# Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan

**National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)**

October 2021

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# Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission in response to the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan Discussion Paper (from herein, 'NIAA Discussion Paper').

We first wish to position ourselves as non-Indigenous scholars; in making this submission, we draw on our respective research areas, including research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (from herein, 'Indigenous') partners, but certainly do not seek to speak on behalf of or displace the voices of Indigenous peoples and communities.

This submission aims to draw further attention to interlinkages between the NIAA's policy work around digital inclusion and the rollout of social policies (including by the NIAA and Department of Education, Skills and Employment [DESE]) that affect as well as demand digital inclusion, and which disproportionately impact Indigenous peoples and communities. We also seek to draw greater attention to the importance of Indigenous data sovereignty regarding the NIAA's call for further data on Indigenous digital inclusion — something that the NIAA Discussion Paper does not address.

As the scope of the NIAA's Digital Inclusion Plan is regional and remote Australia, our predominant focus here is on the impacts of social policies in these areas. However, we also acknowledge that some of the policies we refer to operate Australia wide and thus also affect those living in urban areas.

This submission was written by researchers in the School of Social Science and the Centre for Policy Futures at the University of Queensland.

# Summary and recommendations

The content of this policy submission relates to our research on digital inclusion, social welfare, and social policy in Australia. Our key arguments and associated recommendations are summarised below.

1. **Impact of social policy on digital affordability.**
   We consider the impacts of social policy upon access/affordability to/of digital technologies, including: i) very low base rates of social security unemployment allowance, ii) the inadequate Remote Area Allowance rate, and iii) impacts of the Community Development Program (now outgoing) in remote Australia. We argue that increasing household incomes in remote Australia via more generous social policies would not only reduce material poverty but would also assist in lessening affordability barriers to digital inclusion.
   **Recommendation 1:** Discussions around removing affordability barriers for digital inclusion must address the social policy landscape in remote Australia, which contributes to unaffordability of basic goods and services, including digital technologies.

2. **Digital inclusion must not erode other rights.**
   We discuss how a blinkered focus on digital inclusion has potential to erode other rights, including the right: i) to self-determination, and ii) to access social security. Digital inclusion efforts must be grounded in a deep respect for self-determination, including the right to choose *if* and *how* individuals and communities engage with digital technologies. Indeed, even though digital inclusion offers potential benefits, it also carries several risks and is not a panacea for positive social outcomes. The right to self-determine one's own level of digital engagement is, however, eroded where access to other rights, like social security, become *dependent* on digital inclusion/engagement. We consider DESE's New Employment Services Model (NESM), which represents one aspect of broader moves towards digital social security administration, as an example.
   **Recommendation 2:** The NIAA should ensure that digital inclusion efforts are grounded in self-determination, which respects the rights of people and communities to choose *whether* and *how* they digitally engage. In line with this, access to other rights (e.g., social security and healthcare services) should *not* be dependent on digital engagement.

3. **Data regarding digital inclusion/exclusion.**
   We agree with the NIAA that there is a need to pursue disaggregated digital inclusion data (e.g., across urban, regional, remote, very remote areas), and note the importance of establishing a clear plan and timeframe for doing so. We also draw attention to the importance of recognising and upholding Indigenous data sovereignty, as well as considering how data might be collected/collated/owned at the local (e.g., community) level in ways that might also create waged employment in remote areas — a strategy that would align with Closing the Gap objectives around employment and economic participation.
   **Recommendation 3:** The NIAA (and others) should consider how data regarding digital inclusion/exclusion might be collected in ways that (at least):

   i) respond to and support Indigenous development agendas, rather than only servicing government requirements; and

   ii) uphold Indigenous data sovereignty, including by supporting Indigenous data collection and custodianship at the local (e.g., community) level, potentially through strategies that create waged employment around remote data collection/collation roles.

# Response to consultation questions

## Impact of social policy on digital affordability

As illustrated in the NIAA Discussion Paper, the affordability gap of Indigenous Australians is 6.9 points below the national average. The NIAA Discussion Paper states, "While coverage of telecommunications services and digital connectivity has improved, the access gap has widened" (p. 12). We contend that increasing rates of poverty in remote Australia, caused in part by poverty-inducing social policy, likely play a role in increasing/exacerbating affordability-related access barriers. This must, thereby, be central in deliberations about digital inclusion.

The basic costs of living in remote Australia are far higher than in regional and urban areas, affecting access to fundamental needs like food and shelter (SCIA 2020). For example, food costs are up to 40% higher in remote Australia (SCIA 2020). As the NIAA Discussion Paper points out, costs of accessing the internet in regional and remote Australia are also higher. Meanwhile, opportunities for a reasonable income in remote areas in particular are few and far between; there are very few paid jobs available, and many people have little choice but to turn to social security allowances and pensions (including unemployment allowance) as a primary source of income. In 2018−19, for example, social security benefits were a primary source of income for more than 38% of Indigenous peoples aged 15+ years in 'very remote' areas, and 32% in 'remote' areas (versus only ~18% in urban areas) (Markham 2020). Because Australia's main unemployment allowance — currently JobSeeker Payment, previously Newstart — is very low, this results in many people in remote Australia living below the poverty line.

