



**Good Things Foundation Australia
Pre-Budget Submission 2021/22**

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the digital divide in this country which, without urgent action, is at risk of becoming even wider. A digitally included country is one where all citizens can participate in the rapidly transforming digital economy, find and maintain work, maintain social connections, access online government and health services, and find reliable information, even in times of crisis. To support our communities to recover from the pandemic and become digitally resilient participants of the digital economy, this Federal Budget the Australian Government must:

1. **Provide funding for community-based essential digital skills programs to ensure all Australian adults are work-ready for the new economy.** Particular focus needs to be given to supporting women re-entering the workforce, small business owners, people with disability, Indigenous Australians and CALD communities.
2. **Extend community education programs so all Australians have the skills to adopt telehealth and digital health initiatives.** Community-based digital health literacy programs have supported people during the pandemic to manage their health and wellbeing using tools like My Health Record, and find reliable information online. As the health landscape rapidly transforms, more support is needed to maximise uptake of telehealth and government health initiatives.
3. **Establish digital media literacy programs targeting adults with low digital capability to reduce online harms and prepare for emergencies.** Locally delivered but nationally coordinated community education programs are needed to support vulnerable adults to safely navigate the online world, find reliable information (particularly in a crisis) and understand how to report harms and keep their families safe online.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a rapid increase in digitisation in all aspects of our society. Transitioning to a digital economy has been recognised by both Federal and State Governments as key to our nation's economic recovery from the impact of COVID-19.¹ Never before has it been so important for everyone to be digitally capable, confident and safe online.

The pandemic and associated lockdowns saw rapid digital transformation of many workplaces and essential services. During the national lockdown, Australian adults increased their internet usage, seeing it as essential for paying bills, shopping, accessing news and information, staying in touch with loved ones, working and entertainment.²

However, over 2.5 million Australians are not online,³ with even more having limited digital skills and confidence, putting them at extreme risk of being left behind as our economy transforms. Less than 40% of Australians feel that they can keep up with the rapid changes in technology our society is experiencing.⁴

Being digitally excluded means not having the access or ability to connect safely and confidently to the internet in an affordable way. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) identifies the people across Australia who are more likely to experience digital exclusion as being:

- Older Australians
- People on lower incomes
- People with lower levels of education
- Indigenous Australians
- People who have a mobile-only connection
- People with disability
- People out of the workforce
- People living in rural areas.⁵

[See our Digital Nation Australia 2020 resource here](#) for more insights on who is most likely to be left behind.

With the impact of COVID-19, many more are at risk of falling into the digital divide. Unemployment and underemployment rates have risen,⁶ seeing more people out of the workforce while the pandemic-led digital revolution is taking place. Even while facing

¹<https://www.industry.gov.au/news-media/national-meeting-of-digital-economy-and-technology-ministers-communique-may-2020>

² <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/Covid-19-impact-on-Australian-adults-online-report.pdf>

³ https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2020_WebU.pdf

⁴ https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2020_WebU.pdf

⁵ https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2020_WebU.pdf

⁶ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/latest-release>, December 2020

disruption themselves, community organisations who provide digital skills programs have provided even more support to their communities, with many rapidly transitioning to remote delivery models for digital skills services.⁷ But, these community organisations cannot deliver digital skills programs without support. A third of community sector leaders recently identified that their organisation's financial position had worsened during the pandemic.⁸ Further, 92% of Be Connected Network members said that the small grant funding available through that program enabled them to offer digital skills support to the target audience (over 50's).

We welcomed the recent extension of the Be Connected program by the Australian Government to continue supporting older Australians to gain basic digital skills through this community-education model, but more needs to be done to support those most vulnerable to being left behind.

Digital skills can deliver a fairer economy, a stronger society and better lives; but only if everyone has the support they need to keep up in the digital world. Building on the work of the Digital Technology Taskforce, Data and Digital Ministers Meeting and the focus on digital transformation across Government, the 2021/22 Federal Budget is an opportunity to support initiatives that ensure our communities are digitally able to access online government and health services, search for and apply for jobs and maintain employment and small businesses in a digitally transformed society as our country recovers. As a member of the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance, we also support [the call for a national digital capability framework](#) from which programmatic success can be measured. If we don't invest now, the digital divide is at risk of widening because of the impacts of the pandemic⁹ and Australia will not be able to take full advantage of the global transition to the digital economy.

