

The Impact of IT Intervention Programs for Girls

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ABSTRACT

The goal of our study is to investigate the longitudinal effects of one intervention program for schoolgirls in the Information Technology (IT) field. This bi-annual event has been conducted regularly since 2006 with the aim of confronting a decline in the interest among girls to study IT and promoting study and work opportunities in the field. Each event has been evaluated with pre- and post-event surveys. Longitudinally, both students and teachers have also been surveyed three to four years after the event in which they participated. Results from the 2006 cohort surveyed in 2009-2010 are reported on in this paper. The main conclusion is that, unfortunately, any increase in the uptake of IT in schools that occurred as a result of attending the event was transitory. Therefore, it is crucial that inspiring, engaging, and empowering computing classes are being offered continuously at all secondary schools.

Author Keywords

Female participation, intervention strategies, evaluation

ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.2 Social Issues, K.4.3 Organizational Impacts

INTRODUCTION

In October 2006 the first *Go Girl Go for IT Career Showcase* was held at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. The event targeted girls from senior secondary schools (13-16 years old), exposing them to the wide range of career opportunities in, and related to, Information Technology (IT). The emphasis (as in all *Go Girl Go for IT* events) was on creating awareness of IT as a valid career path for women. The event was held across two days with more than 1660 students and 108 teachers participating.

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The majority of students (more than 1300) were in Years 9 or 10 (14-15 years old) with a few from Years 8, 11 and 12 (younger than 14 years old or older than 15 years old). Students participated in a variety of presentations and activities during the day, which aim to debunk the myth that a career in IT is boring, as well as to promote the wide variety of opportunities that exist in the IT industry.

Students were surveyed before the event (as part of the registration process on the day), and teachers and students were surveyed in the final session at the end of the event. The staff and students were almost unanimous in agreeing that the event was generally 'good' to 'excellent' and that they learnt a lot about the potential career opportunities for girls in and related to IT.

Beyond this, students were asked to indicate their interest in IT in the pre- and post-event surveys. Before the event most of the students indicated that they had little interest in careers in the IT industry. Analysis of the post-event survey however suggested that student and staff perceptions of IT as a valid career for women had changed and that their perceptions of the IT industry had improved. The analysis revealed that the positive improvement was statistically significant suggesting that at some point in the future an increase in female participation in IT post-secondary education and IT employment, from these participants, could be expected.

But is this change in perceptions on the day sufficient, or strong enough, to have a longer lasting impact? In late 2009 a new survey was undertaken of the girls and teachers who attended the 2006 event to gauge if the impact of the event had any long lasting effect on their career choices or opinions of IT. This report provides the outcomes of the analysis of the data collected.

The paper starts with an overview of the previous studies showing evidence of the importance of organisation and further evaluation of the intervention programs aimed at addressing the issue of female underrepresentation in the IT field. The process of data collection and the results of longitudinal survey among students and teachers who participated in the *Go Girl Go for IT 2006* event are then

described and discussed. Several concluding remarks are provided at the end of the paper.

BACKGROUND

Australia has a significant gender imbalance in the IT field with currently only 19.73% of the Australia IT workforce being women [1]. This issue is not confined to Australia. In Europe, despite an increase in the total number of students undertaking computing courses, the number of women studying such degrees has barely moved and stands at 24% [2]. The literature provides numerous arguments why this gender imbalance is of concern including reasons of social equity, a need for a sufficient IT workforce and the innovation that comes from having diverse teams in the creative process [3]. Trauth (2011) [4] argues that gender diversity is an economic necessity as well as essential for social justice: *“women represent half the population and in many societies half the labour force... the 'best brains' can be located in a variety of bodies, not just male”*. Klawe and colleagues (2009) [5] state that equity for women in design and development teams leads to teams with greater diversity and *“enhanced abilities to perform tasks, greater creativity, and better decisions and outcomes”*.

There are many issues which contribute to the lack of girls taking up studies in IT. The Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (2013) [6] suggests that the IT profession has an *‘image problem’*: *“Persistent and long-held negative perceptions of predominantly male [IT] professionals engaged in desk-bound, repetitive, isolating jobs have implications for the pipeline of [IT] skills from schools to tertiary education...”*

To attract girls to computing, and to retain women once they are in computing courses and careers, requires ‘formal’ programs which are established specifically to confront the factors that discourage women’s participation [7]. Formal programs, more commonly known as intervention programs, are activities designed to change a state of affairs for a disadvantaged or minority group. Many intervention programs have been conducted to support and enable females to move beyond the obstacles, which have previously prevented them from being part of the field (see for example [8], [9], [10], [11]).

