Digital Media
Research Centre

Advancing Digital Inclusion in Low Income Australian Families

Interim Findings Report

October 2022

Background

Families living on low incomes are among the least digitally included Australians and are at greater risk of broader social exclusion than other Australians. Digital ability and digital inclusion have been linked to a range of social and economic benefits. Australians who have adequate, affordable access to digital technologies and the knowledge and skills to use them, have better outcomes across life spheres including education, work, finance, health, and wellbeing.

The Australian Research Council Linkage Project, "Advancing digital inclusion in low income Australian families" is running from 2021-2024, and focuses on the digital inclusion implications of children's home and school learning experiences, school leavers' transitions into work, and parenting in digital times.

The project is a collaboration with Queensland University of Technology, Western Sydney University, Swinburne University of Technology, RMIT University, Good Things Foundation, The Smith Family, yourtown, Infoxchange and the Digital Literacy Foundation and will develop new practices, policies and sector wide solutions for improving the digital inclusion of low-income families around Australia.

Our team of researchers are engaged in six communities around Australia, from North Queensland to Tasmania. We are working with 30 families to understand the ways they currently access and use technology. To date we've conducted interviews with families and the local organisations that support them in each community and have found that the challenges and opportunities for low-income families in each location are as varied as the families themselves and highlight the need for tailored place-based approaches to digital inclusion.

Key Findings

Theme 1: Data and device poverty

Three strands are emerging in this theme, highlighting the variation of experiences across low-income families. The first is that some families are making deliberate investments in technology at significant household cost. Parents in these families are acutely conscious of the need to ensure that their children enjoy the same digital access and opportunities as their peers. This is being balanced against cost-of-living pressures and budgets are managed carefully, including in relation to internet services, devices, subscription services and so on. Parents spoke of 'shopping around' for mobile phone plans, getting good deals

on new or second-hand devices and pausing streaming services according to finances or demand.

> "We saved up all year and got them iPads for Christmas. They need them. We don't want them to be left behind."

In some cases, technology purchases were new acquisitions in response to COVID lockdowns, and sometimes made hastily by households at the start of the pandemic. These were at times desperate decisions made to cope with what was happening. We have found that all families are making big sacrifices to sustain access to technology. The ongoing and one-off costs associated with acquiring and maintaining tech places a burden on families who often can't afford these purchases.

> "So, I have to find a way. At the present, there are two, three bills sitting there. There is one on the green slip, then rego check-up, and all these. So, I thought I can delay these things till December. Most important he should get his mobile fixed. Then I will do other bills, in December. … Then I have to think like yeah, I have to take two more additional jobs so that I can pay the bills, you know…"

The second group of families have devices, but they are often not suitable for the tasks required of them. For example, completing senior technology studies on an iPad instead of a PC or laptop, or completing homework tasks on a mobile phone.

> "When COVID first started, we had to do online education. I asked for the hard copy of what the teacher was setting out, but there were certain programs that we had to do online. The school had a record of what was being done and could see if she was getting it right or wrong. She would do that on my phone. And it was really hard, cause it's just a small phone and the keypad was really small, and just everything was really hard to use because it was a phone. Yeah, it was just really hard for her to see, to type. We really needed a tablet at least."

Another issue for families is that older devices are often in need of replacement or repair. Families often have iPads, phones, or laptops with problems like broken screens, missing chargers, or non-functioning batteries that they cannot afford to replace. Although families sometimes have plans to repair these devices, in the interim they turn to workarounds like children sharing working devices for schoolwork.

In addition to often having inappropriate devices, families often experience data poverty as they have inadequate data for their needs and there is a preference for pre-paid mobile plans. All families considered online connectivity to be essential (akin to housing and food), but the cost of connectivity took up a significant proportion of limited household income. Pre-paid mobile data plans, while more expensive, offer flexibility and mobility and are preferred by many families who do not want to invest in a fixed line connection. There are several intersecting barriers that prevent low-income families from investing in fixed line connections. Among these are housing instability, investing in hardware (routers, etc.) that may break, not wanting to enter into contracts, and not wanting an additional bill that has to be paid at the end of the month.