Currently, a single person (without dependents) on JobSeeker Payment in remote Australia (that is, also including Remote Area Allowance and Energy Supplement) receives about ~$46 per day (Staines, Altman, Klein & Markham 2021). This includes the recent small increase in the JobSeeker Payment base rate after removal of the Covid Supplement, though even with this slight increase Australia places second lowest in the OECD on unemployment benefit generosity (Bradbury and Whiteford 2021). This income represents about 55% of the national poverty line, which was ~$83.02 per day in March 2021 (Melbourne Institute 2021). These low base rates of social security are a significant *cause* of poverty across the whole of Australia but are further exacerbated in *remote* Australia because of other overlapping remote-focused social policies, including the: i) Remote Area Allowance (RAA); and ii) Community Development Program (CDP) (now outgoing).

i)    The RAA is provided as an additional payment to those living in remote parts of the country to account for the relatively high costs of living there. However, the supplement is a mere $18.20 per fortnight ($1.30 per day) and has not increased in real terms for 20 years, being wholly inadequate to make up for the extra costs of living remotely. The Productivity Commission (2020) recently recommended that the Australian Government increase this rate to address cost-of-living disparities more realistically, but no changes have yet been made.

ii)   Punitive and strict mutual obligations that are attached to JobSeeker Payment in remote Australia reduce social security incomes even further. Introduced in 2015, the CDP 'welfare to work' scheme has a current caseload of ~40,000 people across remote Australia (~80% of whom are Indigenous) and has been directly connected to worsening poverty (Staines et al. 2021). Very high breaching and payment suspension rates under the CDP have reduced overall incomes in remote Australia by a further ~2.5% on average (Markham & Altman 2019), while many people have also dropped out of the social security system altogether because of the punitive nature of the Program (Winingali & Ipsos 2018; Staines & Smith 2021). When this

happens, people instead tend to rely on family and kin for survival, which further dilutes others' household budgets (Paterson 2016; Staines & Smith 2021; Winingali & Ipsos 2018).[1]

The CDP is now in the process of being wound up and a new 'Remote Engagement Program' co-designed/implemented in remote Australia by 2023 (Wyatt 2021; NIAA 2021). However, the current *Social Security Legislation Amendment (Remote Engagement Program) Bill 2021,* which is intended to facilitate co-design of the replacement program, prematurely (i.e., pre-co-design) only enables participating people/communities to access a maximum increase to social security incomes of $100─190 per fortnight, contingent on doing ~30─36 hours of fortnightly work. This would still leave individuals ~$323 below the national poverty line (Altman, Klein, Markham & Staines 2021). In essence, this Bill creates a situation where those who 'opt in' to receive the additional $100─190 per fortnight are being paid a mere $6.33 per hour for their ~30─36 hours of work,[2] which is not only impoverishing,[3] but is also less than the minimum wage (Altman et al. 2021). Thus, the restrictions set by this Bill mean that the CDP replacement program is also unlikely to alleviate poverty in remote Australia; to the contrary, it is more likely to keep people living below the poverty line.

The above policies combine to create a landscape that makes the chance of experiencing material poverty very high for many people in remote Australia; under this policy landscape, income poverty has worsened in remote Australia in recent years. Indeed:

- more than 50% of Indigenous peoples in very remote Australia continue to live below the national poverty line (Markham 2020);
- "Indigenous cash poverty rates in very remote areas rose from 46.9% in 2011 to 53.4% in 2016" as poverty rates in urban areas fell (Markham & Biddle 2016: iii); and
- median disposable equivalised incomes for Indigenous households in very remote areas decreased by $12 per week between 2011─2016, even though they increased by $57 per week in urban areas (Markham & Biddle 2016).

These high rates of poverty directly affect affordability and access to basic goods and services, all of which cost more than in regional/urban areas (as outlined earlier). This includes affordability of and access to digital technologies. Other research has also concluded that poverty is a key factor in producing digital divides, with the 'haves' being more likely to be digitally included and the 'have nots' being digitally excluded (Van Dijk 2005; Hunter & Raddoll 2020). Hunter and Raddoll (2020) recently showed, for example, that household income is important in mediating internet and ICT access for Indigenous Australians.

