.

"These information sessions with nbn and U3A are designed to provide older Australians with support and answers to questions about their home internet, online scams and how to use smart devices," University of the Third Age Victoria Network's Glen Wall said.

"Our U3A mentors' role is to provide peer-based support designed not to feel intimidating and help to get older Australians more confident about being safe online and using internet connected devices for their needs.

"We've had great feedback from the community so far, telling us how helpful it has been."

Gabe Denmark (NBN) assists Michael Martin with his mobile phone. (Sean Kavanagh/3009067/03)



(39 more than once), and 389 questions were answered in sessions that lasted 35 minutes on average. The program was deemed so successful that there was local media coverage:

Based on the Geelong success, the Glenroy Tech Café operated weekly sessions in the Glenroy Library for four months from late August 2023. Eleven U3A mentors provided support, assisted by two Library Technology support staff. Participants were encouraged to enjoy a hot beverage with a biscuit while learning digital skills and assisted one-to-one or in small groups. Zoom sessions were also offered for those who could not attend in person. In total, 181 participants were assisted (105 of them in-person and 35 of them more than once). In addition, three outreach sessions were organised, reaching 14 people in a Men's Group, 50 from Avari (Turkish) and 12 from the Greek Social Club. Participants said about the program:

Maurice: "He was excellent, a Genius. He saved me. The Tech café is fantastic."

Robyn: "Excellent instruction and knowledgeable. Very thorough."

Noel: "I was able to follow and understand. I am very thankful for this service and support."

Luisa: "An excellent session. I feel inspired to learn more about the iPhone apps."

The Geelong and Glenroy programs were well documented and supported by U3A Network Victoria, Whittlesea U3A and the Tech Corner. They were run as pilots to build a sustainable model for Digital Mentoring Programs that could be replicated in a range of locations and contexts. Critical insights from these programs highlighted the importance of word-

of-mouth in promoting the initiative, as many participants learned about the program through the success stories of others. Basic catering helped create an open and supportive environment for people to seek help with technology concerns. Consistency and a regular schedule were also found to be crucial, as attendees valued knowing when they could receive ongoing assistance. The program revealed that most participants lacked the digital competencies needed to complete essential tasks during COVID restrictions, underscoring the necessity for mentors to have the flexibility to tailor the curriculum to the specific needs of their participants. Additionally, it was recognised that U3A Network Victoria should leverage partnerships with councils, local community groups, and clubs to build trust and credibility within the community.

The insights from the Geelong and Glenroy pilots were merged with the findings and co-design approach learned from the Shaping Connections research to develop a replicable model for a Digital Mentoring Program. Digital mentoring sessions have been formalised and based at local libraries and councils where mentors can address the specific needs of participants. For example, the Banyule Council started offering weekly digital mentoring support at the Seniors Club in Watsonia from late 2022. A year later, U3A Network, U3A Casey, City of Casey (Positive Ageing and Inclusion), Connected Communities, Casey Cardinia Libraries and the Southern Migrant & Refugee Centre delivered a series of drop-in digital skills mentoring sessions with the support of NBN co. in the Cranbourne, Endeavor Hills, Bunjil Place, Hampton Park and Doveton Libraries. Finally, towards the end of 2023, Whittlesea U3A, U3A Pine Rivers, and U3A North Gold Coast collaborated to further develop the Digital Skills Mentoring program for rollout in Queensland.

The program has also been rolled out to CALD community groups, in retirement villages, and by health service providers. A six-week Tech Café program was run in retirement villages and for over three years in Estia South Morang Care Accommodation facilities. This program is being expanded to Bendigo's Estia Care Accommodation facilities. One of U3A's partners, DPV Health, delivered a pop-up Hub program in the foyer of their Medical Centre in South Morang. Finally, the U3A Network Victorian, Whittlesea U3A are sharing model for Digital Mentoring with out-of-state U3As, such as U3A Pine Rivers, U3A North Gold Coast and U3A Atherton Tablelands, which are U3A Queensland groups.

U3A also noticed that supporting the mentor's needs through a community of practice was a central success element. The Tech Corner's success in providing this support evolved into an online "train-the-trainers"

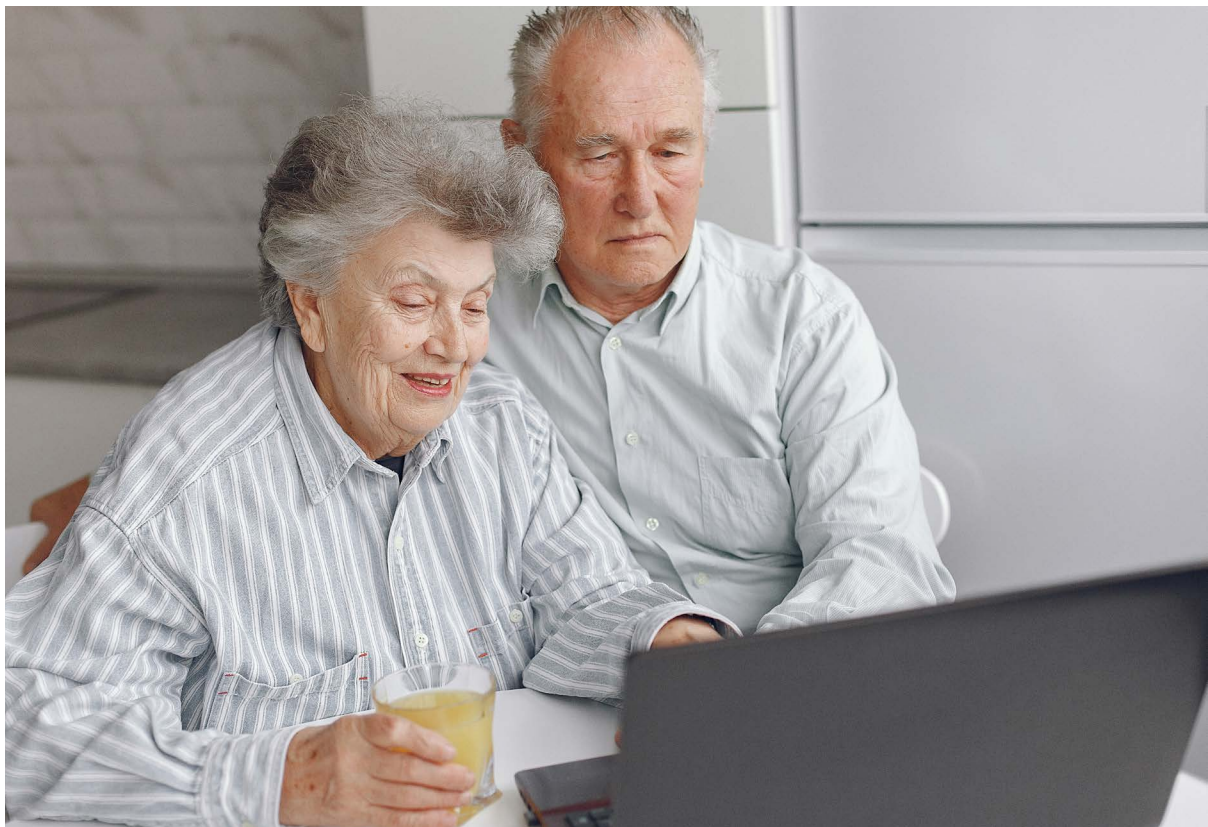


program collaboratively developed by the NBN co. Community & Stakeholder Engagement Team (Victoria) and U3A Network Vic and Whittlesea U3A called “Live Life Digitally Connected” in mid-2023. Live Life Digitally Connected aims to provide training and support to mentors and community connectors interested in setting up a digital mentoring program by introducing them to the approach described here. Moreover, Live Life Digitally Connected is delivered by U3A’s most experienced senior mentors referred to as Support Mentors and covers contemporary technology concerns of older adults, with opportunities for mentors to discuss and debate best practices and solutions to the problems of their communities.