Von Hellens, Beekhuizen and Nielsen (2005) [12] suggest that intervention programs for women in computing are difficult to evaluate and frequently there is also a lack of resources to ‘deeply analyse’ the outcomes of such programs. Yet to improve our understanding of which intervention programs are best, for whom, and in what context Weiss (1997) [13] suggests a cumulative information base is necessary. Therefore, evaluations of intervention programs need to be conducted, results need to be published and through these publications each study then adds to the body of knowledge. Even when evaluation results show that a program has had little effect or an unintended effect, dissemination of these results is

important so that knowledge builds and *“ineffective programs are not unwittingly duplicated again and again”* [13]. Equally, when the results from a program are mixed, published evaluations enable other people to learn, which of the components of the program were associated with the greater success.

As it was mentioned above, the *Go Girl Go for IT 2006* event was evaluated both immediately after the event took place and three to four years later. The process of data collection for the latter longitudinal study, as well as its results are presented in the next section.

DATA COLLECTION AND RESULTS

Separate surveys were sent to the teachers and the students who participated in the *Go Girl Go for IT 2006* event. All teachers who attended the event were sent an invitation to participate with 25 teachers returning completed surveys.

As the students were generally under the legal age of consent (18 years in Australia), it was a requirement from Deakin University that permission was sought from the student’s parents, prior to the event, for consent to contact their daughters for a follow up survey. The 2006 event was attended by over 1660 students of whom approximately 600 had provided consent to be surveyed at a later time. Not all of these students were still contactable, as their address details were no longer current in 2009. 116 usable surveys were received and 38 undeliverable surveys were returned.

The surveys exploring participants’ recollections of the event are included in the Appendix 1 and Appendix 2. Report on the collected data is presented in the following sub-sections.

Teacher recollections

Teacher demographics

Of the 25 teachers in the sample, 23 were still teaching at the same school as in 2006 when they attended the *Go Girl Go for IT* event. Table 1 shows in which role the teachers attended the event.

A teacher attended as:	Count	Percent
The Careers teacher	5	20%
The IT teacher	15	60%
An interested teacher	2	8%
An available teacher	1	4%
Other	2	8%
Total	25	100

Table 1. Roles of the teachers who attended the event.

Fifteen of the teachers were IT teachers and a further five were Careers teachers. The remaining teacher attendees had a variety of roles including IT trainer, program coordinator and university researchers. Only two teachers came in multiple roles.

Observed changes in attitude to IT among participants

The teachers were asked if they had observed any changes in attitude amongst their students after the *Go Girl Go for IT 2006* event. Overwhelmingly they reported seeing positive attitude changes. Table 2 summarizes their responses.

The feedback from the teachers suggested that the girls were more confident with IT, enthusiastic about IT, and were more motivated and positive about studying IT. One teacher mentioned that “two girls did IT in final year of high school” and another indicated “three girls decided to change their subject selections to include VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) multimedia”. A number of teachers suggested that although the girls were very positive about the new career options they had been exposed to, and found the day interesting, they were not motivated enough to change career direction.

Have the attitude to IT amongst your students positively changed after attending the event?	Count	Percent
Yes	16	64%
No	6	24%
No response (N/R)	3	12%
Total	25	100%

Table 2. Positive change in attitude to IT amongst the girls after attending the event (from the teachers’ perspective).

Observed uptake of IT subjects at school among participating schoolgirls

In a similar vein, the teachers were asked if they had seen a change in the number of girls electing to take computing subjects at school. Here the responses were more variable and overall less positive about the uptake than to changes in attitudes towards studying IT. The results are shown in Table 3. In one school the teacher indicated that VCE IT had not been offered for a number of years, but the cohort that attend the showcase had selected VCE IT and a class would run in 2010. Other teachers indicated that more students were continuing to study IT from the 2006 cohort of *Go Girls Go for IT*, and others were electing to include IT and multimedia in their studies. The introduction of new IT-related courses were also mentioned: “Our school introduced a new ‘film making’ course in 2008. This has definitely attracted more girls”.

Was there a change in the number of girls selecting IT subjects after attending the event?	Count	Percent
Yes	9	36 %
No	8	32 %
N/R	8	32 %
Total	25	100 %

Table 3. Positive change in the number of girls taking computer subjects after attending the event.

The message from teachers was not all positive. In one school, although there was an increase in those studying IT in 2008, this did not continue: “Sadly IT has been dropped from our curriculum. Variety of factors involved. [Although there was] slight increase in 2008 in taking IT Applications, in 2009 and 2010 the subject failed to attract sufficient numbers at VCE”.