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[1] Other social security payment types are also subject to strict mutual obligations that can also exacerbate hardship, such as under the Australia-wide, DESE-administered ParentsNext Program, which it has been widely argued is punishing and harmful to those often already experiencing poverty and hardship (Hamer & Tranter 2021; Klein & Vincent 2020). In many parts of Australia, and particularly in remote Indigenous communities, these social policies are also often overlaid by forms of income management, via the (outgoing) BasicsCard and (continuing) Cashless Debit Card, both of which have also been found to be harmful and to increase poverty, including by locking social security recipients out of being able to use cash to access cheaper goods and services via fresh food markets and second-hand shopping (Marston et al. 2020).

[2] Since April 2020, due initially to the COVID pandemic, work-for-the dole mutual obligations under CDP were suspended. This means those who remain on CDP without 'opting in' to the Remote Engagement Program to receive the extra ≤$190 per fortnight, continue to receive the base JobSeeker benefit rate without doing the ~30-36 hours of work required of those who opt in.

[3] Even if the total $190 extra per fortnight was accessed, this would only bring individuals' incomes up to ~$59.60 per day, which is still only ~72% of the March 2021 national poverty line (Melbourne Institute 2021).

Practical strategies that can be implemented to alleviate poverty and associated digital affordability barriers, and facilitate the objectives of the Digital Inclusion Plan, include:

- creating a secure, unencumbered/unconditional economic floor as a starting point for reducing poverty and enhancing affordability of basic goods and services (as outlined by Staines et al. 2021); to facilitate the objectives of the Digital Inclusion Plan, this secure economic floor could be designed into the new Remote Engagement Program, due to replace the CDP in 2023.

- increasing the RAA to a rate that supports access to basic goods and services in remote Australia; internet affordability/access should be considered as a basic good/service and thus, taken into consideration under a revised RAA.

> **Recommendation 1:** Discussions around removing affordability barriers for digital inclusion must address the social policy landscape in remote Australia, which contributes to unaffordability of basic goods and services, including digital technologies.

## Digital inclusion must not erode other rights

As the NIAA Discussion Paper points out, digital inclusion is identified under Target 17 of the revised (2020) National Agreement on Closing the Gap, developed in partnership with the Coalition of Peaks. The revised Closing the Gap Agreement also recognises that respect of Indigenous self-determination is central to the kind of shared decision making sought by the parties to the Agreement (Closing the Gap Agreement, 2020: p.6). By extension, digital inclusion efforts should also be grounded in a deep respect for self-determination. Indeed, even though digital inclusion (i.e., by overcoming access, affordability and ability barriers) is a necessary prerequisite for enabling digital engagement, *whether* and/or *how* individuals or communities choose to digitally engage should be up to them.

There are myriad reasons people choose not to engage with digital technologies, even where they are technically digitally included (i.e., where access, affordability, and ability barriers are removed) (Hunter & Raddoll 2020). As the NIAA Discussion Paper points out, 'self-exclusion' "due to privacy concerns…" (p.11) as well as "concerns around cyber-safety and potential impacts on cultural and social cohesion" (p.17) are relevant for some. Assuring digital inclusion in remote communities requires a comprehensive understanding of cyber-safety, along with the risks and benefits that can arise through the uptake of internet services (Rennie et al. 2016). Digital spaces can also be host to the same prejudices as offline spaces, such as racism, sexism and other harms (Daniels 2012). Indeed, even though digital inclusion and engagement offer benefits, they are not necessarily a panacea for positive social outcomes. Despite this, digital inclusion and engagement are becoming increasingly necessary for enabling access to other rights, such as access to social security.[4] It continues to be the case that "The Australian Government is increasingly delivering key services online, including those relating to… social services" (NIAA Discussion Paper, p.5). DESE's NESM is one example of these broader moves towards digitising social security, which demands not only digital inclusion but also engagement.

The NESM is being rolled out in late 2022 across urban and regional Australia to replace the current Jobactive Program. It involves a far stronger emphasis on digital administration of social security payments, including 'jobseeker' self-management through digital service platforms and a "points-based

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[4] Article 9, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.*

activation system" for digitally tracking mutual obligations (DESE 2021; ACOSS 2021). However, this form of "digital dole parole" (Casey 2021) may threaten access to social security for those who experience barriers to digital access, affordability, and/or ability. This is particularly acute for Indigenous peoples, who experience the 'two-fold barrier' of higher digital exclusion as well as disproportionately high social security receipt (46% for Indigenous peoples versus about 21% for non-Indigenous peoples respectively in 2014–15) (Venn, Biddle & Sanders 2020). It is the case, therefore, that Indigenous Australians will continue to be disproportionately impacted by the digital transformations being implemented in social policy administration, including under the NESM. Navigating the increasingly complex social security system is already very difficult; the move towards digital administration has potential to further exacerbate barriers to access. Moreover, the push towards digitisation of social policy administration has been problematic in several ways, potentially worsening poverty and further marginalising already marginalised populations.[5]

The NESM rollout includes provisions to deliver extra support to digitally excluded individuals to ensure that they can continue to access social security. However, it will nevertheless be important for the NIAA and DESE to closely monitor whether digital transformations are creating barriers to individuals accessing social security. Moreover, serious and ongoing consideration should be given to the rights of individuals to *choose* to be digitally *disengaged* (as we extend on below), without losing their access to social security.