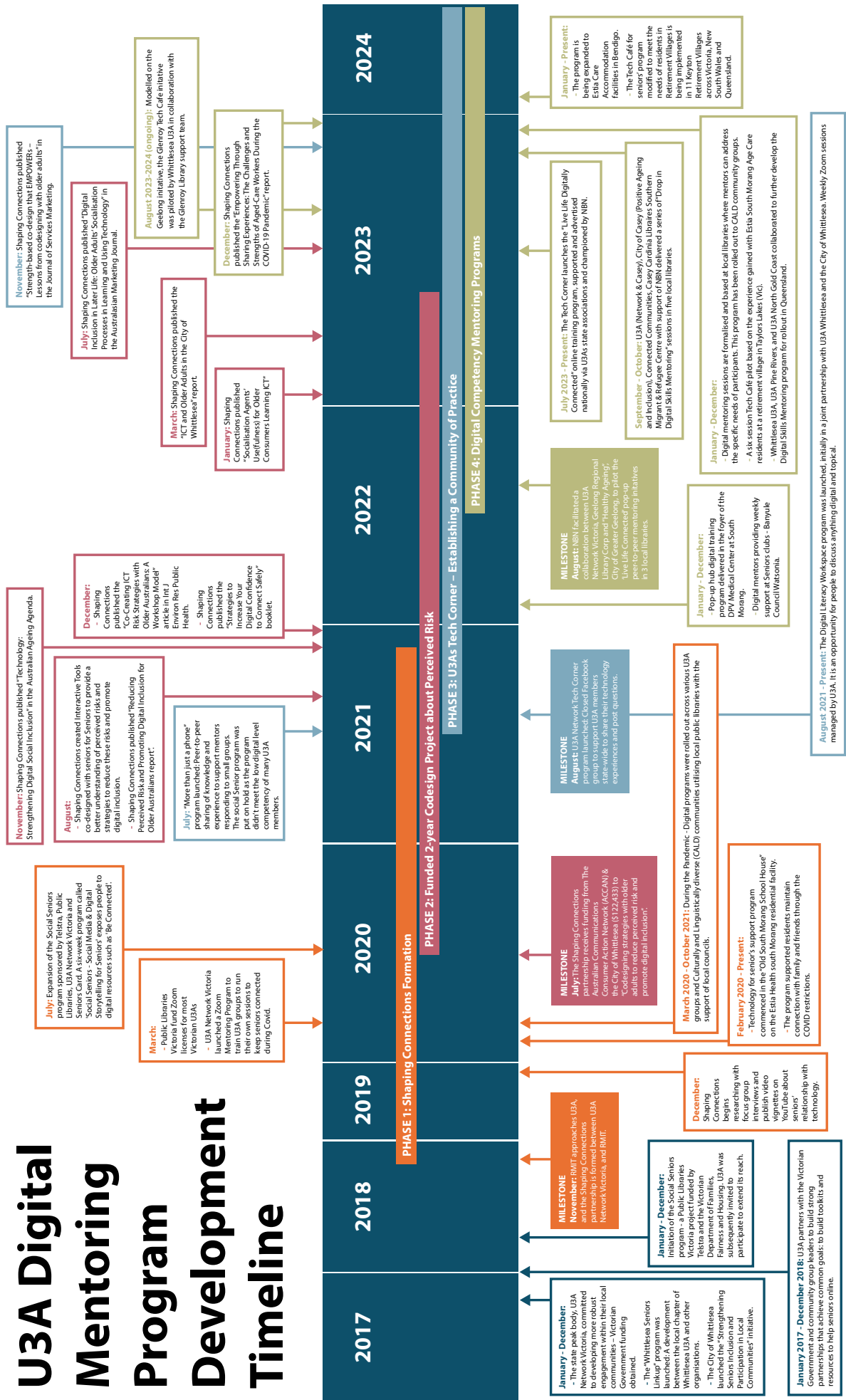
A research arm of the Shaping Connections program is looking towards the future by exploring the relationship and potential of older adults and artificial intelligence (AI). A collaboration between U3A Network Victoria and RMIT University, the “Datascapes of Ageing in Place” project focuses on enhancing digital inclusion and literacy among older adults, with a particular emphasis on the role of AI-driven digital learning avatars in achieving these goals. This project engages a Digital Mentors group within U3A, which aims to scale digital literacy efforts by ‘mentoring new mentors’. In addition to promoting digital skills, this research challenges ageist stereotypes by advocating for the concept of eldragogy, a ‘pedagogy of elderhood’ that positions older adults as empowered, self-directed learners. The initiative explores the integration of digital learning companions in various educational and practical contexts, for example,

in the enrolment of AI-driven avatar tutors in movement classes and the use of avatar-shaped ‘ask engines’ to improve information access and exchange. The “Datascapes of Ageing in Place” project aims to develop a Community of Scholars (COS) of elders-in-training practising a “mentor the mentor” curriculum that focuses AI on the unique needs and potentials of older learners.”

The successful implementation and expansion of the Digital Competency Mentoring Programs in Geelong and Glenroy demonstrate the effectiveness of a peer-to-peer mentor/mentee approach tailored to the specific digital needs of older adults. By incorporating insights from the Shaping Connections research and the practical experiences gathered through the Tech Corner, U3A Network Victoria has developed a replicable model that can be adapted to various locations and contexts. The program’s success is grounded in its flexibility, the importance of community partnerships, and the creation of a supportive environment that fosters continuous learning. As this model continues to evolve, the integration of AI and the expansion of training initiatives championed by U3A partners, such as “Live Life Digitally Connected”, will further enhance the capacity of mentors and extend the reach of digital competency programs to more communities, ensuring that older adults are well-equipped to navigate the digital world.



U3A Digital Mentoring Program Development Timeline



3.0

The Digital Mentoring Program Framework

This section details the framework U3A uses for the Digital Mentoring Program and presents an easy-to-remember replicable model for peer-to-peer mentoring with older adults. The U3A Digital Mentoring program is unique as it was developed over multiple years. It has been refined through practical pilots and partnerships with support from research findings through Shaping Connections.

Shaping Connections has worked closely with U3A's membership base to share their voices, opinions, beliefs, and experiences so that empowering, co-designed projects can be created and pursued. The value of peer-to-peer learning and the power of working with individual "social connectors" within communities is paramount and has helped U3A to develop their mentoring program.

3.1 A collaborative approach to an emerging model

Through the Shaping Connections collaboration and further discussions with U3As senior management, four key participant groups essential to their digital mentoring practices were identified:

- **Community Relationship Connectors:** Exchange-facilitators between roles; establish and nurture community relationships.
- **Mentors:** U3A mentors provide knowledge and guidance on digital competency to mentees. Senior mentors provide guidance to mentors.
- **Mentees:** Recipients of mentoring whose experiences assess program effectiveness.
- **U3A Industry Partners & Service Providers:** These include institutional partners such as aged care, local governments, libraries, telehealth services, and senior clubs, which offer perspectives on the broader impact of digital competency.