The teachers further suggested that a one-off event such as *Go Girl Go for IT* is not sufficient to sustain changes in attitudes in the longer term. However on the plus side, one teacher indicated her own change in attitude: “[my] attitude was clear when advising girls about IT”, but she reported that it was still predominantly boys taking computing subjects at VCE. Another teacher suggested, “The event needs to be held more often, or ambassadors need to come to schools and speak”. They also indicated issues with under resourcing “[there is a] huge shortage of IT teachers in schools!”

One teacher suggested that there were other factors at play, for instance “current VCE IT course is too dry and does not allow for their creative side”. Further they indicate that the uptake amongst girls had increased when VET (Vocational Educational Training - Multimedia) was offered.

Disappointingly, the number of girls seeking careers advice about the IT industry had not increased. Only two teachers indicated that there had been any positive change. Anecdotally another teacher suggested that any increase in interest was through the introduction of VET rather than VCE IT subjects.

Observed changes in career decision making among participating schoolgirls

Despite the somewhat negative response to the uptake of IT-related subjects in the schools, the teachers had a much more positive story to report regarding the impact the event had on the girls’ attitude to career decision making. Seventeen teachers indicated that the event had a positive effect with only one teacher indicating that it hadn’t made a difference. Generally the teachers felt that the *Go Girl Go for IT* event had exposed the girls to new possibilities, particularly in the areas that are traditionally male-oriented, that the girls had gained in confidence generally and that it had highlighted the need for timely career decision-making. From an IT perspective there was an increased realization of “the importance of IT skills in most careers and tertiary education”. One teacher went as far as to suggest that “it promoted IT as being worthy - intelligent - cool - fun”.

Did you also attend the <i>Go Girl Go for IT</i> event in 2008?	Count	Percent
Yes	9	36 %
No	14	56 %

N/R	2	8 %
Total	25	100 %

Table 4. Teacher attendance of subsequent *Go Girl Go for IT* event in 2008 (in addition to 2006).

The final question on the teachers' survey asked if they had attended the follow up *Go Girl Go for IT* event in 2008. Nine indicated that they had while 14 had not (see Table 4). The reasons for attending revolved around the positive experience in 2006, allowing the girls to explore IT courses and career opportunities. For those who did not attend a number of reasons were provided: on leave, no longer in that teaching capacity, too busy, not aware of the event in 2008, and the school did not receive the information in time. The latter three reasons have implications for the organization of future events.

Student recollections

Student demographics

Table 5 shows what the girls were doing in 2009, three years after they had attended the *Go Girl Go for IT* event. Bearing in mind that the majority of girls who attended the *Go Girl Go for IT* event in 2006 were in Years 9 – 11, it is not surprising to find that most of the respondents were in Year 12 or post-secondary education. Other activities included attending Bible College, studying in the Navy and doing an apprenticeship (electrician).

The girls were able to choose more than one option, with a number of them indicating that they were studying, but also working, so that they could support their studies.

What are you doing in 2009?	Count	Percent
School in Year 11	4	3 %
School in Year 12	37	30 %
Technical and Further Education (TAFE)	8	6 %
University	51	41 %
Work	18	14 %
Other	7	6 %
Total	125	100 %

Table 5. Occupation of the students in 2009.

Reason for attendance at Go Girl Go for IT 2006

The girls were asked if they chose to attend the event or whether it was a compulsory excursion. Table 6 shows the results. Only 30 girls (26%) indicated that the excursion was compulsory; the majority of girls chose to attend the event.

Reason for event attendance:	Count	Percent
Chose to attend	75	65 %
Compulsory	30	26 %

Don't remember	8	7 %
N/R	3	2 %
Total	116	100 %

Table 6. Optional or compulsory basis of the event.

Computing subjects studied since Go Girl Go for IT 2006

The girls were asked to list the computing subjects (if any) that they had studied at school since attending the *Go Girl Go for IT* event in 2006. The responses mentioned a large range of IT subjects. Some responses were very specific (for example "*Unit 3 & 4 IT Applications, in Year 11*"), while others were quite vague (for example "*IT*"). A 5-step categorization was developed to capture the general intent of the responses:

1. IT literacy (including PowerPoint, MS Excel etc.)
2. IT studies (including VCE IT variations, software development, programming, applications etc.)
3. Multimedia and web development
4. Degree in IT or IT-related area
5. Animation / digital imaging / graphic design

Of the 116 responses, 53 girls studied some form of IT in 2007. This dropped by almost half in 2008 to 29, with a small drop in 2009 to 22 girls. The results are summarized in Table 7.

