Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance
A National Digital Inclusion Roadmap

Introduction

Society and the economy are quickly digitising, making daily tasks easier, faster and cheaper to accomplish. Many people in society applaud the ability to transfer money using online banking, file Government paperwork through websites and communicate via video call and social media. They are able to not only adapt to new technology but embrace it, as they navigate the innovation of daily life.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has not only accelerated the digitisation of our daily life, but has moved innovation from a convenience to a necessity. Now, around Australia, banks are closed, Government services have been moved to online-only and restricted travel is making it difficult to spend time with friends and family.

While many are benefitting from the increased role technology is playing in society and during the pandemic, many Australians do not have affordable connectivity, the knowledge or the hardware to utilise technology. This makes it difficult for them to use digital services, stay socially connected in a time of social distancing and pivot their daily tasks to an online world.

Even prior to the pandemic, vulnerable Australians were being digitally excluded from the economy and society. Now, more than ever, it is vital Australia addresses the digital divide and works in a coordinated manner to ensure all Australians are digitally capable and can thrive in a digital world.

In this position paper, the ADIA outlines the current state of digital inclusion in Australia, highlights the fragmented nature of the programs currently being run, calls for a coordinated effort between Government, private and community sectors, and proposes initiatives that can be immediately implemented while a whole-of-government strategy is being developed.

The State of Digital Inclusion in Australia

Digital inclusion is critical for full involvement in Australia's modern way of life, and is based on the premise that everyone should be able to make full use of digital technologies – to manage their health and wellbeing, access education and services, access employment opportunities, organise their finances and connect with friends, family and the world beyond.[1]

In order to be digitally included, a person must be digitally capable, they must have access to an affordable internet connection and device, in a way that works for them. This can be encapsulated as Affordability, Ability and Accessibility.

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[1] Australian Digital Inclusion Index (2019) page 8.

When it comes to digital capability, this goes beyond simply *owning* digital devices; it means having the skills and confidence necessary for social and economic participation in the digital world. Essential digital skills are necessary across all aspects of our society and a range of workplaces. Beyond this, it is necessary that Australians have essential digital capabilities in order to ensure Australia's ongoing economic recovery and future jobs readiness.

Digital capabilities are now required in many areas of life and work where until relatively recently they were not, which has been underscored by the COVID-19 crisis. Only those with access to the internet and the skills to make the most of it, are able to truly participate in work, learning, telehealth, access to government information and services, and maintain connection during this time of social distancing.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII)[2] tracks digital inclusion throughout Australia, with the first Index being released in 2016. The Index creates a baseline for digital inclusion to be measured against, allowing the ability to track how Australia is performing.[3] The Index measures three components: Access, Affordability and Digital Ability.

According to the latest Australian Digital Inclusion Index published in 2019:

- Digital inclusion in Australia is increasing, with every state and territory improving its score, but there is still a large digital divide between different groups of people.
- Australians with low levels of education, employment and income are significantly less digitally included and in some instances that gap is widening.
- The groups with the lowest digital inclusion score are people in Q5 low-income households, people 65 years of age and older, mobile-only users and people who did not complete secondary school.
- Australians who are 65 and older are the least digitally included age group, with a consistent gap with the most digitally included age group (25-34).
- Affordability of the internet has only improved marginally, making it a debilitating factor for low-income Australians. Mobile-only users have lower affordability scores, with the cost per gigabyte higher than a fixed connection.
- Indigenous Australians have low digital inclusion scores - with a preference for mobile-only connectivity and remoteness being key factors in their score - however, their scores are improving.
- Digital inclusion is higher in capital cities compared to rural areas throughout Australia.
- Australians with a disability - defined as receiving the disability pension - have a low level of digital inclusion.

The ADII gives us a crucial snapshot of where Australia currently stands in regards to digital inclusion, and also highlights where the most work needs to be done. With the economy and society digitising so rapidly, it is vital Australia uses these findings to increase the digital capability of at-risk groups, ensuring they are not left behind.