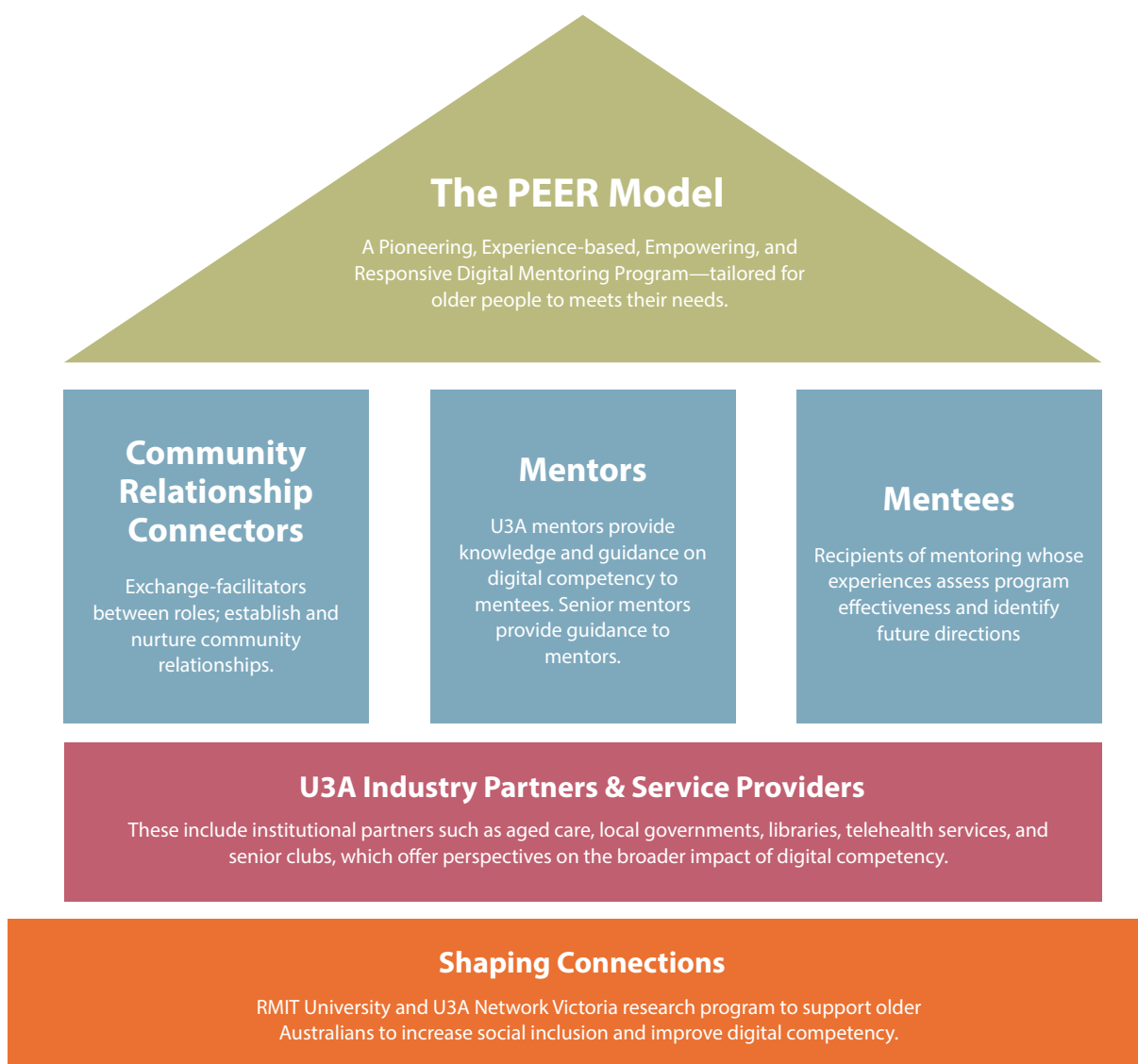
Feedback was collected from these groups through interviews and archival statements, providing testimonials that illustrate the benefits and impacts of these practices. These insights were then integrated into an emerging model for peer-to-peer mentoring programs with older adults.

The examination of the Digital Mentoring Program has clearly articulated the components that contributed to its development. U3A Network Victoria followed an approach that focused on ongoing refinement of the mentoring program, drawing from practical experience and research findings derived from the co-design methodology. The emerging PEER model underscores the evolution of the Digital Mentoring Program into four key dimensions. Testimonials from interviews are included in this report as evidence of the program's positive impact on participants' lives.

The Digital Mentoring Program was developed by leveraging the research insights and resources generated from the Shaping Connections program, alongside practical insights from the pilot programs. Diagram 1 uses a Greek temple metaphor to illustrate how various groups within the framework interact. In this Digital Mentoring Program Framework, Shaping Connections forms the temple's foundation, with industry partners and service providers acting as the next support layer. The program's pillars—Community Relationship Connectors, Mentees, and Mentors—support the PEER model, symbolised by the temple's roof.



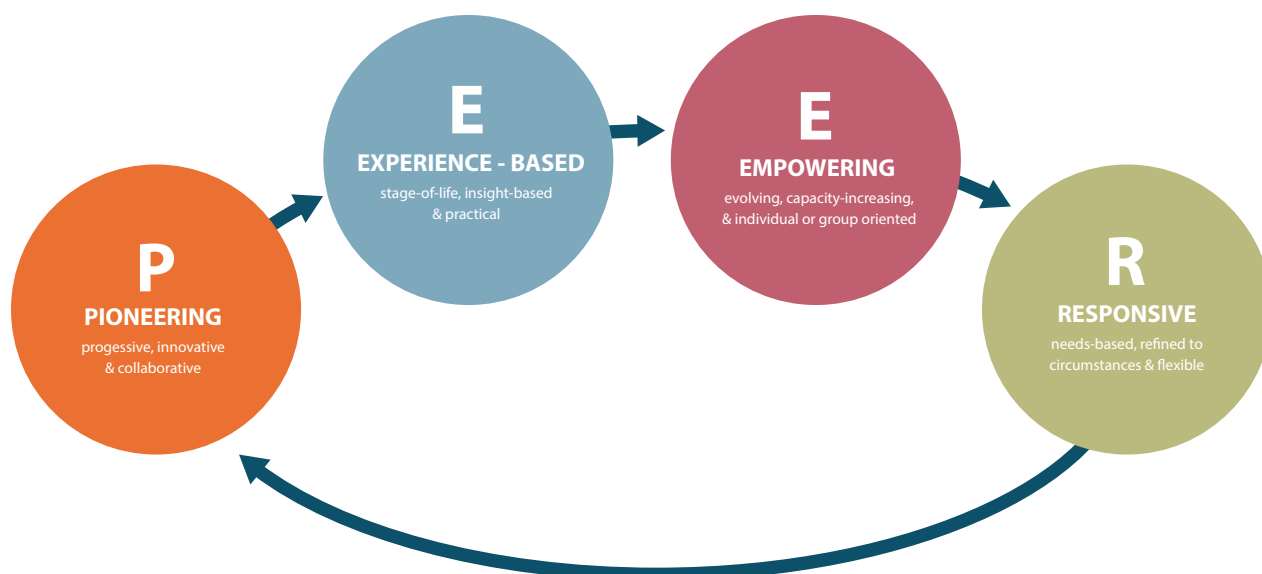
Diagram 1. Digital Mentoring Program Framework



3.2 The PEER Model

The PEER model focuses on building competencies while identifying and supporting mentors and mentees. The PEER model ensures that the Digital Mentoring Program is tailored for older people and meets their needs. As a peer-to-peer program, the Digital Skills Mentoring program is meant to provide an easy-to-remember-and-replicate ‘PEER model’ for other programs involving older adults. Diagram 2 outlines the elements of the PEER model.

Diagram 2. Digital Mentoring Program created by the PEER model



3.2.1 Pioneering

The digital mentoring program is pioneering in its innovative approach to enhancing the digital skills of older adults, aimed at improving their social inclusion. By embracing out-of-the-box thinking, the program has introduced novel solutions to the challenges faced by older adults in the digital landscape. Based on insights from the Shaping Connections program, the initiative utilised a co-design approach for innovation, actively involving older adults in its development alongside U3A and industry partners. This collaborative methodology is effective because it empowers older adults by giving agency to their voices (Bossio et al., 2019).

Collaboration has been pivotal to the program's success, as mentor Peter R. remarked:

“Through RMIT and U3A working together, we have the benefit of them learning what we are and spreading the word of what U3A is. And we could actually teach them [RMIT]. We have shown them [RMIT] a different way of approaching education.”

The program's innovative and collaborative nature stems from the continuous exploration and refinement of knowledge in partnership with all involved parties. RMIT University's involvement has been crucial in validating and enhancing the peer-mentoring approach while promoting it to other stakeholders. For example, Jessica Cotter, a Community Connector in a managerial role at a major telecommunications company, observed:

“Our marketing team could not believe the wealth that the U3A network showed us. It was mutually beneficial to multiple teams internally for us. U3A gives us direct contact with RMIT, their members and their mentors, and even further network through the Victorian government. The advantages of the partnership, we could see how much we were beneficial for one another.”

Through this collaboration, service providers and U3A partners have gained access to the Shaping Connections co-design research findings, which are crucial for designing future community programs. This innovative partnership has set a new standard for integrating research and practice to create impactful community-based initiatives.

3.2.2 Experience-based

The program focuses on seniors’ lived experiences with technology. Older adults often struggle to get tech support from younger people due to differences in lived experiences (Xie, 2007). Thus, an experience-based approach is crucial, as emphasised by Peter Eade, a Community Connector and Library Officer:

“Another thing that mentors need is a degree of respect and understanding. Because the people coming in might be of different ages and from different backgrounds, they might have disabilities, or they might have language barriers, so digital mentors need to have a degree of respect and openness.”

