



Affordability continues to be a key barrier for improving digital inclusion in Australia

EMBARGOED until 1PM, Tuesday 17 September, 2019: Today the 2019 Australian Digital Inclusion Index report was released.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index is a comprehensive picture of Australians' online participation through three measures - access, affordability and digital ability. It looks at trends across demographics including age, geography, socio-economics, people with a disability and Indigenous Australians.

In the four years since the benchmark for measuring digital inclusion in Australia was launched, affordability is the area where significant improvements have not been made.

The high level key findings in the 2019 Index are:

- Access continues to improve – underpinned by the rollout of the NBN, this measure has seen the biggest improvement since benchmarking began.
- Digital ability marginally improved in 2019 and has been steadily improving since 2014 (when data was first collected). The 2019 Index findings show addressing digital ability isn't just about building skills but also increasing confidence in the use of different technologies.
- Affordability – although value for money spent on internet services continues to improve, the share of total household budgets spent on these services has increased in 2019. Despite the increasing availability of the NBN, the affordability gap between high and low-income households remains at the same level as in 2014. Improvements to affordability are unlikely in the absence of a lower cost NBN broadband product, or increase in household income for those in lower-income brackets.

Launching the 2019 Australian Digital Inclusion Index in Shepparton, Telstra Group Executive Legal and Corporate Affairs Carmel Mulhern said as more services are digitised, digital inclusion is more important than ever.

"Technology and connectivity are an essential part of staying in touch and there are still many of our community who are missing out on the vital benefits they need because they can't connect," she said.

"There are 800,000 Australians who don't have an email address, about 1.3 million households not connected to the internet, and one in 10 who don't have a smart phone.

"Our organisational purpose is to build a connected future so everyone can thrive. The word 'everyone' speaks to our core responsibility to help deliver the opportunity connectivity creates."

Among other findings in the 2019 Index was a deep dive into the digital inclusion of recently-arrived migrants in Shepparton. Shepparton is home to new migrants from countries as diverse as Afghanistan, Iraq and Sub-Saharan Africa. Insights were gleaned into the key challenges this group faces to be digitally included – affordability and low levels of English literacy.

Professor Julian Thomas from RMIT's Digital Ethnography Research Centre (and Lead researcher) said, "Digital inclusion is a complex and persistent problem. The Index provides a vital evidence base, which can help us develop positive strategies to ensure all Australians gain the benefits of the digital economy."

Professor Jo Barraket, Director of the Centre for Social Impact Swinburne said, "It's more than about having access to cheaper services. We know that until household incomes at the lower end improve, the notion of affordability of digital services remains out of reach for so many people in Australia. Until this happens we can expect the affordability gap to only worsen over time."

RMIT University's Digital Ethnography Research Centre and the Centre for Social Impact at Swinburne University develop and produce the Index in partnership with Telstra and Roy Morgan.

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Other key findings of the 2019 Australian Digital Index

- South Australia recorded the largest improvement in overall digital inclusion of all the states and territories.
 - In general, Australians with low levels of income, education, and employment are significantly less digitally included. There is consequently a substantial digital divide between richer and poorer Australians.
 - The gap between the most digitally included age group (people aged 25-34 years) and the least digitally included age group (people aged 65+) narrowed for the first time since 2014.
 - ADII Supplementary survey research conducted in the far north Queensland remote Indigenous community of Pormpuraaw and the central Australian remote Indigenous community of Ali Curung suggest digital inclusion for Indigenous Australians further diminishes with remoteness, particularly with regard to access and affordability.
 - Geography matters. The ADII reveals substantial differences between Australians living in rural and urban areas.
 - More than four million Australians access the internet solely through a mobile connection, often linked with socio economic factors including low income, unemployment and low levels of education.
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