Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance

**A National Digital Inclusion Roadmap**

# Executive Summary

Australia is digitising, with the COVID-19 pandemic accelerating the pace of every-day activities moving online. It is becoming increasingly critical that all Australians are digitally included so they can participate in all aspects of society.

Being **digitally included** means:

* A person has **affordable** **access** to high-quality internet, and owns appropriate devices to utilise the internet.
* A person can use the internet in an **accessible** way, whether they are living with disability, from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, or with other needs.
* A person has the **ability**, skills and confidence to complete tasks on and benefit from the internet.

In order for Australians to engage in basic online services such as MyGov, Centrelink and Medicare - as well as banking and telehealth - it is essential they have affordable and reliable internet and devices, can use the internet in a way that works for them and have the skills to complete tasks confidently and safely.

Digital inclusion is not just necessary for Australians’ personal life. Increasingly, a person must have internet access and skills to join the workforce. Finding job opportunities, applying for positions and having the necessary basic digital skills all hinge upon being digitally included, with digital exclusion being a driver for unemployment.

Before the pandemic, Australians were being left behind because they did not have the affordable access or the skills necessary to participate in a digital world. Now, with more of life moving online, increasing digital inclusion in Australia must be a priority.

Currently, the approach to increasing digital inclusion is decentralised and inconsistent across government, business and community groups. Each entity is setting its own goals and creating its own programs to address the problem, lessening the impact of each program. Providing a central strategy to address digital inclusion would allow all stakeholders to work together to amplify the efforts, ensuring the most vulnerable Australians are not left behind.

In this position paper, the ADIA recommends the following to increase digital inclusion in Australia:

* A whole-of-government strategy should be developed - a National Digital Inclusion Roadmap (Roadmap) - so businesses, nonprofits and government can work towards the same goal. Responsibility for the strategy should sit with one Department.
* While the Roadmap is being developed, specific initiatives can be initiated:
	+ Creating a Digital Capabilities Framework to provide a common understanding and goal for 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.
	+ Move towards all federal, state and local government websites being compliant with the latest accessibility standards (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines - WCAG 2.1).

# 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 daily life.

*The COVID-19 pandemic has not only accelerated the digitisation of our daily life, but has moved it from a convenience to a necessity.*

While people are benefitting from the increased role technology is playing in society and during the pandemic, many Australians are digitally excluded, lacking affordable connectivity, the knowledge or the hardware to utilise technology.

Some of the most digitally excluded are seniors, people who live in rural and remote Australia, people with a disability and people vulnerable across income and employment. This makes it difficult to use digital services, stay socially connected in a time of physical distancing and put their best foot forward for employment opportunities.

Prior to the pandemic, vulnerable Australians were being digitally excluded from the economy, society and the workforce. 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 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

Being **digitally included** means:

* A person has **affordable** **access** to high-quality internet, and owns appropriate devices to utilise the internet.
* A person can use the internet in an **accessible** way, whether they are living with disability, from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, or with other needs.
* A person has the **ability**, skills and confidence to complete tasks on and benefit from the internet.

Digital inclusion is 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, skills and accessibility measures 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)[[1]](#endnote-1) 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 changes in how Australia is performing over time.[[2]](#endnote-2)

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

* Whilst there are improvements in digital inclusion 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.
* Digital inclusion is higher in capital cities compared to rural areas throughout Australia, with the gap between capital and country areas apparent across all measurements. The NBN is helping connectivity in rural Australia, however affordability and ability are still lagging behind, and the variability between states is high.
* 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 different cohorts in Australia currently stand in regards to digital inclusion, and also highlights where the most work needs to be done. With the economy and society digitising rapidly, it is vital Australia uses these findings to increase the digital inclusion of at-risk groups, ensuring they are not left behind.

# 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 ADIA is supported by Infoxchange and backed by Australia Post, 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 and 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 programs and initiatives to increase digital inclusion. Some are national, some are targeted at particular demographics, some are short-term, some are online, some are group-based. In totality, they lack coordination and there is not 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 65 programs, frameworks and strategies:

* 37 Government Initiatives
* 28 Private and Community Sector Programs

Every initiative targets a different group of Australians. A breakdown of some of the target groups is:

* 16 programs and initiatives specifically for youth, students or the education sector
* 11 initiatives focusing on specific workforces (eg - health care workers, miners, defence personnel)
* 7 programs or initiatives targeting rural and remote Australians
* 6 programs dedicated to Indigenous Australians
* 5 programs focused on older Australians
* 5 programs dedicated to small businesses
* 4 programs for low income Australians
* 2 programs focused on migrants in Australia

Many of the programs are not targeted to the people who the ADII identify as the least digitally included - low-income households, seniors, mobile-only users, people who live in rural and remote Australia, people with a disability and Australians who did not finish secondary school.