Peter Eade’s insight highlights the importance of mentors understanding mentees’ experiences. With one in three Australians aged 65 and over born in a non-English-speaking country (health.gov.au, 2019), understanding lived experiences is essential. For instance, mentees often comment that they do not have their needs met when assisted by younger mentors, which is often the case in retail staff and professional services. In contrast, mentors with similar experiences can relate and help effectively. This approach builds confidence in using digital technologies (Aleti et al., 2023a), as shown by mentee Luigi:

“Sometimes I have problems, for example, with my mobile phone, and they [mentors] show me how to do it. My English, I have some problems, I have to find the right words. If I am by myself, I get confused. The problem is spelling; if I see it right there, I can copy it, and it is easier for me. Now, I got everything [on his devices], I got Netflix, everything I want now.”

Luigi, who speaks English as a second language, finds learning digital tech easier with visual guidance from mentors – bypassing unfamiliar terminologies and issues with correct spelling. He now confidently uses many device functions, like Netflix and reading Italian newspapers.

3.2.3 Empowering

Shaping Connections has demonstrated that co-designing with older people is a valuable approach to empowering consumers experiencing vulnerability (Figueiredo et al., 2023). The digital mentoring program focuses on mentees' self-improvement, equipping seniors with digital skills for independent, active lives. Participants progress from any starting level through scaffolded learning. Mentor Tony B. illustrates this approach:

“Sometimes, when you show someone to do the task, you have to let them do the task, rather than doing the task yourself. Sometimes it takes longer to do that, and you have to have patience, so when they go away, they can do it themselves again.”

Mentors encourage self-improvement and empowerment by insisting on the mentees' ability to perform the task independently. Though time-consuming for mentors, this approach empowers mentees to improve their digital skills. Prior research suggests informal peer-to-peer mentoring enhances older adults' well-being and independence (Pihlainen et al., 2021). The program's success is evident in the rise of 'emerging mentors'—mentees who gain enough digital competency to support others. While not identifying as mentors, these individuals play a key role in helping peers learn digital technology and reducing the teaching 'burden' for formal mentors. This increase in emerging mentors reflects the program's effectiveness in empowering seniors. Identifying these mentors is crucial for future program growth with new groups of mentors and mentees. Some emerging mentors are empowered to take on formal mentor roles. Similarly, experienced mentors are empowered to become senior mentors, who go on to guide mentors on how to interact with mentees.

3.2.4 Responsive

Many older adults prefer flexible learning methods as their needs, competencies, and preferences change at pace with technology (Pang et al., 2021). The digital mentoring program is designed to be responsive to

seniors' needs and continuously evolves based on their experiences. The content and solutions for digital challenges are co-created by mentees and mentors. A critical skill of successful mentors in the program is their ability to listen and tailor their approach to meet mentees' needs. The program's informal and flexible content and delivery methods enhance its responsiveness to mentees' needs. Mentor Janice B. exemplifies this approach:

“As soon as the break starts, they'll line up at your desk to ask questions that'd better be asked during the class. We know this now, and we start each class by asking if they have any questions.”

Janice adjusts her mentoring sessions based on mentees' specific needs and questions, ensuring their concerns are addressed effectively. The program's informal and flexible content and delivery methods enhance its responsiveness to mentees' needs. This responsive approach has garnered positive feedback from mentees, noted by Community Connector Emlyn Jenkins, a Community Engagement Coordinator with a healthcare service provider:

“The responsive approach has been very effective learning for our program. When we go out and do pop-up engagement, we might be building awareness about our services; we are there accessible for the community, whatever the question they might have.”

Emlyn highlights how the program's responsiveness enhances engagement among seniors seeking digital support, influencing his organisation to adopt similar approaches in future community engagement efforts with seniors.

3.3 The Roles within the Framework

Three essential roles form the pillars of the Digital Mentoring Program (Diagram 1): community connectors, mentors and mentees. Community connectors play a vital role in establishing, facilitating and nurturing relationships within and across communities, enabling mentors and mentees to connect. The mentors are older adults with relevant digital competency and the capacity to guide mentees at the grassroots level. Mentors play a critical role in the educational aspects of the program. The mentees are the main recipients of the program. They are older adults

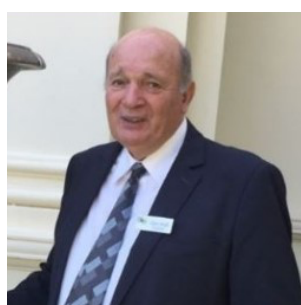
from different backgrounds, with different levels of digital competency, who wish to grow their skills, discuss digital interests/issues or concerns with peers, or simply have their technology-related questions answered.

3.3.1 Community Relationship Connectors

Community relationship connectors are individuals who are leaders or representatives within the U3A structure or working for U3A's industry partners, including RMIT University, NBN co., DPV Health, local councils, or libraries. They share a common goal: to assist seniors in developing their confidence and competency in using digital technologies. These community connectors play a central role in co-designing the Digital Mentoring Program to ensure that the program is designed to effectively meet the needs of mentors and mentees and the common goals of the participating partners they also represent. The central role played by the community connectors is reflected in the 'Pioneering' and 'Responsive' aspects of the PEER model (Diagram 2).

To better illustrate the role of community connectors, five examples of community connectors are presented below:

1. Glen Wall, Former Vice President of U3A Network Victoria



Glen Wall is a community connector who works within the U3A structure. Glen is the President of Whittlesea U3A and former vice-president of U3A Network Victoria and currently Chair of U3A Australia. He is also the co-founder of a social enterprise by and for older adults that evolved from a collaboration with the City of Whittlesea. The social enterprise provides volunteer leadership training and community

connection resources to community groups. As such, Glen plays an essential community connector role in bringing expertise from older adults via the social enterprise to projects with the City of Whittlesea and U3A. He has been instrumental in advancing positive ageing policies in the region. Being one of the founders of Shaping Connections, Glen identified the importance of trial and refinement in peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing across several organisations.

“The significant contribution of the Digital Mentoring Program was the ability to trial and refine the program with the insights learnt from Shaping Connections. This peer-to-peer sharing of knowledge and experience has positive impacts on enabling partner organisations to service the senior cohort.”

Glen highlights that peer-to-peer sharing between older adults has been central to the success of the Digital Mentoring Program. Community connectors, therefore, play a central role in designing programs to serve seniors by ensuring partner organisations understand the PEER model (Diagram 2) in U3A’s Digital Mentoring Program.

2. Peter Eade, Glenroy Library Officer



Peter Eade is a community connector in his willingness to see advantages in the alliance between the Glenroy Library and U3A to upskill older adults via the Tech Café. His testimonial illustrates how well the Tech Café format proposed by U3A suits seniors compared to the usual library technology support programs.

“We do have a similar approach already. However, one key difference of the Tech Café for Seniors program [U3A] is that we have a slightly longer format and that allows us to spend longer time with people. [The Tech Café] also have a slightly more relaxed and friendly format that is open to a bit of chatting and a sense of learning together as a community. Our usual program is shorter, less chatty and more focused on the issue. I do think seniors respond well to the Tech Cafe format. That’s definitely some experience that we’ll take forward when we structure our program in the future. We know that this approach can be really effective. We’ll look into incorporating this approach to our own program or further collaboration with U3A.”

The Tech Café program provides a more relaxing approach in which older adults can enjoy drinks and snacks while “chatting” about technological issues. As Peter witnessed, this relaxing approach is very influential among seniors. This exemplifies the effectiveness of the peer mentoring approach during the Tech Café, designed by seniors at U3A to other seniors. It is highly effective in making digital competency training more approachable for seniors and potentially for different communities. As

a community connector, Peter plays an essential role in connecting older adults with U3As digital mentoring program via the library. Working together as an enabler and connector is a central aspect of the success of the digital mentoring program. Local libraries may have different levels of visibility, accessibility, approachability and perceived social standing amongst older adults. Consequently, they may be able to reach different communities of older adults. By working closely with U3A in the digital mentoring program, Peter helps connect communities through shared interests and goals. Working across different communities with an openness and willingness to learn from collaborators is central to the community connector role. This is also exemplified by other community connectors:

3. Jessica Cotter, Community and Stakeholder Engagement Manager, NBN co.



Jessica is a community connector because she was able to look at resources available in U3A, NBN co. and the Geelong City Council and bring them together towards a common vision of change. Jessica facilitated the inclusion of U3A in the programs in Geelong Libraries via a relationship with senior management at the City of Geelong. Her testimonial demonstrates how the U3A network provided a much more effective channel for service providers to reach seniors than other methods.