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[2] [Australian Digital Inclusion Index](#) (2019) page 5.
[3] Note that the ADII is currently being revised with the new version to be released later in 2020.

About the ADIA

Recognising the need for collaborative action to move the needle on digital inclusion, stakeholders came together in late 2016 to brainstorm how best to create change. The outcome has been the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance (ADIA). Established in 2017, the ADIA is a shared initiative with over 400 business, government, academic and community organisations working together to accelerate action on digital inclusion.

Our vision is to reduce the digital divide and enable greater social and economic participation for everyone in Australia.

> *We believe everyone in Australia should be able to make full use of digital technologies.*

The alliance is supported by Infoxchange and backed by Google and Telstra, with participants throughout the country from all sectors. It has a Governance Committee that represents members across the community sector, private sector and academics; and across affordability, accessibility and capability/skills building.

Each of the member organisations conduct a variety of research and practical programs aimed at reducing the digital divide and enabling greater social and economic participation for everyone in Australia. The value in coming together through the ADIA is in encouraging information sharing and collaborative action to improve the state of digital inclusion in a strategic, cohesive way.

Working together, we can harness the collective skills, knowledge and capabilities of organisations across the country to reduce the digital divide. Through continued collaboration and information sharing we believe we can amplify the work of the sector and locate the gaps for future initiatives.

A Fragmented Approach to Addressing Digital Inclusion

Currently, there are numerous efforts underway across several sectors to improve digital inclusion. However they are uncoordinated and we do not have a common understanding of what the map of efforts looks like.

The ADIA has compiled a list of the most prominent Government, private and community programs, strategies and frameworks in the digital inclusion space, and included it at the ANNEXURE (*Annexure 1: Current Digital Inclusion Frameworks, Strategies and Programs in Australia*). The list demonstrates the vast number of programs and strategies, all working independently and targeting different groups in Australia.

Within the Annexure alone, there are 66 programs, frameworks and strategies:
- 37 Government Initiatives
- 29 Private and Community Sector Programs

Every initiative targets a different group of Australians. There are initiatives that:

- focus on specific workforces (eg - health care workers, miners, defence personnel)
- are specifically for students or the education sector
- are focused on older Australians
- target rural and remote Australians
- are dedicated to Indigenous Australians
- are for low income Australians
- are dedicated to small businesses
- are focused on migrants in Australia

It is noteworthy that many of the programs are not targeted to the people who the ADII identify as the least digitally included.

There are also frameworks and strategies focused on specific workforces, all written without being centred around a common capability framework. Some organisations, such as the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research, recognise this as a problem and specifically call for a national digital skills framework to address this fragmentation.

The Federal Government alone has several departments working on projects looking at digital inclusion, without whole-of-government coordination. The projects span from Social Services to Defence to Health, all working in silos without collaboration or a shared end goal.

The community and private sectors put substantial resources into increasing digital capabilities with programs like Go Digi, Digital Springboard, Digital Garage and Tech Savvy Seniors, but each organisation is defining their own goals and aiming to address different things. For the industry as a whole, there are multiple efforts underway with no guidance from the government on what the programs should aim to achieve. While each project will differ based on the organisation, a clear focus for all the efforts would have a substantial impact on the efficacy of the programs.

From a consumer perspective, this situation is confusing and hard to navigate. It is difficult to identify what programs are available and to take advantage of opportunities to learn and upskill.

Currently, the scattered approach to improving digital capabilities is not providing as much of an impact as it could with greater coordination and is still leaving the most vulnerable Australians behind. Providing a central strategy would also enable government to harness community and industry efforts to amplify its own efforts.

A Whole-of-Government Strategy

Right now, due to COVID-19, organisations are digitising at a faster pace than ever before. With a large section of our economy moving online, and moving quickly, it is critical there is a centralised understanding of the capabilities people should have or be working towards.