Category of IT subjects:	2007	2008	2009
1. IT literacy	2	1	5
2. IT studies	41	19	2
3. Multimedia & web development	8	4	1
4. Degree in IT or related area	0	2	9
5. Animation/digital imaging/graphic design	2	3	5
Total	53	29	22

Table 7. Selection of IT subjects in 2007-2009.

The most popular elective was VCE IT or a related subject in 2007. The next most popular elective was related to multimedia and web development.

Of particular interest is the IT study habits of those nine students who were enrolled in an IT or IT-related degree at universities in 2009. Of the nine girls studying IT at the tertiary level, seven had studied IT for at least one year previously and five girls studied IT in both 2007 and 2008. Apparently only one girl who was enrolled in an IT degree in 2009 had not studied IT in the previous 2 years. This leads to a perception that to get into a degree in IT (and presumably a career in IT) there is a need to study IT at school. However, no IT courses at Australian universities require students to have undertaken IT studies in secondary school.

Further exploration of IT after Go Girl Go for IT 2006

The girls were asked if they had explored or researched different options in the computing field. Twenty four girls indicated they had (21%), whereas 89 (77%) said they had not. However, the respondents who indicated they had chosen to attend the event in 2006 were more likely to explore other options in the IT field. This difference is statistically significant at $p < 0.01$ (see Table 8).

The options the girls explored in the computing arena were quite extensive. Some “explored options for tertiary courses through VTAC (Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre) and course guides”. Some girls indicated that they had picked up IT subjects at school including Technical and Further Education (TAFE) options, while others gained practical experience through work experience or post-secondary work and study.

Have you explored or researched IT since attending the event?					
	Chose to attend	Com-pulsory	Don't Remem-ber	No Response	Total
Yes	20	2	1	1	24
	26.7%	6.7%	12.5%	33.3%	20.7%
No	52	28	7	2	89
	69.3%	93.3%	87.5%	66.7%	76.7%
N/R	3	0	0	0	3
	4.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%
Total	75	30	8	3	116

Table 8. Researching IT options after attending the event.

Of the 22 comments received regarding different IT options, the greatest number of comments was related to multimedia and/or web design in some form, with nine girls mentioning that they had explored or followed up in some way in these areas.

Career Decision Making after Go Girl Go for IT 2006

The girls were asked to indicate, whether attending the *Go Girl Go for IT 2006* event assisted them in their future career decision making. 41 girls indicated that it did (35%), while 69 (60%) indicated that it did not. However, those who chose to attend the event were more likely to believe that it helped with their future career decision making. The difference is statistically significant at $p < 0.01$ (see Table 9).

Did attending the event influence your career decision making?					
	Chose to attend	Com-pulsory	Don't Remem-ber	No Response	Total
Yes	31	6	3	1	41

	41.3%	20.0%	37.5%	33.3%	35.3%
No	41	23	4	1	69
	54.7%	76.7%	50.0%	33.3%	59.5%
N/R	3	1	1	1	6
	4.0%	3.3%	12.5%	33.3%	5.2%
Total	75	30	8	3	116

Table 9. Influence of the event on career decision making.

Forty comments were received in relation to career decision making. Five girls indicated that the event had helped them to select Deakin University as their university of choice (the university hosting all *Go Girl Go for IT* events). Eleven girls indicated it had given them a more positive insight into IT as a potential career path, whereas five girls indicated that they still felt that IT was not for them. Fourteen comments included an indication that the event had been a real “eye-opener” and that it allowed them to better understand the widespread use of IT in lots of different careers. Some comments demonstrating these follow:

- “I very much enjoy IT but I don't think I would have considered it as a career had I not attended.”
- “Decided that law is better for me. However I really enjoyed the day and it made it very clear how versatile/varied IT industry can be.”
- “It has helped me not be so biased.”
- “Made me see IT as a valid career choice - that it's not only a male dominated field.”

Interestingly the event appeared to have a positive effect not only related to the IT industry, but also to being a woman in the workplace, as the following comment suggests: “It certainly gave me a sense of confidence as a woman in the workplace; and a confidence working with computer programs and computerised procedures at work”. Further, the notion that success does not occur immediately also seems to have been debunked by the event: “It helped me to realise there are hundreds of ways to enter the industry and that not succeeding first time around isn't the end of the world”.