“In 2020 we approached Geelong City Council for our Uplifting program. While it was well received, it was lots of work to reach 30 people. Once we realised that we had the power of the U3A network in Geelong, we all worked together to deliver this amazing program with weekly pop-ups in the library. It’s hugely beneficial and, ideally, will continue going daily; it would be wonderful. I am immensely proud of that collaboration between us. It is our intent to take it to the national level; with U3A in other states could tap into it and utilise those services.”

Through the collaboration with U3A, NBN co. effectively delivered its community program to promote digital inclusion to a broader audience. This collaboration has achieved such success that NBN co. intends to expand nationally. The NBN co. case exemplifies how other service providers can collaborate effectively with U3A to approach seniors, especially for digital inclusion. Moreover, the role of community connector

Jessica played is central to the success. Her comments about ‘realising the power’ of their partner and the focus on ‘working together’ and collaborating exemplify her connector role, which is a central pillar to the success of the program.

4. Kellie Massouras, Municipal Emergency Management Coordinator, Banyule Council



Kellie has a central community connector role in improving the council’s emergency communication. She has employed her different roles in councils to further the digital mentoring approach. She was the Council Resilience Manager at the City of Whittlesea and arranged to have U3A representation on the City of Whittlesea Municipal Emergency Planning Committee’s Community Sub Committee. Kellie

left Whittlesea Council and took up the role at Banyule Council and subsequently was seconded to Shire of Mitchell in the Resilience Manager role. This movement has allowed Kelly to disseminate best practices among councils, especially when it comes to upskilling older adults via the peer-to-peer model, including the Digital Skills Mentoring program in their Resilience programs and facilitating the program into the Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) exercises.

“We know from a lot of research, particularly through RMIT research, that a number of digital literacy training has been rolled out by the government in the last decade haven’t really been



working because it wasn't the preferred style of seniors. If you can work with them face to face, or as U3A, peer-to-peer, we know that there's a better uptake of learning, and it sits longer, and there are more connections built between seniors. And in our emergency communication, these connections are very important. We are keen to further apply this peer-to-peer model."

The Shaping Connections program has provided research evidence Kellie needed to help demonstrate that peer-to-peer training is a suitable digital competency training approach for seniors. Her testimonial demonstrates the importance of the role of the community connector between the local government and seniors in situations of emergency.

5. Emlyn Jenkins, Community Engagement Coordinator, DPV Health

Emlyn is a community connector because he recognises that his organisation and U3A have common objectives, and he could see the synergies of working together. His testimonial demonstrates the positive results of the Digital Mentoring program on DPV Health.



"We have mutual objectives to support seniors. We are a health service provider, and U3A has done amazing things to support seniors. We try to coach people and build awareness of the online booking system to see doctors, allied health or community nurses through an online portal. U3A pop-up digital hub was a fantastic initiative during the time that we were coming out of Covid restrictions to the normal way of life."

Emlyn's community connector role is essential in terms of making DPV Health services more accessible and available to seniors. By collaborating with U3A in the Digital Mentoring program, he could see what was needed to successfully provide support to equip seniors with skills, such as online booking, to access DPV Health's services digitally. As a connector, he would also learn from older adults how his team at DVP Health can improve their online tools to make them more accessible.

Overall, the community connectors' testimonials about the Digital Mentoring program share three common points:

- First, the program is highly effective in digital upskilling older adults and can be expanded to programs where digital upskilling for seniors is the goal.



- Second, the program's PEER approach is appropriate for older adults and can be expanded to other community programs.
- Third, the program needs to be supported by individuals who perform the commonality relationship connector role.

Connectors who have the skills and capacity to work within the program alongside mentors and mentees and have outside connections to services, resources and facilities outside of the U3A structure form an essential pillar in the framework.

3.3.2 Mentors

Digital competency mentors play a critical role in the educational aspect of the program as they share their digital skills and knowledge with the mentees. Effective mentors exhibit four important skills or areas of focus:

- First, innovation in digital practices allows mentors to lead by example, exploring and introducing new technologies and approaches that can benefit mentees. This focus on innovation involves staying informed about being open to experimenting with

new methods and encouraging mentees to explore unfamiliar digital territories. By fostering a culture of curiosity and adaptability, mentors help mentees become more confident in navigating the evolving digital landscape. These skills are reflected in the 'Pioneering' component of the PEER model (Diagram 2).

- Second, active listening enables mentors to understand mentees' specific needs, expectations, and situations. Active listening also enables mentors to understand mentees' emotional state and build mentees' confidence towards digital technologies. These skills are reflected in the 'Responsive' component of the PEER model (Diagram 2).
- Third, mentors must have a problem-solving mindset to be able to address mentees' wide range of specific problems and questions. This does not mean that mentors must have exceptional expertise in digital technology, but rather, they are willing to learn and update their knowledge in response to mentees' needs. That is, effective mentors demonstrate a commitment to the 'Experience-based' approach outlined in the PEER model (Diagram 2).
- Fourth, mentors need to be able to build trust with mentees. Many questions that mentees ask are personal and sensitive, such as resetting their email account or setting up an online banking account. Mentees might feel anxious about technology, and mentors need to help them work on this anxiety to increase their confidence in using digital technology. In other words, a good mentor is focused on the 'Empowering' component of the PEER model (Diagram 2).

The mentors play an essential role in the program as a weight-bearing pillar in the model. It is important to note that mentors participate in the program on a volunteer basis without financial compensation. As such, the success of the program is held up by the non-financial benefits and attributes the mentors get from contributing to it. Mentors volunteer their time and expertise because of the personal and social benefits they gain from the program. They find participating in the program enriches their social life as they foster positive relationships with other mentors and mentees. When asked what he gains from the program, mentor Gavin Trigg states: "I meet new and interesting people". For Gavin, the program is a great place for mentors to socialise and meet new people. Similarly, for mentor Peter R., these encounters foster an atmosphere of positive learning and respect.

“When talking to mentees, I am treated with respect. If I say something should be done, I am believed. My credibility is being recognised by these people. I don’t seek to have my credibility recognised but it happens when you are authentic and when you help people.”

Peter R. explains that he receives great respect from mentees. The mentor has built his credibility and fostered a trusting relationship with mentees, and he is recognised and respected in the program. Participating in the program can help enrich mentors’ social and emotional lives, which is an important contribution to their active and healthy lives. This also demonstrates that the ‘Empowering’ component of trust-building is based on reciprocity between mentors and mentees.

Further explaining this positive social experience, mentor Janice B. explains:

“I know Peter C, all the things that we’ve been doing since lockdown, he has been so supportive. We’ve worked so well together over the last 18 months. It’s been incredible. And then Gavin’s come in and he sort of fitted in the same way. He just slotted in the same way.”

Janice explains how she works with Peter C and Gavin T as a team. Their collaboration not only helps them to be better at mentoring but also adds to their positive social experiences during the program.

Mentors report a great sense of personal achievement in participating in the program, such as when they can successfully help mentees with their digital problems, as reported by mentor Janice B.:

“I get much more out of it than the people that I actually help. When you get a challenge, and we find an answer, or when you actually help them, you know that you’ve made a difference to them. They are not taking it for granted. They really appreciate the time and effort you put in. It is the same as when I went to work. I was not there to get pats on my back from my bosses. I was there to do the job and walked out and went home and said I’ve done a good job today. And I get the same feeling when I help people. I do get a lot of satisfaction.”

