UN OHCHR General Comment on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment

# Introduction

In the time of Covid -19, there is an ever-increasing urgency to address the digital divide to ensure already large disparities in educational outcomes are not amplified by the educational pivot to online delivery of lessons and resources. The transition to online education is variable across the nation and will fluctuate depending on the severity of the pandemic at any given time in a geographical location. Almost every school across the Australia have already had a level of closure and this is likely to be the situation until a vaccine is available to effectively control the virus.

Closing the digital divide is an obvious and relatively easy fix that should be prioritised in addressing the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. With an ever-evolving education system which will only increase its dependence on online learning and technology in the future, the gap in online access must be addressed as a priority. There are opportunities for Australian governments to work closely with the private sector and the community themselves to close this gap in internet access so First Nations students and their parents and carers can access educational materials online. (Radoll and Hunter 2018)

### Extent of the Digital Divide

There are a number of data sources which provide valuable insight into the magnitude of the digital divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In the 2016 ABS census 75.3% of First Nations households had internet access which is 10.5% less than the 85.8% for all Australian households.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) report examines the level at which Australia’s online participation. The report measures three main measures of online participation of access, affordability, and digital ability. The 2019 Australian Digital Inclusion Index demonstrated First Nations people living in urban and regional areas have low digital inclusion (55.1, or 6.8 points below the national average).

First Nations people spend a greater percentage of their household income on accessing the internet which creates affordability issue. The affordability score is 52.4 which is 6.8 points below the national average of 59.2. The relative expenditure score is 49.7 which is 4.9 points below the national average of 54.6. The value of expenditure score of 55.1 is 8.8 points lower than the national average of 63.9 which means that First Nations people receive less data for every dollar spent on data.

The Digital Ability score for First Nations people is 6.4 points below the national average of 50.8 at 44.4 points. Additionally, the digital inclusion gap while fluctuating in recent years has widened between 2018 – 2019 widened to 6.8 from 6.1 in the previous period. It’s important to note that the ADII did not include data from remote communities which would have seen even larger gaps across all measures though it’s important to recognise that remote communities have distinctively much larger disparities than any other First Nations region. This is largely attributed to geographic isolation, lack of infrastructure, socioeconomic disadvantage including lower literacy levels.

### Affordability and the Digital Divide

A main reason for the data affordability being much lower for First Nations people is the high reliance on mobile phones exclusively to access the internet. This is 36.8% of First Nations people compare to 21.1% for the general population. The much higher cost of mobile phone data which can often lead to be without data contributes to the First Nations access score of 68.4 compared the national average of 75.7. Fixed broadband has much higher data allowances which provides greater and more consistent access. Furthermore, the bandwidth capabilities of mobile phone data compared is inferior and compromises stability of access. With the expansion of the National Broadband Network (NBN) which hasn’t been rolled out in many First Nations households, this has also been a contributor to disparity in access which widened by approximately 50% from 2018 to 2019 from 5.2 to 7.3 points.

### Remoteness and the Digital Divide

The 2016 ABS census also found that there are large differences in First Nations people accessing the internet based on geographical location with 82.8% in major metropolitan areas, 73.2% in regional areas, 61.3% in remote areas, and 49.9% in very remote areas. The 2014–2015 NATSISS also found major geographical disparities within First Nations communities and while there was a national average of 78.6% of First Nations people accessing the internet in the 12 months prior to the survey there was approximately twice as many First Nations people in urban areas (88.8%) accessing the internet compared to very remote areas (47.5%). In addition, the pattern of access is even wider with on 19% of First Nations people in very remote areas compared to 71.1% in urban areas accessing internet daily. Remote areas such as areas like Alice Springs and Broome also had low internet access of 62.7% and daily access of 36.5%. The number of First Nations people nationally accessing government services online is about 64% but again the rates decline with geographical location with 70% in urban areas compared to 55% in remote and 54% in very remote. Importantly the lack of government service provision in remote and very remote locations compounds this disadvantage. The Centre for Appropriate Technology also undertook a survey of very remote First Nations communities in 2016 and found that only 37% of the 401 small communities surveyed had internet coverage and in 80% of those communities this was only available in one household.

As the NATSIHS demonstrated, there are low levels of access to government online services which becomes greater the more remote location. This is counter intuitive as the higher geographically disadvantaged communities should have higher online access. This not only creates disadvantage for consumers but also creates high levels of inefficiencies for government services where they may be required to provide physical services if consumers are unable to access services online. This can have serious consequences for children in households whose financial security and welfare is impacted due to the inability to access services.

