Digital Literacy and Gen Z. The unpacking of expectations

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Generation Z are the first generation who have no personal reference to a pre-internet society and their lives have been immersed in a digital culture. This generation are often referred to as the digital natives, the “native speakers” of digitally focused language. They have grown up in a highly diverse environment, constantly engaging with digital technologies, demonstrating savviness using technologies for social networking purposes, browsing and searching for information. With this high level of exposure to the digital environment it is often assumed by educators Generation Z students have achieved digital proficiency, however tech-savviness does not imply students are tech-smart.

From an education perspective there is concern with regard to the digital literacy abilities of young New Zealanders. It is purported they do not have the level of digital literacy required to be able to utilise e-technology for not only for academic purposes but also for the vocational sector as they transition from secondary school into their post school pathways. This creates a challenge for the New Zealand Government whose priority is that the New Zealand education system develops “young New Zealanders … to be equipped with the values, knowledge and skills to be successful in the 21st Century” (Ministry of Education, 2014, p.4).

This study is positioned in the academic post school pathway to explore the digital literacy of New Zealand secondary school students and their level of digital preparedness for tertiary studies. An exploratory case-study research design and inductive approach to data analysis was utilised to enable the researcher to develop an understanding of the participants’ knowledge of digital literacy and the interplay between the secondary and tertiary sectors in New Zealand.

It is anticipated this study will provide guidance to both the secondary and tertiary sectors to enable a smoother transition for secondary students into tertiary level study to meet the New Zealand Government’s expectations.