Australia needs an overarching strategy, so that Australian businesses, non-profits and Government can work towards the same goal.

We have identified immediate action items, alongside the development of a whole-of-government strategy - a National Digital Inclusion Roadmap (Roadmap) - to be led by a single government department.

The Roadmap would be delivered through three crucial pillars of digital inclusion, to provide a holistic - Affordability, Ability and Accessibility.

The initiatives that could form the immediate action plan, are:
- Creating a Digital Capabilities Framework to provide a common understanding of what it means to be a digitally capable individual.
- Assessing which affordability measures taken in the immediate response to COVID-19 can be retained going forward. This may include a permanent low-cost option for those on low incomes, from the NBN.
- Move towards all federal, state and local government websites being compliant with accessibility standards *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines - WCAG 2.1*.

These initiatives could commence immediately, alongside the development of the overarching Roadmap.

National Digital Inclusion Roadmap

Affordability	**Ability**	**Accessibility**
Addressing availability and affordability of internet services.	*Ensuring everyone has the capabilities and confidence to benefit from and complete activities on the Internet*	*Allowing everyone to use the internet including those living with disability, from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, or with other needs.*
- Removing cost as a prohibitive barrier - Individual's access to devices and the internet	- Analysis of digital capability programs being provided to understand gaps and overlaps - Creating a Digital Capabilities Framework to provide a common understanding of what it means to be a digitally capable individual	- Ensuring websites are compliant with accessibility standards - Ensuring whole of government adherence to accessibility requirements suitable for public procurement of ICT products and services

The Roadmap will achieve the following:
- Set overarching goals to work towards.
- Create a Digital Capabilities Framework to provide a common understanding of what it means to be a digitally capable individual.
- Conduct overlap and gap analysis, so the sector can ensure resources are being used effectively. This would support identification of areas of importance for individual organisations to focus their attention.

Affordability

The Roadmap should establish initiatives to address the issues of affordability and access to internet services - removing cost as a prohibitive barrier. Without affordable internet access, school children have a harder time keeping up in school - both academically and socially, it makes it difficult for adults to find employment and lift their family out of poverty, and it is a barrier to access support services and stay socially connected for less-mobile Australians.

The Roadmap can tackle affordability and access issues by:

- Incorporating NBN rollout and wireless plans to demonstrate progress towards 100% connection across Australia.
- Assessing which affordability measures taken in the immediate response to COVID-19 can be retained going forward. This may include a permanent low-cost entry level option from the NBN.[4]
- Spearheading efforts to support low income and vulnerable populations to access devices.
- Identifying and funding free public wifi access points in community centres, libraries and other public locations.

Ability

The Roadmap must also address digital capability - ensuring everyone has the capabilities and confidence to benefit from and complete activities on the Internet.

When discussing digital capability, people use a variety of terms and each term can mean something different to each person. When the ADIA talks about someone being digitally capable, it means they have the knowledge and confidence to safely, securely and discerningly navigate different devices and the internet. It is a commitment to lifelong learning and adapting to new technologies and platforms. It means they can make sound judgements on the safety and authenticity of a product, service or information source. Digital capability encompasses the ability to do certain things online, as well as to do them safely and effectively.

It is also important to note that as Australian businesses adapt to a world with COVID-19, employees must be digitally capable to support a digitally transformed business.

Initiatives the Roadmap could implement to address digital capability include:

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[4] For more information visit ACCAN's 'No Australian Left Offline' page: https://accan.org.au/no-australian-left-offline

- Conducting a gap and overlap analysis, to give a clear picture of what areas of digital capability are not being appropriately addressed, or alternatively, being addressed by multiple organisations. It is vital we have a clear understanding of the digital capability landscape to ensure we are approaching the problem comprehensively and efficiently.

- Implementing a consistent way for individuals and community organisations to find out what is available locally by way of programs and resources to encourage digital inclusion.