Janice explains that her problem-solving mindset gives her personal satisfaction by helping other people overcome challenges. Mentors don’t need to have prior mentoring experience, and as such, they must learn new skills to work with mentees. Mentors get a sense of achievement from

helping other people and seeing the positive impacts of their work. This sense of achievement is further strengthened by mentees' gratification.

In addition to the sense of achievement, mentors report that participating in the program enables them to maintain an active lifestyle. Participating in the program enables mentors to continue their active lifestyle after retirement. Peter R. explains how mentoring is a positive activity that he enjoys spending a large amount of time on each day. Peter could keep himself busy doing what he enjoys:

“What mentoring shows me is I can make myself busy three to six hours per day in helping people, I could, easily.”

Digital mentors report significant personal gain from the program, which gives them a sense of achievement and enriches their active, social and emotional lives. The mentors are instrumental in implementing the PEER model, which is particularly pronounced through their focus on a Pioneering, Experience-based, Empowering and Responsive approach to working with mentees.

As the PEER model evolves, experienced mentors shift from solely training mentees to guiding and supporting emerging mentors. In the Digital Skills Mentoring program at Watsonia Community Centre, senior mentors like Peter C, Glen Wall, and Janice B were crucial in supporting mentors such as Marry-Anne W, initially in person and later via Zoom. Senior mentors bring greater expertise and a willingness to share knowledge, helping less experienced mentors grow. The mentors mentioned here have transitioned into senior roles and now actively train others.

3.3.3 Mentees

Mentees are the recipients of the digital mentoring program. Their experiences and outcomes are vital for assessing the program's effectiveness. Mentees assert that the program has the same three benefits as the benefits reported by the mentors: personal achievement, maintaining an active lifestyle and positive social experiences. Mentees find personal achievement in gaining digital knowledge and improving their confidence and skills in using digital technologies. The newly acquired knowledge and digital skills enable mentees to maintain and enrich their independent and active lifestyles. Finally, the digital mentoring program offers positive emotional and social benefits for mentees within and outside U3A.

Mentees report gaining digital knowledge, including an understanding of their own digital skills, different digital technologies, and the benefits and risks of using them. For example, the 'Responsive' aspect of the PEER approach focuses on ongoing learning and providing relevant digital knowledge in response to changes in the digital landscape. Mentee Steve reports that the digital knowledge that he learns from the program is relevant and useful:

"There's always something new come up. For example, there's the online health system. I didn't know anything about it. And it's always, whatever you learn, they'll come in handy. I keep coming back because I'm interested in these things."

Steve states that his motivation to participate in and return to the program is to acquire new and useful knowledge. Learning new knowledge is a great way for older people to stay active. The knowledge gained at the digital mentoring program provides useful information for older adults and exemplifies how the program can enable and assist them in accessing important services, many of which are now digitally based. Moreover, the program has a significant impact on improving mentees' confidence in the use of digital technology. Mentee Maria explains:

"Even at the beginning, I thought I was not going to learn anything. But they [mentors] said: "You are going to be confident. You are not going to be scared of the iPad anymore." And I get excited to do things like taking screenshots. I talked to Siri [for the] first time last week."

These testimonials showcase how the Digital mentoring program helps mentees become more confident about using digital devices. Before participating in the program, Maria was anxious about using digital devices and consequently avoided them altogether. After learning how to use them, Maria no longer experiences such anxiety and is now confident and excited to explore and use digital technologies. This is a testament to the central importance of the 'Empower' aspect of the PEER model. With their increased confidence, mentees are empowered to use different software and applications to facilitate and enrich their daily lives. Mentee Anne explains:

"Last week, I just sliced my finger off. And Janice [mentor] had just shown me how to do the QR code. Sure enough, I went to the clinic, and that's what they wanted. And I was so happy, I said: "Oh, look at this, I know how to do this."



Anne shares a specific example of when what she learned became useful. Many essential services, such as the medical clinic that Anne attends, require users to use digital technologies. Learning how to use QR codes in the digital mentoring program enabled Anne to use the service smoothly. Anne's example demonstrates that the digital skills that U3A provides for mentees are crucial for them to access important services to facilitate their daily lives. In addition, Anne also reports positive emotional impacts from being able to use the new technology. She feels happy and confident about being able to manage the technology on her own.

Mentees also report enriching their lives by using digital technologies learned through the program. Typically, this is achieved by the program's flexible approach, which directly responds to the mentees' learning needs (the 'Responsive' PEER component). As a mentee, Shirley explains about her wanting to learn how to use technology to navigate around her neighbourhood:

"Now I can use PTV [Public Transportation Victoria] and Google Maps. I feel very confident using those. The Google Maps, I am able to use it to find out where I have to go. I am beginning to expand my movement around the area. I'm confident because I know where I'm going. It has been terrific with that. Plus, taking a trip with the train. Those are the things I feel much more confident doing by myself."

Shirley got the help she needed and is now confidently travelling further than before using public transport. Shirley's experience emphasises how her new digital skills enrich seniors' daily activities.

The Digital mentoring program also provides positive emotional and

social benefits to participants. Mentees report that participating in the program is an enjoyable activity and that they look forward to each class. As Anne and Dereck explains:

“I’m looking forward to it. I panic if I can’t find parking because I want to be there before 10 o’clock.” (Anne)

“I enjoy the company, and I enjoy what we talk about.” (Dereck)

Finally, mentees also recommend the program to others, as demonstrated by the testimonials of mentees Luigi and Rhonda:

“I have another friend who comes and joins the class. I told her about the class last year, and she joined up.” (Rhonda)

“Before I came here, I knew nobody. But there’s a friend of mine coming today, we’ll come together. I like to study with other people. I enjoy it. I helped a friend. She didn’t know how to put the Internet in.” (Luigi)

Luigi and Rhonda enjoy learning with other people in the class. Luigi also explains how he has used his digital skills to help his friends with the Internet. This is a testament to the essential part of the ‘Experience-based’ component of the PEER model: digital knowledge is more easily disseminated between older adults who understand each other’s needs and difficulties. Moreover, older adults with similar lived experiences are ‘stepping up’ and providing mentorship to their friends within and outside of the program.

3.4 Industry Partners and Service Providers

The success of U3A’s digital mentoring program relies heavily on the contributions of industry partners and service providers, whose support is vital in addressing the unique digital needs of older Australians. Mentors volunteer their time, and mentees receive training either for free through pop-up services and collaborations or at a very low cost, limited to U3A membership fees to cover administrative expenses. Therefore, the involvement of institutional partners is crucial in establishing a solid foundation for the program’s implementation and ensuring its long-term sustainability.

One notable partnership is with the National Broadband Network (NBN), which began engaging with Local Government Councils in 2020 and U3A in 2021. The NBN co.’s initial focus on service rollout has evolved into a

broader mission to uplift communities left behind in the digital world. By collaborating with U3A, NBN co. has been able to reach a wide network of older Australians, providing them with the digital skills needed to fully engage with technology, thereby ensuring no community is left behind in the digital age.

Similarly, DPV Health, a not-for-profit organisation, recognised during the COVID-19 pandemic the critical need for older Australians to access essential healthcare services through digital means. The collaboration between DPV Health and U3A addresses this gap by offering digital mentoring that equips seniors with the necessary skills to manage their health digitally, such as updating vaccination passports on smartphones or booking medical services online. This partnership ensures that older Australians can navigate the increasingly digital landscape of healthcare.

Many local government councils, such as Banyule, Merri-bek, Whittlesea, Casey, Geelong, and Mitchell Shire, among others, have played a significant role in supporting U3A's digital mentoring program. Each of these councils has contributed in various ways to ensure that older Australians within their communities are not left behind in the digital age.

For instance, the City of Geelong and the Geelong Regional Library Corporation have been particularly proactive in their collaboration with U3A, recognising the importance of digital competency in today's society. Geelong has focused on ensuring that its older residents are equipped with the digital skills needed to access vital services and participate in the community. The Library has worked closely with U3A to offer drop-



in sessions where seniors can speak directly with community mentors about all their technology questions. These sessions are designed to be welcoming and accessible, with no question being too basic. They have also increased the capacity of library staff to support seniors in developing digital skills.

