

18 August 2021

Community Support and Services Committee
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QUT Digital Media Research Centre submission to the inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

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We are researchers in QUT's Digital Media Research Centre. The DMRC is a global leader in digital humanities and social science research with a focus on communication, media, and the law. Our [Digital Inclusion and Participation program](#) actively works with government, industry, non-profit and for-purpose organisations to undertake a range of research on digital inclusion throughout Australia.

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Executive summary

We welcome the efforts by the Queensland Government to understand the potential for digital inclusion policy, programs and services to address social isolation and loneliness in Queensland. Our research shows that:

- Digital inclusion is critical for developing and maintaining social connectedness, reducing isolation, and enabling Queenslanders from all parts of the State to fully participate in society.
- In order to address social isolation and loneliness, the Queensland Government should invest in programs and services that increase digital connection, access, and literacy.
- To avoid further isolating already vulnerable Queenslanders, any programs, practices and policies aimed at addressing social isolation and loneliness must be accompanied by support for access, affordability, or digital skills, where needed.

The Digital Inclusion Program at the DMRC is currently involved in a range of [projects](#) relevant to improving digital inclusion in Queensland. We are eager to share our insights as these projects progress, and welcome any opportunities to engage further with the Queensland Government on issues relating to digital inclusion and participation.

Digital inclusion and the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the increasingly important role that digital media plays in connecting people with their friends and family.¹ With restrictions limiting opportunities to travel and interact with others face-to-face, digital media has been the “primary mode of socialising” for many Australians.² Meanwhile, as many services were moved online, Australians without access to an internet connection, devices or the required digital skills lost many day-to-day social interactions that kept them connected to their families and communities.

Digital inclusion, social isolation and loneliness

It is well-established that low levels of digital inclusion increase the risks of social isolation and loneliness.³ Without access to, and the skills to use, digital technologies,

¹ Tanya Notley, Simon Chambers, Sora Park and Michael Dezuanni. 2021. *Adult Media Literacy in Australia: Attitudes, Experiences and Needs*. Western Sydney University, Queensland University of Technology and University of Canberra, p. 45.
https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1824640/Australian_adult_media_literacy_report_2021.pdf.

² Tanya Notley, Simon Chambers, Sora Park and Michael Dezuanni. 2021. *Adult Media Literacy in Australia: Attitudes, Experiences and Needs*. Western Sydney University, Queensland University of Technology and University of Canberra, p. 45.
https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1824640/Australian_adult_media_literacy_report_2021.pdf.

³ Julian Thomas, Jo Barraket, Chris K. Wilson, Indigo Holcombe-James, Jenny Kennedy, Ellie Rennie, Scott Ewing and Trent MacDonald. 2020. *Measuring Australia's digital divide: the Australian*

Queenslanders are prevented from participating fully in social and economic life.⁴ Beyond the pandemic, the digital transformation of many social and government services risks widening the already deep divides between those with the access and skills to use technology and those without.⁵

On the flipside, strong digital inclusion can help overcome geographical and social isolation. Having access to affordable, reliable internet, and possessing appropriate digital skills, can help Queenslanders living remotely or in the regions to overcome isolation by helping them to stay up to date with community happenings, conduct business, access education, and participate both socially and economically.⁶

Policy implications

To reduce social isolation and loneliness, **the Queensland Government must invest in programs that improve digital connection, access and literacy.** Communities need people and facilities to assist in the development and transfer of digital skills. One promising strategy is to link “digital skills and activities to broader social infrastructure,” such as libraries and community groups.⁷ Services and activities that keep people connected offline can also help encourage digital inclusion, as they have increasingly digital components. For example, being connected to community football can help encourage digital inclusion through the streaming of local games, or being part of a social media group for a team or a club.

Factors including income and geographic location affect levels of digital inclusion and participation.⁸ Programs that aim to address social isolation and loneliness must **be accompanied by support for access, affordability, or digital skills** where it is needed, or they risk further isolating already vulnerable Queenslanders.

Digital Inclusion Index 2020. RMIT University, Centre for Social Impact and Telstra.
<https://doi.org/10.25916/5f6eb9949c832>.

⁴ Amber Marshall and Hurriyet Babacan. 2021. *Leveraging Digital Development in Regional and Rural Queensland: Policy Discussion Paper.* Rural Economies Centre of Excellence, Australia.
https://www.ruraleconomies.org.au/media/1309/recoe_paper_june-2021-digital-connectivity-final-paper-web-version.pdf.

⁵ Amber Marshall, Michael Dezuanni, Kimberley Wockner, Hurriyet Babacan, Jean Burgess, Fran Crawford et al. 2020. *Northern Australia Communications Analysis: Directions Paper.* Cooperative Research Centre for Developing Northern Australia, p. 58.
<https://crcna.com.au/resources/publications/northern-australia-communications-analysis>.

⁶ Michael Dezuanni, Jean Burgess, Julian Thomas, Chris Wilson, Amber Marshall, Josephine Barraket et al. 2017. *Measuring Queensland's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2017: Queensland.* RMIT University, p. 6. <https://doi.org/10.4225/50/59b762ab75714>.

⁷ Amber Marshall, Michael Dezuanni, Kimberley Wockner, Hurriyet Babacan, Jean Burgess, Fran Crawford et al. 2020. *Northern Australia Communications Analysis: Directions Paper.* Cooperative Research Centre for Developing Northern Australia.
<https://crcna.com.au/resources/publications/northern-australia-communications-analysis>; Michael Dezuanni, Amber Marshall, Amy Cross, Jean Burgess and Peta Mitchell. 2019. *Digital Mentoring in Australian Communities: A Report Prepared for Australia Post.* Australia Post.
https://auspost.com.au/content/dam/auspost_corp/media/documents/digital-mentoring-in-australian-communities.pdf.

⁸ Michael Dezuanni, Jean Burgess, Julian Thomas, Chris Wilson, Amber Marshall, Josephine Barraket et al. 2017. *Measuring Queensland's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2017: Queensland.* RMIT University, pp. 10-11. <https://doi.org/10.4225/50/59b762ab75714>.