> **Recommendation 2:** **The NIAA should ensure that digital inclusion efforts are grounded in self-determination, which respects the rights of people and communities to choose *whether* and *how* they digitally engage. In line with this, access to other rights (e.g., social security and healthcare services) should *not* be dependent on digital engagement.**

## Data regarding digital inclusion/exclusion

As the NIAA Discussion Paper notes, access to information is an explicit target under the revised (2020) National Agreement on Closing the Gap, with rates of digital inclusion being used as an indicator against this measure. The NIAA Discussion Paper acknowledges that access is poorer in remote parts of Australia, which has also been demonstrated by Hunter and Raddoll (2020: 15), who used ABS Census data to track household internet connectivity between 2006 and 2016, and who concluded:

> Where a region is dominated by a city with more than 100,000 residents, the digital divide is less than 10 percentage points. As a region becomes more remote, the digital divide tends to increase… [with] the largest differential between Indigenous and non-Indigenous internet access [being] in Apatula [remote Northern Territory], where the digital divide is more than 50 percentage points.

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[5] Internationally, digital methods are also being increasingly used to survey and punish marginalised populations (Scott 1998; Eubanks 2018). The Australian Government's 'Online Compliance Intervention' (colloquially, 'Robodebt') is an apt example of how digitisation, when coupled with automation, can be incredibly harmful for those already experiencing social marginalisation (Park & Humphry 2019; Whiteford 2021). The use of big data under Australia and New Zealand's social investment strategies, which has coincided with demands for social security service providers to collect and deliver increasing volumes of service-user-data through government digital platforms, also raises important questions about how digital inclusion coincides with an ever-increasing thirst for (primarily quantitative) data to drive government policy and programming. Indeed, such data continue to be regularly used to construct "strikingly partial" stories about those receiving social security (Gilliom 2001: 19), while removing the ability of people to tell their own stories and define their own needs (Staines et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, data available via the Productivity Commission indicator does not disaggregate according to remoteness — something the NIAA Discussion Paper states should be ensured "Where possible" (p.19). Although the National Agreement on Closing the Gap also recognises this as an important area for future reporting against Target 17, there is no indication of *when* and *how* this change might be made. We agree with the NIAA that where data on digital inclusion are collected, they should be disaggregated according to remoteness, but suggest that the Australian Government should identify clear steps and a timeframe for ensuring this is achieved. This would facilitate the Digital Inclusion Plan as well as reporting against the Closing the Gap framework (Target 17).

Although disaggregated digital inclusion data would facilitate policy strategy, it is also still too often the case that "the collection of data on indigenous peoples is [still] viewed as primarily servicing government requirements rather than supporting indigenous peoples' development agendas" (Kukutai and Taylor 2016: 3). As Walter (2016: 80) points out, data collected by (predominantly) non-Indigenous peoples and government departments have regularly been used to socially construct the "statistical Indigene", who is seen through the lens of "disparity, deprivation, disadvantage, dysfunction and difference" ('5D data'). To counter this, widespread calls continue to be made for recognition/support of Indigenous data sovereignty (Kukutai and Taylor 2016), which highlights the importance of prioritising Indigenous ownership over Indigenous-focused data, as well to determine the purposes for which such data are used.

In line with the notion of Indigenous data sovereignty (but not explicitly mentioning it, nor promoting it), the Productivity Commission's (2020: 10) Indigenous Evaluation Strategy recognises, as an overarching principle, the importance of "centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, perspectives, priorities and knowledges" when looking to collect data for evaluation purposes. The Productivity Commission (2020: 11) notes that this should extend to, for example, supporting Indigenous evaluation capability and leadership, ensuring Indigenous peoples can decide for themselves how they wish to be involved in evaluative work, and making sure that "Evaluations are conducted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluators" where possible. Unfortunately, the NIAA Discussion Paper does not make mention of how Indigenous peoples are to be centred in the collection of data regarding digital inclusion, nor how these data might be collected in ways that support Indigenous data sovereignty.

> **Recommendation 3:** The NIAA (and others) should consider how data regarding digital inclusion/exclusion might be collected in ways that (at least):
>
> i)  respond to and support Indigenous development agendas, rather than only servicing government requirements; and
>
> ii) uphold Indigenous data sovereignty, including by supporting Indigenous data collection and custodianship at the local (e.g., community) level, potentially through strategies that create waged employment around remote data collection/collation roles.

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