Participants are encouraged to seek help on a wide range of digital topics, such as using mobile phones or tablets (including iPhones, Samsung devices, Androids, and iPads), downloading and using various apps (including Telehealth), safely making video calls on platforms like Zoom, and tips on avoiding scams and staying safe online. This collaboration is part of a broader initiative by the council and the library to enhance communication with residents to support seniors' access to library and council services.

Banyule Council have supported the program and partnered with U3A to improve the support of seniors to access emergency information via mobile phones and the Emergency Management Victoria website before, during, and after emergencies, ensuring that even the most vulnerable populations can receive timely and accurate information.

Similarly, other councils like Merri-bek, Whittlesea, Casey, and Mitchell Shire have supported the program by providing resources such as venues, funding, and promotional assistance. These councils have integrated the program into their broader community outreach efforts, recognising that improving digital competency among older residents contributes to overall community resilience and well-being. For example, Whittlesea (Seniors Link-up), Banyule and Merri-bek have facilitated the setup of digital pop-up services, where seniors can receive one-on-one mentoring sessions, making digital learning accessible and convenient. In Whittlesea and Casey, the focus has been on incorporating digital competency into existing community programs, ensuring that seniors can seamlessly integrate these skills into their daily lives.

Over the past decade, the Australian and Victorian governments have enhanced their communication with residents before, during, and after emergencies using digital channels. However, many older Australians have been unable to access these critical updates due to a lack of digital competency. Recognising this gap, the Victorian government approached local councils to run emergency management exercises with a focus on vulnerable and at-risk communities, including older people. Through collaboration with U3A, these councils' Emergency Communication Departments have delivered targeted training to build older people's capacity to trust and engage in digital-based communication, ensuring



they receive timely and important information during emergencies.

Banyule Council has taken a unique approach by aligning the U3A digital mentoring program with its emergency management exercises, targeting older adults as a key at-risk group. This partnership ensures that seniors in the region are not only equipped to use digital technologies but are also prepared to access critical information during emergencies, thereby enhancing their safety and security. The Banyule Council Emergency Management team included U3A in a local exercise simulating council emergency management procedures in response to incidents such as floods or bushfires. U3A collaborated in the exercise to determine whether messages sent to mobile phones (text) before, during, and after an emergency incident were received by seniors. Additionally, the exercise aimed to assess if the messages were opened, whether the content was understood, and if the seniors acted according to the directions provided.

Councils like Banyule and Mitchell Shire have also recognised that digital competency is crucial for improving communication during emergencies, as highlighted by the Victorian government's approach to enhancing digital channels over the past decade. Through these collaborations, councils have been able to extend their emergency management exercises to include training for older adults, helping to build their capacity to trust and engage in digital-based communication. These councils have recognised that these efforts not only support emergency preparedness but also help bridge the digital divide, enabling older Australians to participate actively in the broader digital society.

Overall, the involvement of these local government councils has been instrumental in the success of U3A's digital mentoring program, providing

the necessary infrastructure, support, and community engagement needed to empower older Australians to confidently navigate the digital world. Their collective efforts have ensured that digital competency becomes an integral part of community development, benefiting not just the individual participants but the broader community as well.

Moreover, local libraries, such as Glenroy Library, have been instrumental in offering digital programs tailored to the needs of seniors. In partnership with U3A, Glenroy Library launched the Tech Café, a digital support program designed specifically for older Australians. This initiative, supported by 11 digital skill mentors from both U3A and Glenroy Library, has provided essential digital support to 181 participants, helping them confidently use digital technologies in their daily lives. Recently, the Tech Café extended its reach through collaboration with the Library's digital support team, U3A, the Library's Technology Officer, the Council's Social Support Team, and the Living and Ageing Well Team. Together, they brought the Tech Café to local groups, including the Senior Men's Group (Glenroy Library), the Alevi Community Council of Australia (at their North Coburg venue), and the Greek Senior Women's Group (Glenroy Library), showcasing the Tech Café at their respective club meetings.

The sessions were delivered with the assistance of a translator from Language Loop. The Digital Skills Mentors who facilitated the Tech Café sessions offered guidance on staying safe online, avoiding scams, and effectively navigating various devices and websites. The events were well-received, with participants actively engaging in discussions and receiving personalised assistance for their technical challenges.

The success of these events has opened the door for U3A, Merri-bek Libraries, Merri-bek Council's Social Support Team and Living and Ageing Well Team to collaborate in delivering the Tech Café program in the Fawkner and Glenroy areas. This includes continued support of the Men's Group, the Avari community, and the Greek Seniors Women's Group, further bridging the digital divide.

These collaborations illustrate the indispensable role that industry partners and service providers play in the success of U3A's digital mentoring program. By pooling resources, expertise, and infrastructure, these partnerships have empowered older Australians to embrace digital technologies, thereby enhancing their participation in today's increasingly digital society.

The formation and maintenance of these partnerships would not be possible without the pivotal role played by **Community Relationship Connectors**. These individuals—who may be U3A members, local

community leaders, or dedicated volunteers—are the ones who actively nurture these relationships. They bring together different stakeholders, energise the collaboration, and ensure that the partnerships remain dynamic and responsive to the community’s needs. By building trust, fostering communication, and advocating for the program, these connectors enable the partnerships to thrive.

In essence, while the institutional partners provide the necessary resources and framework for the digital mentoring program, it is the Community Relationship Connectors who breathe life into these collaborations, ensuring that they are not only established but also sustained over time. This synergy between organisations and individuals is what makes U3A’s digital mentoring program a robust and effective initiative, empowering older Australians to navigate the digital world with confidence.

3.5 Shaping Connections

The framework’s foundation is the Shaping Connections research program. Shaping Connections brings together academics from RMIT University and stakeholders from U3A Network Victoria. RMIT University has collaborated closely with U3A to understand and address the digital needs of older adults. The Shaping Connections program focuses on achieving social impact in three key areas:

1. Building network connections between researchers, community members, and industry organisations.
2. Developing resources such as tools, libraries, seminars, and booklets.
3. Strategic planning, including research, action plans, and evaluation/ reporting.

Shaping Connections has made significant strides in supporting the U3A Digital Mentoring Program by facilitating the upskilling of older adults through funded research initiatives. These efforts ensure that research discoveries, outcomes, and outputs are continually integrated back into the U3A community. The program is rooted in co-design with U3A members, ensuring that all articles, frameworks, tools, and resources provide direct value to end-users. This collaboration between U3A and RMIT represents a novel integrated effort to enhance lifelong learning and active aging, highlighting the importance of integrating technology with a user-centric approach to improve the lives of older adults.



4.0

Conclusion

This report outlined the approach that was applied to develop the Digital mentoring program through the Digital Mentoring Program Framework. The Shaping Connections research program is the foundation for the Industry partners and key roles of Community Relationship Connectors, Mentees and Mentors. At the top of the framework is the PEER model, which concentrates on building digital competencies whilst identifying and supporting mentors. The PEER acronym stands for Pioneering, Experience-based, Empowering and Responsive. Each of these key elements was examined in detail, and insights were gained from participants who were involved in the program.

The PEER model is 'Pioneering' as it is based on innovative co-design, making it engaging for older people who may be experiencing vulnerability and helping them become more digitally competent. It is also progressive as co-design methodology was utilised and encourages peer-to-peer learning to inform and increase social inclusion. It is Experience-based as it's been developed by the recipients of the learning, as well as presented by people at the same stage of life who understand and have experience with the challenges being faced. The PEER model is also Empowering for older people as it recognises that all people want to continue to learn and increase their skills, no matter their age. U3A has noted that some mentees develop their skills and become mentors. Older people experience the Digital Mentoring Program as empowering as they increase their capacity both as individuals and also as a group. Finally, the model is Responsive to the needs of participants, industry partners and service providers. The program has been amended and refined over the years to address various circumstances, challenges, and requirements of mentees. The PEER model provides a sound methodology for engaging with older people and can be applied by other organisations seeking to engage with this important segment.

The report discussed the key roles identified in the Framework of the Community Relationship Connectors, Support Mentors, Mentors and Mentees.

Community relationship connectors play an important role in making services more accessible and promoting communication with older

people. This role is especially important between health services, local government and emergency services.

The Mentees who are the recipients of the program are motivated to participate and learn new and useful knowledge. It's also a great way for them to stay active and access important information and services. The program also has emotional benefits as it increases their confidence, provides opportunities for social interactions and enriches their lives.

