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National Indigenous Australians Agency
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QUT Digital Media Research Centre submission in response to the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan Discussion Paper

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We are researchers in the [Digital Inclusion and Participation](#) program of QUT's Digital Media Research Centre. The DMRC is a global leader in digital humanities and social science research with a focus on communication, media, and the law.

Executive summary

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan. First and foremost, we wish to emphasise that **Indigenous voices must be centred at all stages** of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan. Based on our research, we also recommend:

- Improving affordability of digital products and services, including broadband connections, for Indigenous peoples. This could include, for example, incentivising the development of home broadband and mobile plans tailored to the specific digital needs of Indigenous communities.
- Improving access to digital products and services for Indigenous peoples, including by improving affordability and reliability of home broadband connections, for example.
- Introducing targeted, culturally appropriate programs to improve digital skills in Indigenous communities, centred on the specific needs and wants of each community. These programs could be embedded in or supported by existing social infrastructure, including community organisations and public libraries.
- Improving the collection of data about Indigenous digital inclusion, particularly in remote Indigenous communities.
- Investing in research, led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, into digital inclusion in both urban and remote Indigenous communities.

Indigenous voices

Indigenous voices must be centred at all stages of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan. This is not only a matter of sound public policy development on matters affecting Indigenous Australians, it is also a critical threshold determinant of the success of the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan itself. Without this central involvement of Indigenous peoples in every aspect of its operation, the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan would be at risk of being incomplete, ill-informed, ineffective and irrelevant. Therefore the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan must incorporate clear opportunities for ongoing leadership, co-design, research, and other engagement regarding the best way forward by Indigenous peoples. This requires open and transparent access to culturally appropriate consultation processes, throughout the entire process, including open invitations to roundtables. These consultation processes must centre Indigenous research, incorporate Indigenous principles and practices, ways of being doing and knowing and, importantly, Indigenous peoples' lived experiences accessing digital technologies.

It is also important to recognise that Indigenous communities are extremely diverse. Findings from one Indigenous community will not necessarily reflect the experiences of people in another community, and digital inclusion initiatives must be place-based

and take into account the specific wants and needs of each community.¹ The national Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan must recognise these place-based differences. Further, while remote Indigenous communities face significant and unique digital inclusion barriers, the majority of Indigenous people do not live in remote communities. The Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan must acknowledge and address regional differences in digital inclusion, and include the large Indigenous communities living in urban locations.

Affordability

Affordability is a significant contributor to low levels of digital inclusion for Indigenous peoples,² and addressing affordability issues should be a key priority of the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan. Indigenous people are more likely to be mobile-only users and to use prepaid services.³ Mobile and prepaid services are significantly more expensive and include less data than fixed connection and post-paid services, meaning Indigenous people tend to get less value for their money. Research suggests that the decision to use mobile and prepaid services is influenced by cultural practices, including 'demand sharing',⁴ and preferences for options that enable more direct expenditure management.⁵ Digital inclusion initiatives should seek to improve affordability of products and services that suit these specific needs.

Current market-based approaches to the provision of telecommunications services are failing Indigenous communities, and a new, public good approach is required.⁶ One option for improving affordability is to incentivise telecommunications companies to

¹ See, e.g., the differences between the 14 local government areas in Hurriyet Babacan, Jennifer McHugh, Amber Marshall, Narayan Gopalkrishnan and Allan Dale. (2021). *TCICA Region Telecommunications and Digital Connectivity: Final Report*. <https://tcica.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/tcica-digital-connectivity-strategy.pdf>.

² Julian Thomas, Jo Barraket, Chris Wilson, Indigo Holcombe-James, Jenny Kennedy, Ellie Rennie, Scott Ewing and Trent MacDonald. (2020). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020*, pp. 7, 19. https://h3e6r2c4.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TLS_ADII_Report-2020_WebU.pdf; Julian Thomas, Jo Barraket, Chris Wilson, Ellie Rennie, Scott Ewing and Trent MacDonald. (2019). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019*, p. 17. https://h3e6r2c4.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TLS_ADII_Report-2019_Final_web_.pdf; Julian Thomas, Jo Barraket, Chris Wilson, Kay Cook, Yee Man Louie, Indigo Holcombe-James, Scott Ewing and Trent MacDonald. (2018). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2018*, pp. 6, 15. <https://h3e6r2c4.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Australian-digital-inclusion-index-2018.pdf>.

³ Julian Thomas, Jo Barraket, Chris Wilson, Indigo Holcombe-James, Jenny Kennedy, Ellie Rennie, Scott Ewing and Trent MacDonald. (2020). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020*, p. 19. https://h3e6r2c4.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TLS_ADII_Report-2020_WebU.pdf.

⁴ Amber Marshall, Michael Dezuanni, Kimberley Wockner, Hurriyet Babacan, Jean Burgess, Fran Crawford, Marcus Foth, Robin Gregory, Peta Mitchell, Tim Neale, Steve Rogers and Ruth Wallace. (2019). *Northern Australia Communications Analysis: Directions Paper*, p. 49. <https://crcna.com.au/resources/publications/northern-australia-communications-analysis>.

⁵ Julian Thomas, Jo Barraket, Chris Wilson, Indigo Holcombe-James, Jenny Kennedy, Ellie Rennie, Scott Ewing and Trent MacDonald. (2020). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020*, p. 25. . https://h3e6r2c4.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TLS_ADII_Report-2020_WebU.pdf.