Attendance at Go Girl Go for IT 2008

Finally the students were asked if they had also attended the *Go Girl Go for IT* event in 2008. Only two indicated that they had. The reasons for not attending in 2008 included:

- The event was not available to Year 12
- Too busy in Year 12
- Not studying IT anymore
- Changed schools – the new school did not participate
- Not interested in IT / not interested in going again
- Was not aware of the event in 2008
- No longer at school / at university.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A number of clear messages emerge from the longitudinal study among the participants of the *Go Girl Go for IT 2006* event:

1. The *Go Girl Go for IT* event is perceived as an enjoyable, positive experience by both girls and teachers. The majority of girls had a very positive view of IT even if after attending the event they still felt that IT was not for them.
2. It seems that any increase in uptake of IT in schools that has occurred as a result of attending the *Go Girl Go for IT* event is transitory. As suggested by Lang (2012) it appears that multiple access points are needed to reinforce effects of such programs and to facilitate longer lasting change [14].
3. IT needs to be perceived as an attractive career option by girls and should be continually reinforced to remain in their field of vision.
4. The outcomes of this analysis suggest that the advertising campaign in schools for the 2008 event was not entirely successful. Bearing in mind that the majority of teachers were still at the same school, a strategy to advertise upcoming *Go Girl Go for IT* events should include direct contact with the teacher who attended the previous event. For maximum impact this should be done in person or by phone, not via email.

Concerns were raised by one teacher about the “dryness” of the current VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) IT curriculum. The uptake of multimedia and other, more creative, non-traditional areas of IT supports this dislike for the current IT curriculum. How the VCE curriculum can be informed (and transformed) by this trend needs to be investigated.

Criteria by which to evaluate such programs as *Go Girl Go for IT* need to be developed when the program itself is planned. A clear direction on what will constitute a successful program should be discussed from the commencement. Is success measured by the girls’ feelings that they had a good day? Is success that the girls learnt something? Is success that the day ran smoothly? Is success that the day had an impact on the girls? What impact is desired? Is it that the girls *consider* undertaking an IT subject? That the girls undertake an IT subject in the following year? Or that they investigate IT further as a possible career? How many students need to go onto study IT at University level to make the event a success? Maybe success should be measured in terms of better informed teachers in which case, based on the analysis of the teachers’ survey, the event is a success?

Similar longitudinal studies were done in 2011 among the participants of the *Go Girl Go for IT 2008* event and, more recently, in 2013 among the participants of the *Go Girl Go for IT 2010* event. A more detailed analysis of the entire data set now needs to be undertaken. It is hoped that this

will enable useful insights to see for whom this type of event had lasting impact and under what conditions.

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■ **Q10. Please answer part a or part b** ■

a. If you DID choose computing subjects, why?

b. If you DID NOT choose computing subjects, why?

Q11. Since attending Go Girls have you explored, or researched in any other way, different opinions in the computing field? Yes No

If yes, what have you done?

Q12. Do you think attending Go Girls in 2006 has helped you with your future career decision making? Yes No

If yes how?

Q13. Did you also go to Go Girls day at Deakin in 2008? Yes No

Why or why not?

Thank you - we appreciate you taking the time to answer these questions

APPENDIX 2. QUESTIONNAIRE ON TEACHER RECOLLECTIONS OF THE GO GIRL GO FOR IT 2006 EVENT.



GO GIRL, GO FOR IT 2006
Post Event Evaluation
A Longitudinal Study



To help us improve this event please take a few moments to complete the following questions

Please indicate responses by placing a cross in the appropriate box

Q1. Are you still teaching at the same school as you were in 2006? Yes No

Q2. If not when did you move schools? 2006 2007 2008 2009

Q3. In 2006 did you attend as (cross as many as apply)?

The careers teacher The IT teacher An interested teacher An available teacher

Other (please specify) _____

Q4. What was your interest in ICT in 2006?

About Go Girls 2006

Q5. What do you remember about the Go Girl event?

Q6. Do you recall what any of the speakers spoke about? If so what?

Q7. What were your impressions of Deakin University?

The Impact of Go Girls 2006

Q8. Were you aware of any changes of attitude amongst the girls who attended Go Girls 2006 after the event? Yes No

If so what sort of changes?

Q9. Have you noticed a change in the number of girls undertaking computing subjects? Yes No

If yes, how?



■ **Q10. Have you noticed a change in the number of girls seeking advice or more information about careers in computing?**

Yes No ■

If yes, how?

Q11. Do you think Go Girls in 2006 helped your students consider more seriously their future career?

Yes No

If yes, how?

Q12. Do you go to the Go Girls day at Deakin in 2008?

Yes No

Why or why not?

Thank you - we appreciate you taking the time to answer these questions