Good Things Foundation Australia thanks the Australian Government for the opportunity to make this submission to the 2021/22 Federal Budget and recommends action on three priority digital capability areas:

1. **Work-ready skills programs for priority groups** including women re-entering the workforce, people with disability, small businesses, CALD communities and Indigenous Australians.
2. **Support adoption of telehealth and digital health initiatives** through extending nationally coordinated community-based education programs
3. **Improve digital media literacy for vulnerable adults** to reduce online harms and assist communities to find reliable information in a crisis.

⁷ <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org.au/research-publications/reinventing-digital-literacy-support-crisis>

⁸ https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Australias-community-sector-and-Covid-19_FINAL.pdf

⁹ <https://www.ceda.com.au/Digital-hub/Blogs/CFDA-Blog/April-2020/How-COVID-19-is-worsening-digital-inequality>

Essential, work-ready digital skills to maximise participation in the digital economy

Invest in a nationally coordinated, community-based work readiness digital upskilling program to reach priority groups at higher risk of being left behind.

The pandemic has seen millions of Australians newly out of work, working reduced hours, or on government income subsidies. Being out of the workforce or on low incomes puts people at higher risk of being on the wrong side of the digital divide,¹⁰ and this has the potential to be magnified in light of workplaces undertaking rapid digital transformation during the pandemic and transition to a digital economy.

Even before COVID-19 saw a rapid digitisation in workplaces, it was anticipated that by 2030 over 90% of jobs will need digital skills and 45% will need more advanced digital capabilities.¹¹

In this new operating environment, digital capabilities are needed to:

- Apply for jobs and get back into the workforce
- Maintain work through rapid technology changes
- Start or run small businesses in this new operating environment
- Undertake professional development activities to improve employability
- Access government support while transitioning into new work environments.

Priority Groups

While many people could benefit from this support, tailoring support towards people in several priority groups will see the most impact from digital upskilling initiatives.

Women are less digitally included than men in Australia,¹² and have been highly impacted by job losses due to the pandemic. Investing in improving digital capabilities is a key strategy to enabling women to return to work and fully participate in the digital economy.¹³ In addition to helping women back into the workforce in the short term, there is a need for women to improve their digital skills to maintain existing jobs and participate in growth industries such as aged care, healthcare, social services, disability support services, and education.¹⁴ Support should be targeted towards women with low or no digital skills, in low income families, who are unemployed, or in workplaces at risk of automation or newly requiring digital skills.

¹⁰ https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2019_Final_web_.pdf

¹¹ https://www.industry.gov.au/sites/default/files/May%202018/document/pdf/australia-2030-prosperity-through-innovation-full-report.pdf?acsf_files_redirect

¹² https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2020_WebU.pdf

¹³ <https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/economic-security/wess/repair-and-rebuild-womens-workforce-participation-and-further-close-gender-pay-gap>

¹⁴ <https://womensworkforceparticipation.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/towards-2025-strategy.pdf>

Australian small businesses have lagged behind medium and large enterprises in all measures of digital adoption.¹⁵ The recent crises have seen small businesses rapidly innovate, with 40% having changed business models in order to respond to the world around them.¹⁶ Small businesses need to undertake digital transformation to remain competitive, and improving digital capabilities in this sector will help them to maintain employment, and potentially expand.

People with disability aged 15-64 are twice as likely to be unemployed as those without a disability in Australia, and 1 in 10 are underemployed.¹⁷ 34% reported lacking the necessary skills or education as a barrier to finding work.¹⁸ People with disability are also more likely to be digitally excluded in Australia, with the ADII showing a significant gap in digital ability,¹⁹ and may need more tailored supports to gain the essential work-ready skills required.

Additionally, Indigenous Australians and CALD communities, particularly newly arrived migrants or refugees, could particularly benefit from community-based, culturally appropriate digital inclusion support to be work-ready as the economy transforms. The ADII shows that First Nations people have lower levels of digital ability and are more at risk of digital exclusion.²⁰ The work of organisations such as First Nations Media (inDigiMOB) and the National Centre for Indigenous Excellence has helped to identify the issues around the digital divide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and have begun to close the skills gap. Additional funding support for digital ability programs as part of the development and implementation of a national Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan (recommended by the 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review) would be beneficial. For newly arrived migrants and refugees in CALD communities, digital exclusion can have significant impacts on successful settlement in Australia, including their ability to find and maintain work or establish small businesses and participate in professional development and training opportunities. Trusted support in familiar community environments would assist to reduce the digital skills divide for this priority group and improve employment outcomes.