Also, many of these digitally excluded cohorts overlap - for example many seniors only use mobile devices and many remote Australians are in low-income households. Having a full understanding of the landscape of digital inclusion programs will allow for better targeting of programs as well as better curated curriculum for the people who identify with multiple digitally excluded cohorts.

There are 11 frameworks and strategies focused on specific workforces, all written without 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. A clear, common focus would have a substantial impact on the efficacy of the programs while still supporting approaches tailored to different needs.

From a consumer perspective, this situation is confusing and hard to navigate. It is difficult to identify what programs are available, who is eligible and how to take advantage of opportunities to learn and upskill. This also applies to products and services that might support the access and affordability of online participation.

Currently, the scattered approach to improving digital inclusion is not providing as much of an impact as it could with greater coordination. Providing a central strategy would 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. In order not to see the impacts of digital exclusion significantly exacerbated, Australia needs an overarching strategy, so that Australian businesses, nonprofits 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) - that would be led by a single government department.

The Roadmap would be delivered across three crucial pillars of digital inclusion - 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 the latest accessibility standards (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines - WCAG 2.1).

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

# Overview: National Digital Inclusion Roadmap

## Affordability

* *Addressing availability and affordability of internet services*
* Access to devices and the internet
* Removing cost as a prohibitive barrier

## Ability

* *Ensuring everyone has the capabilities and confidence to benefit from and complete activities on 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

## Accessibility

* *Allowing everyone to use the internet including those living with disability, from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, or with other needs*
* Ensuring websites are compliant with the latest 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 that enable the government, private sector and community organisations to effectively collaborate.
* Create a Digital Capabilities Framework to provide a common understanding of what it means to be a digitally capable individual.
* Implement 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.
* 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.

# National Digital Inclusion Roadmap

## Affordability

The Roadmap should establish initiatives to address affordability - removing cost as a prohibitive barrier when accessing internet services and devices. Without affordable internet access and appropriate devices, 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.

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 option from the NBN. See ACCAN’s ‘No Australian Left Offline’ initiative:<https://accan.org.au/no-australian-left-offline>
* 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 ability - ensuring everyone has the capabilities and confidence to benefit from and complete activities on the internet. The capabilities necessary are essential and basic skills that will enable people to navigate the digital world, such as using email, setting up online accounts, keeping passwords secure and utilising online services like banking, shopping and completing government forms. Also, as Australian businesses adapt to a world with COVID-19, employees must be digitally capable to support a digitally transformed business.

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.

Initiatives the Roadmap could implement to address digital capability include:

* 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.

Looking at the proposed National Digital Capabilities Framework in more detail:

* 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.
* The Framework would be a guideline - not regulatory in nature. It would articulate a common language and shared understanding of what it means to be digitally capable.
* The Framework would define 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.
* The Framework would act as the basis upon which to examine the range of capabilities that training programs currently cover; addressed to which audiences. It would enable identification of gaps and overlap to support efficient and effective expenditure of combined resources to give every Australian the best chance of having the digital capabilities necessary to be digitally included.
* The Framework would inform measurement of digital capabilities of Australians to enable tracking of a common understanding of progress against a core set of capabilities.
* In terms of developing the Framework - 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 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 Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment which is piloting the inclusion of essential digital skills in the [Australian Core Skills](https://docs.employment.gov.au/documents/digital-literacy-skills-framework) [Framework](https://docs.employment.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/acsf_document_01-05-2019.pdf) (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. Having said that, the ACSF could be a valuable starting point for creating a more widely relevant National Digital Capabilities Framework.

## 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 progress towards achieving accessibility, the government should:

* Move towards all federal, state and local government websites being compliant with the latest 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.

# 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. With a Roadmap, government, private sector and community organisations can work towards shared goals, base programs on a common 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.

**Endnotes**

1. [Australian Digital Inclusion Index](https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2019_Final_web_.pdf) (2019) page 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Note that the ADII is currently being revised with the new version to be released later in 2020. The current ADII’s methodology can be found here: [Australian Digital Inclusion Index](https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2019_Final_web_.pdf) (2019) page 50-51. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)