Likewise, Mentors enjoy solving problems and have developed the skills of listening and building trust. Mentors enjoy helping people and derive a strong sense of achievement from being involved. Many mentors asserted that the Digital Mentoring program had enriched their social life as they enjoyed meeting interesting people.

The industry partners and service providers shared that the Digital mentoring program gave them access to older adults and helped them share imperative information for this segment whilst helping them build their digital skills. It was a win-win for both the industry partners/service providers and older adults.

The Digital Mentoring Program has organically been developed over multiple years. It is a true collaboration between all parties. The pilots implemented in Geelong and Glenroy, in addition to the findings from the Shaping Connections research, have enabled the program to have a significant social impact on all parties involved, which are identified in the Digital Mentoring Program Framework. The PEER model outlined is not only a peer-to-peer model but is Progressive, Experience-based, Empowering and Responsive. It is recommended that other organisations apply this approach when interacting with older people and utilise the research findings from Shaping Connections.

Recommendations

The U3A Digital Mentoring Program, which has evolved organically over multiple years through true collaboration among all involved parties, serves as a powerful example of how to effectively close the digital divide for older adults. Grounded in the findings from the Shaping Connections research and supported by successful pilots in Geelong and Glenroy, the program has demonstrated a significant social impact on its participants. Central to its success is the PEER Model—a progressive, experience-based, empowering, and responsive peer-to-peer approach. This model offers valuable insights for engaging with older adults and developing tailored digital products and services. The following recommendations



are intended to guide organisations in applying the PEER Model and leveraging the research findings from Shaping Connections to enhance digital inclusion for older adults.

1. Implement the PEER Model for Digital Mentoring

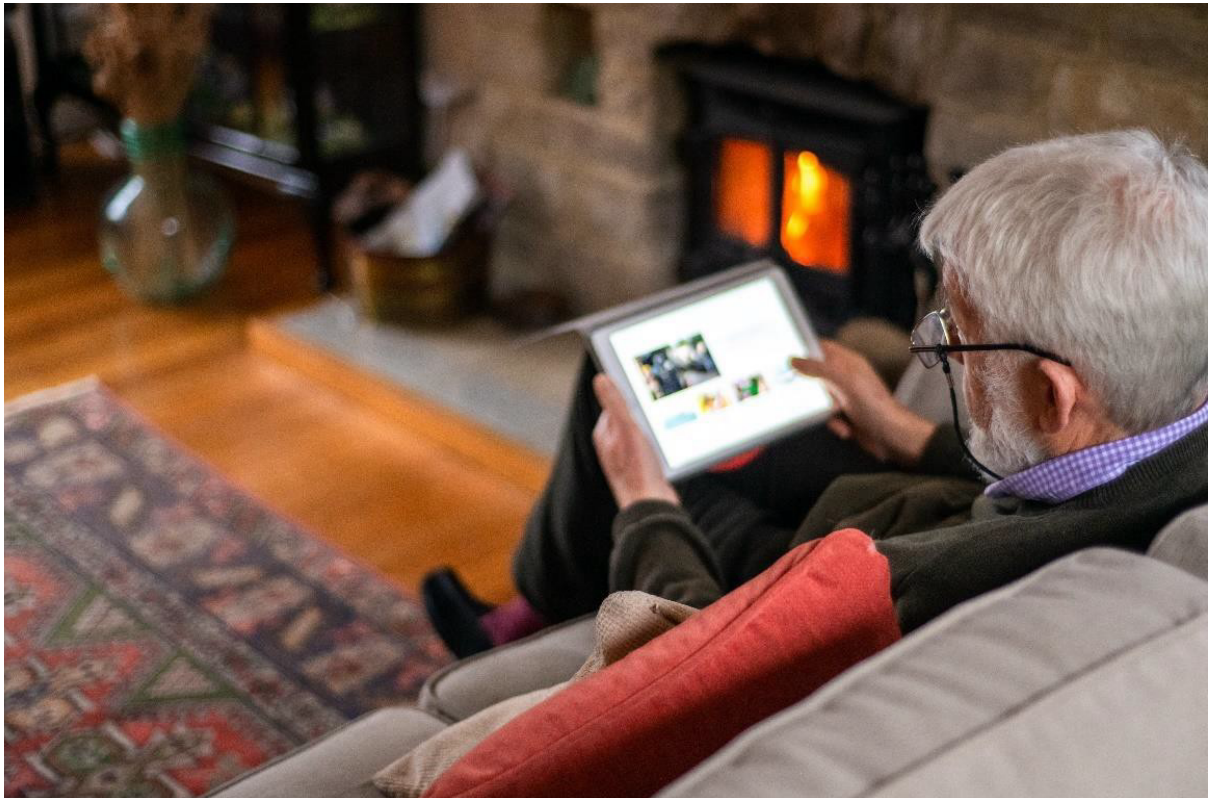
Organisations should adopt the PEER Model—Pioneering, Experience-based, Empowering, and Responsive—as a framework for their digital inclusion initiatives. This model has proven effective in engaging older adults by addressing their specific needs and preferences. By focusing on peer-to-peer mentoring, organisations can create a supportive and relatable learning environment that encourages continuous digital skill development.

2. Foster Collaborative Partnerships

Building strong partnerships with local councils, libraries, healthcare providers, and community organisations is crucial for the success of digital inclusion programs. These collaborations can provide the necessary resources, expertise, and access to older adults. Working closely with organisations like U3A, which have established trust within the older adult community, can enhance the reach and impact of digital mentoring programs.

3. Tailor Programs to the Lived Experiences of Older Adults

Programs should be designed to resonate with the lived experiences of older adults. This means acknowledging the unique challenges they face with technology and ensuring that learning materials and approaches



are relevant and accessible. Using mentors who are at a similar stage of life and who understand these challenges can significantly increase the effectiveness of the training.

4. Encourage Flexibility and Responsiveness in Program Delivery

Older adults have diverse learning needs and preferences, which can change over time. Organisations should offer flexible program delivery methods, including one-on-one sessions, small group workshops, and remote learning options. Regularly gathering feedback from participants and adapting the program to meet their evolving needs will help maintain engagement and ensure the program's ongoing relevance.

5. Empower Older Adults Through Self-Improvement and Peer Support

Digital mentoring programs should focus on empowering older adults to take control of their learning journey. Encourage a learning process where mentees gradually build their confidence and skills with the opportunity to become mentors themselves. This not only helps to close the digital divide but also fosters a sense of community and purpose among participants.

6. Leverage Existing Community Networks

Organisations should tap into existing community networks, such as U3A, to identify and recruit mentors and participants. These networks

already have established relationships with older adults and can provide a supportive environment for digital learning. Engaging with these networks can also help spread awareness and increase participation through word-of-mouth.

7. Provide Resources for Continuous Learning and Development

Develop and provide resources that support continuous learning, such as online tutorials, instructional booklets, and interactive tools. These resources should be easily accessible and cater to varying levels of digital competency. Additionally, creating platforms for ongoing mentor support, like a community of practice, can help mentors stay updated on best practices and new technologies.

8. Focus on the Social and Emotional Benefits of Digital Inclusion

Highlight the social and emotional benefits of digital competency in program messaging and design. Older adults who gain digital skills can stay connected with family and friends, access important services, and engage more fully in community life. Programs should aim to enhance not just digital competency but also the overall well-being of participants.

9. Advocate for Policy and Infrastructure Support

Organisations should advocate for policies and infrastructure that support digital inclusion for older adults. This includes ensuring access to affordable internet services, devices, and ongoing technical support. Engaging with policymakers and stakeholders at local, state, and national levels can help create an environment where digital inclusion initiatives can thrive.

10. Evaluate and Share Program Outcomes

Regularly evaluate the outcomes of digital inclusion programs and share findings with other organisations, policymakers, and the public. This can help build a body of evidence that supports the expansion of successful models like the PEER Model and encourages more organisations to take action in closing the digital divide for older adults.

5.0

Special thanks to key contributors

Special thanks to all the people who have contributed their knowledge, ideas, and time to document the process that was followed in developing the U3A Digital Mentoring Program.

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