

Future Skills Organisation

Submission to the Bridging the Digital
Divide: Digital Accessibility and
Inclusion consultation paper

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THE SMITH FAMILY

The Smith Family is a national charity which has supported Australian children and families experiencing disadvantage for more than a century. Our **vision** is a world where every child has the opportunity to change their future. Our **belief** is that education is one of the world's most powerful change agents and our **purpose** is to overcome educational inequality caused by poverty.

We take a place-based approach and are working in over 90 low SES communities across every state and territory. In FY23, The Smith Family supported more than **220,600** children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals nationally through our education-focused programs. This includes over 178,000 children and young people, of whom more than **62,800** accessed the **Learning for Life** educational scholarship. *Learning for Life* provides **long-term support** for children from low income families. Children start on the program in primary school and can remain on it through secondary school and potentially higher education.

A quarter of students on the program are from **Aboriginal** and/or Torres Strait Islander background. **39 percent** of *Learning for Life* students and 41 percent of primary carers have a **health** or **disability** issue. More than a third of students live in a household with **six or more** people.

INTRODUCTION

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide a short submission on the Consultation Paper. The context of our comments includes the:

- Key role digital inclusion plays in school and post-school **education**
- The **gap in digital capability** between children living in high and low SES families which is evidenced in NAPLAN.
- The significant proportion of low-income families who we support who are **not digitally included**.

Our organisational context includes our membership of the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance (ADIA) and of the Low Income and Digital Inclusion Forum (LIDIF), as well as being a referring organisation for the Australian Government's School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI). We also have a goal of ensuring that, over time, all of our *Learning for Life* students are digitally included.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL LITERACY

The OECD Learning Framework 2030 cites digital literacy as a core fundamental competency for future education.¹ The OECD's 2023 *Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People*, also gives particular attention to enabling young people to participate in an increasingly digitalised world. The OECD notes two particular dimensions relating to digital:

- Equipping young people with digital skills and problem-solving skills for the digital environment.

¹ OECD 2018 *The Future of Education and Skills 2030* <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/future-of-education-and-skills-2030.html>

- Empowering young people to engage safely, healthily and responsibly in the digital environment.²

DIGITAL SKILLS OF YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

Participation in school (and tertiary) education in Australia today now pre-suppose access to technology and the development over time of the skills required to safely and effectively use this technology. The most recent ICT NAPLAN data for students in Years 6 or 10³ (2022) shows the extent of the challenge to ensure young Australians have “the ability to use ICT appropriately and safely to access, manage and evaluate information; develop new understandings; apply computational, design and systems thinking to create solutions; communicate and collaborate with others; and engage productively with emerging and future technologies”.

In 2022, **55%** of Year 6 students attained their year level ICT proficiency standard as did **46%** of Year 10 students. So for Australian students generally, only **around half are meeting the relevant ICT standard**. This is not setting them up for participation in a range of education, post-school employment and broader civic engagement. This data highlights a much earlier challenge to the potential “supply pipeline” than the Consultation Paper acknowledges.

When the NAPLAN ICT data is analysed by the socio-economic background of students an even more challenging picture emerges. In Year 6, **40%** of low SES students attained their year level ICT proficiency standard, compared to 68% from high SES backgrounds. In Year 10, the figures are **28%** and 60% respectively.

In order to achieve the intent of the Consultation Paper and the work of the FSO in this space, The Smith Family believes that greater consideration needs to be given to how more low SES students can be supported to be digitally included. By way of example, of the school-aged students on *Learning for Life*, all of whom are living in low income families, **30% do not** have a laptop or tablet that is connected to the internet at home. For students in high school, the figure is **20%**. This means significant numbers of children and young people are at risk of not being able to participate in education and develop the digital skills they need to pursue post-secondary education and a range of careers or to access a range of services.

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT INCREASED DIGITAL INCLUSION FOR YOUNG AUSTRALIANS AND LOW INCOME FAMILIES

As noted above, The Smith Family has a goal of ensuring all students on *Learning for Life* are digitally included and we are working in partnership with a range of Government, non-Government, philanthropic and business organisations to realise this goal. Such cross-sectoral partnerships are essential if ‘Bridging the Digital Divide’ is to be achieved.

In FY24 our work in this space included:

- Providing over 3,774 digital devices to *Learning for Life* students
- Supporting over 34,000 participants through Donate Your Data (Optus Prepaid service with data, calls and text, through Donate Your Data (DYD).
- Over 1,134 connections through the School Student Broadband Initiative.
- Around 4,600 instances of IT technical support provided.

² OECD 2023 *Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People*
<https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0474>

³ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2023), NAP–ICT Literacy 2022 Public Report, ACARA, Sydney.

Given our experience delivering the above, including a major partnership with Work Ventures to help provide devices to *Learning for Life* students, we are very supportive of:

- ADIA's position that incentivising device re-use within both the Government and corporate sectors offers significant opportunities to address the challenge of digital exclusion experienced by many young people living in low-income families. This would also bring significant environmental benefits.
- WorkVentures' call for a national strategy on devices, including a National Device Bank.
- A sustainable ongoing solution for the SSBI which targets low income families with school aged students. This could include a low cost broadband offer to support more Australians to access the internet. We support the No Australian Left Offline initiative, which calls for a 50 mbps service for \$30 month to be available for households receiving income support.

Given the significant digital challenge facing Australia and while noting the range of initiatives underway that are noted in the Consultation Paper, The Smith Family believes the above recommendations are required to make greater and more rapid progress on enhancing digital inclusion for low-income children, young people and families. This in turn will have flow on effects to the supply pipeline that the Consultation Paper notes.