Supporting digital skills development

Online learning platforms such as the [Digital Skills Finder](#), [Regional Tech Hub](#) and [Good Things Learning](#) already exist to help people to digitally upskill for the workplace and small business, but many members of these priority groups may not have the access, skills or confidence to independently learn online. To support the uptake and implementation of the digital upskilling platforms available to these priority groups, a

¹⁵ <https://www.asbfeo.gov.au/sites/default/files/ASBFE0%20Small%20Business%20Counts%20Dec%202020%20v2.pdf>

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<https://www.asbfeo.gov.au/sites/default/files/ASBFE0%20Small%20Business%20Counts%20Dec%202020%20v2.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/employment>

¹⁸ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/dis/73-1/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents-1/employment/employment-participation-needs-and-challenges#Difficulty%20finding%20work>

¹⁹ https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2020_WebU.pdf

²⁰ https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2020_WebU.pdf

work-ready digital capability support program is required that is locally-run, community based, and nationally developed and coordinated.

As a world leader in delivering digital inclusion programs, we know that digital skills programs work when there is a combination of high-quality online learning resources with grant-funded, tailored support in local community settings. The Australian Government funded Be Connected program has tested this model and shown that it works, with our research indicating that **87% of learners are now confident or very confident to search the internet independently** as a result of participating in the program. The Productivity Commission recently identified that foundational work-ready digital literacy programs need to be delivered through channels like community adult education, in addition to school and VET providers, to reach those who would not engage in formal education.²¹ Additionally, our work in the UK has shown that the trust at-risk people have in the workforce of community organisations to provide sound advice and guidance makes them an effective delivery model to support them to build work ready digital skills.²²

Critical community-based infrastructure is already in place to rapidly scale and implement work-ready digital literacy programs to meet the demands of the COVID world and the priority groups identified. For example, within our own national network of 3,500 community organisations delivering digital skills programs, we know that 70% support people with disabilities to learn digital skills and 85% are interested in accessing additional resources and support to help them to do so. Additionally, 71% have connections with local businesses, with 20% already providing digital skills support to local businesses and employees.

With minimal additional investment, people in the identified priority groups can access free, digital skills support to ensure that everyone can equally get back into the workforce, upskill, access online services, and participate in the rapidly transforming digital economy as Australia recovers from the pandemic.

Recommendations

1. **Invest \$5.5m per year over 5 years** in a nationally coordinated, community-based support program to deliver the work-ready digital skills to find and maintain employment for women and small businesses.
 - a) \$1.5m per year to coordinate and capacity build a national network of digital mentors in community-based organisations, upskilled and resourced to deliver work-ready digital skills programs and design individual learning plans to women and small business owners and employees.

²¹<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/skills-workforce-agreement/report/skills-workforce-agreement-overview.pdf>

²² <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/research-publications/shocks-knocks-and-skill-building-blocks>

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- b) \$4 million per year in small grants for community organisations to support personalised digital mentoring and upskilling to these priority groups.
2. **Invest \$5.5m per year over 3 years** in a nationally coordinated, community-based support program to support people with disability to gain work-ready digital skills. This must include funding to support co-design of program delivery and accessible resources, small grants to support delivery through existing community-based organisation networks and train-the-trainer packages for digital mentors.
 3. Invest in a multi-year work-ready digital skills education program as part of an Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan focusing on supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to gain or maintain employment or small businesses, co-designed and run in partnership with indigenous owned and community-controlled organisations. This needs to build on the experience of organisations such as First Nations Media (inDigiMOB) and National Centre of Indigenous Excellence, with culturally appropriate learning resources, digital mentor upskilling, and small grant-funding for community-based delivery organisations.
 4. Invest in a pilot work-ready digital skills education program for CALD communities, focusing on newly arrived migrants and refugees, ensuring funding is available for appropriately translated and accessible materials, train-the-trainer activities for digital mentors, and small grant-funding for community-based delivery organisations.