> "I'm really restrictive about data with my daughter as my older sons need it more"

Theme 2: Literacy

Intersecting literacy issues affect families' use of digital technologies. For parents, the ability to use digital technologies and the internet to navigate sites, apps, digital services and platforms connects with parents' functional literacy, and health and financial literacy and service navigation. Some parents expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to use technology, relying on children or other family members to problem solve and help with digital tasks.

> "No, I wouldn't know how, my son knows how to operate everything."

For parents with low literacy across more than one area, they often relied on family and face-to-face advice from service providers and professionals to assist with everyday digital tasks such as dealing with social services or school admin, and this is problematic when services are increasingly digitising and reducing client facing contact. We have observed potentially damaging financial and purchasing practices through use of buy-now-pay-later programs and apps, and missed support opportunities through inability to navigate health systems and information.

A range of motivations or a desire to increase tech skills among parents is often evident. Some families explain that investments they are making in devices and data (which they often struggled to manage) are to ensure that their children do not face digital exclusion.

Theme 3: Uneven service and school support

There is inconsistency in digital skills development across schools, and no participant families reported formal digital skills training in any schools. Policies regarding school-provided digital devices for the students' own use varies from school to school across Australia and among schools within each state, and even within communities. Families reported a variety of situations, such as laptops being provided at school, but not being available to take home; to laptops being provided by support or service organisations for home use; to purchasing their own device for a "Bring Your Own Device" (BYOD) program. While one secondary school might mandate laptop use for every subject, another might have a BYOD program where the device is used primarily for homework and not for in-class work. Different schools provided different levels of financial support for BYOD programs, with one family choosing to move from one school - which provided no financial support for the BYOD program - to another school where the program was subsidised.

> "They just asked me to pay $20, and I'm going to get the laptops. When I pay the $20 online, they say okay, come in, and I pick it up. After this lockdown, they told me to return them back where my son is. He still like the laptop, shout to me, 'Mum, can I get it back?', and I say go now [and ask them], you big enough!"

In addition to uneven provision of access to technology at school, across Australia we are finding few programs that directly aim to support low-income families at the local community level, for instance in libraries or support organisations. While there exist examples of local digital inclusion programs, these are mostly targeted towards other groups in the community who are at risk of digital exclusion, such as seniors. In addition, where out of school technology opportunities exist for children and young people (such as holiday coding clubs), these are often not accessible to low income families due to cost. Across the project, we are also seeing that organisations that may contribute to the promotion of digital inclusion at the community level often work in isolation and do not coordinate efforts across the community, leading to the potential for duplication, or gaps In service provision.

COVID widened the gap, but it has always existed

The differential provision of devices and the support to effectively use them meant the switch to online home-based learning during the COVID 19 lockdowns placed additional pressure on families to purchase new digital devices and more data. Some of our families have accessed devices and data via services and organisations like The Smith Family and

have praised the support they have received, however during the longer lockdowns in New South Wales and Victoria the demand for devices and data far outstripped the available supply. In states like Queensland where the pandemic response included short, sharp lockdowns, families were required to have immediate access to devices to support learning at home, or rely on paper-based resources. Without access to connected learning and support from the school, families struggled to support learning at home.

Conclusion

The digital experiences of low-income families are as varied and complex as the families themselves, however low-income families with limited access to data, appropriate devices, and the ability and support to use them face additional challenges to full economic, social and cultural participation. While rural families are investing more in technology and connections, urban families often rely on mobile devices and flexible prepaid data and these differences highlight the need for context-specific and place-based approaches to digital inclusion. The next phase of our research will involve co-designing programs, activities and policies with families and local organisations in each community that endeavour to improve the digital inclusion of low-income Australian families.

Project Information

The Advancing digital inclusion in low income Australian families research project is running 2021-2024. It is a partnership with Queensland University of Technology, Western Sydney Unviersity, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, Good Things Foundation Australia, The Smith Family, yourtown, Infoxchange and the Digital Literacy Foundation.

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