Building Digital Inclusion – Why We Cannot Build 'Ability' Without Building 'Access'

The ability to access the online world and effectively, safely navigate that world has never been more important. Critical government and private services continue moving online, and digital skills are essential for employment and education opportunities, and for community connection.

Government funding for programs to increase levels of digital inclusion often focus on building digital ability, for instance, by supporting libraries and community centres to provide classes, or one-on-one mentoring and support.[1] However, while these services are important, and have assisted many community members to become and stay comfortable in the constantly-evolving online world, building digital ability can be very hard for community members whose online access, at home, is highly limited.

In 2023, as part of the *Keys To The Digital World: The Critical Role Of Regional Libraries And Community Centres In Building Digital Inclusion'* project, which explored the regional digital divide and the work of libraries and community centres to tackle this divide, SACOSS spoke to community members across regional SA who are digitally-excluded, and the organisations supporting them to go online.[2] A key theme was the ways that different forms of digital exclusion can intersect, and reinforce each other.

Rather than 'ability', 'access', and 'affordability', the three elements used to measure different levels of digital inclusion[3], being distinct components, in people's everyday lives, they deeply overlap. In particular, people who found it harder to go online at home, whether because of connectivity issues, or lack of suitable devices and data, due to being on a low income, tended to find it harder to become and stay digitally-able.

For instance, many regional community members felt discouraged from even attempting to go online because of poor connectivity:

> *"You cannot expect people to use the technology, when the available technology is barely adequate"* – Age Pensioner, Karoonda

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[1] For instance, the 'Be Connected' digital ability program for older people, funded by the federal government, and administered by the Good Things Foundation Australia, and at the state level, the 'Being Digital' skills program, funded, one-off, by the state government for the 2021-2022 state budget.

[2] Read the full report here:
https://www.sacoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/Keys_To_The_Digital_World_Final_Report.pdf

[3] The Australian Digital Inclusion Index predicts levels of digital inclusion across the community, with 100 representing the perfectly-digitally-included person. The latest Index produced a national digital inclusion score of 73.2, with SA having a score of 72, and regional SA, further behind, on 65.6.

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Some regional community members had limited access to data and suitable devices, for instance, because of financial hardship, particularly those relying on income support payments, and had to limit how much time they spent online, making it harder for them to build their digital capabilities:

"You chew up your data, which chews up your food budget" – Jobseeker, Peterborough

While anyone who could only afford a poor-quality device was likely to struggle to go online, and feel deterred from doing so, people who were mobile-only were particularly disadvantaged, with websites often poorly-designed for their smaller screens, and their online interactions often slower and more frustrating. And mobile-only users were aware that there were important skills they were missing out on developing:

"Been a long time since I've had the chance to use a computer…you forget, you deskill" – Jobseeker, Terowie

Put simply, the harder it is to get online, the less time you are able to spend online, the harder it will be for you to become and remain digitally confident and capable. Those with limited access to the digital world are being deprived of opportunities to build their familiarity with the digital world, and self-teach.

Community organisations that provide services to build digital skills report that clients' lack of access to data and devices, at home, can be a significant barrier to building ability. A survey by Good Things Foundation Australia of its partner organisations that provide training in the regions found that 74% thought their clients did not have access to data and devices at home, and that almost one-third (32%) felt their clients' ability to digitally-upskill was held back by lack of digital access in the home.[4]

But this is not simply a regional issue, though the impacts can be more severe, where there are few face-to-face services, meaning greater pressures to go online. We know that nationally, people who are mobile-only, and people who are lower-income, not only score lower, on digital access, but also perform worse, on digital ability.

People who are mobile-only score 45.2, on 'access', 26.8 points behind the national average (72), and score 53 on 'ability', 11.9 points behind the national average. While low-income people (people in the lowest quintile) score 57.3 on 'access' (14.9 point gap), and 49.4 on 'ability (15.4 point gap).

What does this mean for building digital inclusion?

Substantial investments are needed to reduce digital exclusion, with a focus on the most disadvantaged communities, such as regional areas, older people, and low-income people. But while programs to build digital confidence and skill are essential, these services need to

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[4] Good Things Foundation Australia, *Submission to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review*, 2021, pg. 18

be partnered with initiatives that address lack of online access at home.

While libraries and community centres provide access to free Wi-Fi, PCs, and other facilities, a critical service, this cannot be the sole solution to lack of online access in people's homes. People are often limited, with respect to how much time they can spend in libraries or community centres, may have difficulties physically accessing these facilities, or accessing these facilities during opening hours, and may need to do online tasks that are time-consuming, or require privacy or quiet.

Governments need to continue to address connectivity issues in regional areas, and explore ways of making telecommunications costs more affordable to people on lower incomes. But one way of tackling the compounding digital exclusion that comes from limited access to suitable devices and data is the loaning-out of devices (such as laptops) and data. In the UK, these programs have been shown to build digital ability, providing convenient, private opportunities for self-learning, in people's own homes.[5]

There are programs rolling-out devices and data for school children from low-income families, at both a federal and a state level, so there is a clear precedent, and it is time to expand these programs to adults experiencing digital disadvantage.

In SA, a few metropolitan libraries have rolled-out device-loaning, including Port Adelaide Enfield. Users have reported a sense of empowerment and convenience that came from having a functioning device that was not a mobile phone, and increased confidence and capability that came from greater exposure to online platforms:

"Big impact on confidence and skill, am always on the device, always searching, I am always learning" – Disability Pensioner

"Certainly gave me the confidence, I played around with the device, got familiar with it" – Age Pensioner

SACOSS is advocating for a significant, ongoing digital inclusion investment by the state government, part of which should include funding for libraries, community centres, and other organisations to loan-out (or potentially, donate) devices and data to people who have limited access to either, or both.

This funding should be sufficient to not only secure substantial numbers of devices, as well as purchasing data to be distributed, but to also ensure that library and community centre staff have the capacity to do the administrative work to manage and sustain device/data loaning services.

To learn more about SACOSS' advocacy on digital inclusion, visit sacoss.org.au.

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[5] Dixon, K., *Local communities and the internet ecosystem: Scaling solutions to data poverty in the UK*, prepared for Good Things Foundation UK, 2022, is an important exploration of different approaches to tackling data poverty (and device poverty), in the UK, particularly pgs. 31-36 ('WiFi in a Box'), and pgs. 42-45 ('SIM card distribution').