Support adoption of telehealth and digital health initiatives

Invest in community education programs that support skills to access telehealth and digital health initiatives.

Significant advancements have been made in digital health during the pandemic. Telehealth - patients and medical professionals interacting via a digital device or phone - alone has seen a rapid rise in use, reaching over 10 million patients since March 2020.²³ However, by October, 92% of these telehealth consults occurred by telephone rather than through video conferencing, indicating a big opportunity to enhance ongoing uptake of new clinical service delivery models that support digital health ecosystems.²⁴

One of the most significant barriers facing the digital health agenda is how to engage those hardest-to-reach with low or no digital health literacy skills or confidence and introduce them to online health information and services. The digital divide is recognised as an issue impacting the uptake of digital health initiatives in both [Australia's National Digital Health Strategy](#) and the [National Digital Health Workforce and Education Roadmap](#).

Consumers particularly at-risk are people who have higher incidences of chronic health conditions or are at greater risk of mental health issues (such as older people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people living in rural and remote areas, and people with disability). Digitally upskilling at-risk consumers allows them to benefit from important government initiatives such as My Health Record and electronic prescribing, medicare funded telehealth appointments, access information through Health Direct or online mental health services such as Head to Health, access a range of online information and resources safely and understand if that information is reliable and trustworthy.

Good Things Foundation Australia's [Health My Way program](#), funded by the Australian Digital Health Agency, has been delivered through our Network in 75 communities across Australia during 2019-2021. This program has shown that despite the challenges of the pandemic, with funded, locally provided, tailored support, people at risk of digital exclusion can better participate in the digital health environment. After participating in our pilot program, **80% of people increased their digital health literacy skills and confidence**. Further, our experience working in the UK on the 'Widening Digital Participation Programme' using similar, co-designed placed-based models shows a **six-to-one return on investment** from digital health literacy initiatives, as well as improvements in people feeling less lonely and isolated.²⁵

From our recent work consulting with digital health and community experts through the *Expanding Digital Health* roundtable series in 2020, a joint initiative of Good Things

²³ <https://www.digitalhealth.gov.au/newsroom/media-releases/recent-media-releases/digital-health-skills-and-training-more-important>

²⁴ <https://coh.centre.uq.edu.au/telehealth-and-coronavirus-medicare-benefits-schedule-mbs-activity-australia>

²⁵ <https://digital-health-lab.org/>

Foundation and Australian National University, we heard the need for continued and expanded availability of digital health support which is community-led so that its tailored to the specific needs of the community and its most vulnerable populations. These programs must be co-designed and supported over sufficiently long periods of time to enable outcomes to be measured. Digital health technology is rapidly changing and ongoing support will be required to help at-risk consumers to keep up.

The thousands of community organisations already delivering digital skills support to their communities²⁶ are well-placed to nationally scale and deliver digital health literacy programs to at-risk Australians and vulnerable clients, but investment and support is required to enable this work to continue beyond June 2021.

Additionally, trialling and evaluating the introduction of a digital health support role embedded in general practice was a key recommendation of senior policy makers, researchers and other stakeholders across government research and community sector attending the *Expanding Digital Health* roundtable series. This role would support patients within the practice setting to book appointments online, use the practice's telehealth platform for consultations, use e-prescriptions, access their vaccination history online, access their My Health Record, use home monitoring equipment, digitally record their activity/steps and more. Consumer research indicates that support from clinicians may assist people to more readily adopt digital health tools.²⁷

Recommendations

1. **Invest \$3.5m per year for 3 years** to nationally scale digital health community education programs to consumers across 500 locations. These programs will build capability in accessing telehealth and digital health initiatives through community-based learning models. This must include:
 - a) \$1m per year to capacity build and coordinate a national network of community organisations that specialise in skills provision to deliver digital health literacy support. This would include upskilling community sector staff and volunteers on best practice digital health mentoring, creating mentoring resources, and developing up-to-date, quality online digital health learning content that can be delivered through blended face-to-face and remote delivery models.
 - b) \$2.5m per year in small grant-funding distributed nationally across 500 participating community organisations, enabling their program delivery.
2. **Invest \$1m over 12 months** in a pilot program to trial a new role in General Practice to help GPs better support their patients to manage their health and care using digital technology.