⁶ Hurriyet Babacan, Jennifer McHugh, Amber Marshall, Narayan Gopalkrishnan and Allan Dale. (2021). *TCICA Region Telecommunications and Digital Connectivity: Final Report*, p. 71. <https://tcica.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/tcica-digital-connectivity-strategy.pdf>.

develop tailored mobile plans to suit the specific, varied needs of Indigenous communities.⁷ Another option to explore further is the introduction of alternative, community owned service providers.⁸

Access

Access issues also contribute to lower levels of digital inclusion for Indigenous peoples.⁹ In particular, Indigenous peoples' disproportionate use of prepaid services creates access issues because people drift in and out of service between different service periods. Similarly, Indigenous peoples' increased reliance on mobile plans creates access issues because these plans generally provide smaller data allowances, and mobile connectivity is inconsistent and unreliable in many communities. It is also important to draw a distinction between a complete lack of service and under-service. For example, most Indigenous people might technically have access to the internet, but this access could be hindered by over-crowding at peak times.¹⁰ In regional and remote areas, access is also hindered by service outages and insufficient technical support from telecommunications companies.

Strategies for improving access for Indigenous peoples could include providing unmetered access to key online services, and incentivising telecommunications companies to place experts in regional and remote areas to provide timely support.¹¹

Digital ability

Overall, Indigenous people tend to have lower levels of digital ability, but this varies by location. For example, case studies of Pormpuraaw and Ali Curung, two remote Indigenous communities, found that Indigenous people in these communities had

⁷ Hurriyet Babacan, Jennifer McHugh, Amber Marshall, Narayan Gopalkrishnan and Allan Dale. (2021). *TCICA Region Telecommunications and Digital Connectivity: Final Report*, p. 63. <https://tcica.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/tcica-digital-connectivity-strategy.pdf>; Amber Marshall, Michael Dezuanni, Kimberley Wockner, Hurriyet Babacan, Jean Burgess, Fran Crawford, Marcus Foth, Robin Gregory, Peta Mitchell, Tim Neale, Steve Rogers and Ruth Wallace. (2019). *Northern Australia Communications Analysis: Directions Paper*, p. x. <https://crcna.com.au/resources/publications/northern-australia-communications-analysis>.

⁸ Hurriyet Babacan, Jennifer McHugh, Amber Marshall, Narayan Gopalkrishnan and Allan Dale. (2021). *TCICA Region Telecommunications and Digital Connectivity: Final Report*, p. 67. <https://tcica.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/tcica-digital-connectivity-strategy.pdf>.

⁹ Julian Thomas, Jo Barraket, Chris Wilson, Indigo Holcombe-James, Jenny Kennedy, Ellie Rennie, Scott Ewing and Trent MacDonald. (2020). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020*, p. 19. https://h3e6r2c4.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TLS_ADII_Report-2020_WebU.pdf; Julian Thomas, Jo Barraket, Chris Wilson, Ellie Rennie, Scott Ewing and Trent MacDonald. (2019). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019*, p. 17. https://h3e6r2c4.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TLS_ADII_Report-2019_Final_web_.pdf.

¹⁰ Amber Marshall, Michael Dezuanni, Kimberley Wockner, Hurriyet Babacan, Jean Burgess, Fran Crawford, Marcus Foth, Robin Gregory, Peta Mitchell, Tim Neale, Steve Rogers and Ruth Wallace. (2019). *Northern Australia Communications Analysis: Directions Paper*, p. 25. <https://crcna.com.au/resources/publications/northern-australia-communications-analysis>.

¹¹ Amber Marshall, Michael Dezuanni, Kimberley Wockner, Hurriyet Babacan, Jean Burgess, Fran Crawford, Marcus Foth, Robin Gregory, Peta Mitchell, Tim Neale, Steve Rogers and Ruth Wallace. (2019). *Northern Australia Communications Analysis: Directions Paper*, pp. 44, 52. <https://crcna.com.au/resources/publications/northern-australia-communications-analysis>.

higher levels of digital ability than the average Australian, because of their increased reliance on digital technologies for social and economic connection.¹²

Programs aimed at improving Indigenous peoples' digital ability must be culturally appropriate, tailored to the wants and needs of each community, and led by Indigenous people. These programs could be embedded in or supported by existing social infrastructure, including community organisations and public libraries.

Data and research

There is a lack of data relating to the digital inclusion of Indigenous peoples. For example, the most recent Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) does not include scores for Indigenous people, because its sample does not provide enough Indigenous respondents to produce reliable data.¹³ Although the ADII has included scores for Indigenous people in previous years, these scores relate to Indigenous people living in urban and regional areas only, and do not represent remote Indigenous communities.

The Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan should include funding for further, place-based research, led by Indigenous people, into Indigenous peoples' lived experiences of digital inclusion. Indigenous research that centres the voices of Indigenous peoples, is developed in consultation with communities, and that is led by Indigenous researchers is key to understanding the impact of digital inclusion on Indigenous communities across Australia.

¹² Julian Thomas, Jo Barraket, Chris Wilson, Ellie Rennie, Scott Ewing and Trent MacDonald. (2019). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019*, p. 25.

https://h3e6r2c4.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TLS_ADII_Report-2019_Final_web_.pdf; Julian Thomas, Jo Barraket, Chris Wilson, Kay Cook, Yee Man Louie, Indigo Holcombe-James, Scott Ewing and Trent MacDonald. (2018). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2018*, p. 19. <https://h3e6r2c4.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Australian-digital-inclusion-index-2018.pdf>.

¹³ 'First Nations', *Australian Digital Inclusion Index*. <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/first-nations/>.