- A National Digital Capabilities Framework that defines the capabilities Australians need. This would provide a common language and understanding as the Government, the private sector and community organisations continue to deliver programs to develop Australians' digital capabilities.
  - A Digital Capabilities Framework defines the key capabilities that every Australian requires in order to safely and effectively benefit from and contribute to the digitally enabled world. This framework will provide a common language for discussing the digital capabilities Australians should possess. It will clearly articulate the capabilities that the sector is working to equip Australians with.
  - It will act as the basis upon which to examine the range of capabilities, training programs currently cover; addressed to which audiences - in this way we can identify gaps and overlap and most effectively expend our combined resources to give every Australian the best chance of having the digital capabilities necessary to be digitally included. It also forms the basis for measurement of Australians' capabilities. This enables a common understanding of progress against a core set of capabilities.
  - A Digital Capabilities Framework would be intended to be a guideline - not regulatory in nature. Rather it would articulate a common language and shared understanding. It would be used by organisations providing programs to enhance essential digital capabilities, across the community sector and private sector. It would support program delivery that is working towards a shared understanding of what it means to be "digitally included" from a capabilities perspective.

In the view of the ADIA, it is important the framework is driven by the Government. With a myriad of programs currently underway, and inevitably more on the horizon, it is necessary to have a Government-backed shared understanding. This will support organisations to work together to increase digital capability across the country, ensuring a more productive and connected society.

There is currently an array of work both in Australia and internationally to articulate what it means to be a digitally capable individual. The ADIA has examined these various Frameworks and includes at the ANNEXURE (*Annexure 2 - Digital Capabilities: International and Domestic Frameworks and Skills*) a summary of the various existing Frameworks and the capabilities they include. This work could be leveraged in developing an Australia specific Digital Capabilities Framework.

The most notable example of work in this space to date is from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment which is piloting the inclusion of essential digital skills in the Australian Core Skills

[Framework](#) (ACSF). The ACSF is intended for use by the Government in evaluating Registered Training Organisations' applications for funding, meaning it is very limited in purpose and has not been created with the wider set of digital capabilities programs in mind. Further, the current ACSF only includes essential digital skills to a very basic level. If it were to be useful for the purposes described above, it would need to extend to illustrate the capabilities a more competent digital citizen needs to fully participate in society and the economy.

Accessibility

Accessibility refers to supporting everyone to use the internet including those living with disability, from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, or with other needs posed by current barriers built into online technologies.

In order to make substantial steps towards achieving accessibility, the Government should:

- Move towards all federal, state and local government websites being compliant with accessibility standards (*Web Content Accessibility Guidelines - WCAG 2.1*).
- Ensure whole of government adherence to the Australian Standard AS EN 301 549, *accessibility requirements suitable for public procurement of ICT products and services*.
- Incentivise the adult learning sector to incorporate inclusion and accessibility in ICT and design courses by 2022.

With so many Government and non-profit services moved online during the pandemic, it is vital that all Australians are able to access and navigate necessary websites to continue to receive the support they need.

Conclusion

The world is digitising, with the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly increasing the pace of services being moved online. Even before the pandemic, the most vulnerable Australians were being left behind. While Australia learns to live with COVID-19, many of the programs and services forced to digitise will not revert back to operating as they did before the pandemic. This will only highlight the digital inequity in Australia.

Right now, there is an uncoordinated effort underway to improve digital inclusion. For example, in relation to digital capability, with no central guidance, programs are teaching different skills to different groups of people, all working towards different goals.

Australia needs a whole-of-government approach to address the fragmented nature of the work currently being done by the sector. With a Government Roadmap, the sector can work towards shared goals, base programs on a defined digital capabilities framework and ensure their efforts are directed where they are needed most.

The ADIA and its members are committed to improving digital inclusion in Australia. With a coordinated approach from the Government, we can work in unison to lessen the digital divide and give Australians the capabilities they need to thrive in a modern, digital society.