²⁶ <https://www.beconnectednetwork.org.au/be-connected-network/find-help-locally#/map>

²⁷ https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/PDF-135/Accenture-Health-Consumer-Survey-AUS-2020.pdf#zoom=40

Improve digital media literacy and online safety for vulnerable people

Invest in digital media literacy programs delivered through community organisations for adults with low awareness to reduce online harms and prepare for emergencies.

The combination of the recent Black Summer bushfires and COVID-19 pandemic has “provided fertile circumstances for the spread of false and misleading information, distributed with and without malicious intent.”²⁸ Yet, we know that misinformation causes real world harms, ranging from health and safety to electoral integrity.²⁹ The ACCC’s 2019 Digital Platforms Inquiry report recommended that the Australian Government establishes a community-based education program that develops resources and trains community organisations (including libraries, seniors centres and community centres) to upskill all Australians in identifying and scrutinising online news, building on the model of the Be Connected program.³⁰

The findings from the recent Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements highlighted the important role of community organisations in disasters and the need for national community education campaigns on finding reliable and timely information in preparing people ahead of emergency situations:

“Community education and engagement programs have an important role in educating and engaging communities. Governments, emergency service agencies and non-government organisations must continue to extend and use these programs to encourage disaster resilience within their communities and to provide accessible, accurate and authoritative information. This empowers people at all levels to become more self-reliant and better prepared.”³¹

Programs exist for children to build their digital media literacy, such as through schools, the ABC and the work of organisations like the Alannah and Madeline Foundation. Programs are now needed to target other vulnerable groups, such as adults who have low levels of digital skills.

The Online Safety Bill currently has amendments proposed to provide greater powers to the eSafety Commissioner to manage online harms. However, community-based education will still be needed to ensure people with low engagement with government campaigns understand the reporting mechanisms available to them. Parents play an important role in keeping children safe online, and research from the eSafety Commission shows that 95% of parents agree that they need additional information

²⁸<https://www.acma.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/Misinformation%20and%20news%20quality%20position%20paper.pdf>, pg 2.

²⁹<https://www.acma.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/Misinformation%20and%20news%20quality%20position%20paper.pdf>

³⁰ <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital%20platforms%20inquiry%20-%20final%20report.pdf>

³¹<https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/royal-commission-national-natural-disaster-arrangements-report>, p. 247

about online safety to support their children.³² In particular, low income families are one of the groups most at risk of experiencing digital exclusion, as seen with the barriers to access online schooling during the pandemic, so may need additional support.

Those who are most at risk of digital exclusion plus those with low levels of understanding of misinformation and online harms could benefit from tailored programs and supports. In order to reduce online harms for vulnerable groups, support online safety legislation, and help people with low digital media literacy skills to navigate and find reliable information that support their activities during times of crisis, an effective, funded community-education based approach is required.

Recommendations

1. **Invest \$1.5m** for a nationally coordinated, locally delivered emergency digital preparedness 18 month pilot program delivered through existing community infrastructure channels, including: small grant funding for community organisations hosting digital skills training and funding for a train-the-trainer program for digital mentors.
2. **Invest \$3m** in community-based education programs to upskill people with low digital literacy on reporting and managing online harms and finding reliable information online to reduce the unintentional spread of misinformation.

³² <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-07/eSafety%20Research%20Parenting%20Digital%20Age.pdf>

About Good Things Foundation Australia

Good Things Foundation Australia is a social change charity, helping people to improve their lives through digital. We work with partners in thousands of communities across Australia, the UK and Kenya.

In Australia, we have built, upskilled and manage the Australian Government funded [Be Connected Network](#) of 3,500 community partners and deliver the \$20 million grants program to support people over 50 to learn essential digital skills. 820,000 people have been engaged and supported by the Be Connected digital literacy program to date.

We coordinate the national digital inclusion campaign [Get Online Week](#) which last year supported 23,500 people through online and offline digital skills events. With the support of the Australian Digital Health Agency and our network of community organisations, we are assisting adults of all ages to improve their digital health literacy through our [Health My Way](#) program.

Good Things Foundation has run digital inclusion projects in the UK for over ten years through the 5,000 strong Online Centres Network and worked in Australia since 2017.

Learn more about our work: www.goodthingsfoundation.org.au

See our resources for community organisations: www.beconnectednetwork.org.au

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