### The Education Divide and the Digital Divide

Education equity is critical to address the many disadvantages which First Nations people and communities face from employment, incarceration, health and wellbeing and other areas of socio-economic disadvantage. The future delivery of education in the home will likely be primarily online and indeed this will also be the main mode of education delivery in the classroom. This therefore should not be a question of if the digital divide is addressed but how to address it urgently and effectively which provides sustainable equitable solutions. (McKay 2016) If First Nations students do not have equitable online access then this will only serve to widen the educational gap.

### COVID-19 as a divide multiplier

One of the greatest lessons from the new paradigm of the world under a pandemic is that adaptability is critical for survival. The education system has done it’s best to adapt to meet the educational needs of Australian students but what is clear is that the disparity in education equity has been magnified by the new ways of delivering education. What is unclear is the true impact of the increase in online learning and how this has affected First Nations students.

A recent Ministerial Briefing Paper on Evidence of the Likely Impact on Educational Outcomes of Vulnerable Children Learning at Home During COVID-19 highlighted the likely impact largely attributed to the immediate transition to online teaching and learning. The report highlighted the existing disparities and the risks associated with online teaching on disadvantaged students and families particularly relating to internet access, technology and the ability for technical and learning support within disadvantaged households. We are yet to understand the true magnitude of this changed learning environment, but the reasoning suggests this will be severe and significant.

# Case Studies

Case Study # 1

Region: APY lands

**Remote boarding school student online learning barriers at home (NPY Women’s Council Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Remote and Complex Learning Environments)**

Background: Boarding school student Emily was sent home to her community at the end of Term 1 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Emily had been supported to go to boarding school through the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women’s Council Boarding School Project. Emily is in Year 12. The boarding school Project Officer was maintaining contact to assist with the ongoing education of Emily whilst at home. She attends a boarding school that is across state boarders.

Situation: Once Emily was home in community her boarding school engaged with NPY Women’s Council to see what support each of them could they give during the pandemic. The boarding school had sent Emily home with a hardcopy work pack to complete. The project officer (PO) and the boarding school worked together to determine the level of support she required. The school recognised that the need for technology and access to internet would assist greatly in the ongoing learning. The school organised a laptop for Emily. This was posted (from QLD to SA) and took 6 weeks to arrive.

The PO spoke with the local school about what support they could provide Emily, the school offered for Emily to do her work with the senior class. The school was very encouraging and happy to assist in any way. After speaking with Emily the PO and Emily decided that it worked for Emily to keep studying from home. She was happiest doing this and her home space was conducive for study. For extra support the youth worker in community set up a once a week time for Emily to do some work with them at the youth office. Emily had been able to use the laptop and dongle provided by the school to keep doing her Year 12 work. She was especially enjoying watching the hospitality videos online.

Conclusion: This collaborative process between the schools and Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women’s Council proved to bring great success in the learning outcome for Emily. With the quick actions of the boarding school providing a laptop, the wraparound third party support network, and a supportive home environment for this student we saw positive results. Aided by Emily who is a self-motived learner. This is not the case for many First Nations students who return from boarding school and have no internet access in their households.

Case Study # 2

Region: Far West NSW

**Children in this Australian town don't have the internet, so their school has turned to radio (SBS News April 2020)**

“For some families in Wilcannia, many of them the Barkindji people, remote learning due to coronavirus measures has proved a challenge, forcing the local school and its teachers to get creative.”

“One of the realities of living in a remote community in Far West NSW is that online learning is not really an option for the vast majority of our students and their families. Over the last few weeks our school staff have been working together, to think outside the box and not only help our murrpas (kids) learn, but remind them that despite the distance, we are all still connected.

Thank you to the Wilcannia Central School murrpas and their families, who are the reason we love what we do.”

# Part 2: Scoping Solutions

### Closing the digital asset divide

The technology requirements to create equity between First Nations and the Australian population is significant and is part of the digital divide requirements to provide equity in online capabilities. Laptops and tablets are fundamental hardware requirements to provide adequate online functionality and ability to also undertake tasks that require specific software that has optimal use using laptops or tablets such as Microsoft programs. While some of the more advanced smart phones have some capabilities, they provide far inferior performance and abilities to laptops and tablets. The challenge which is also present is the ongoing maintenance of laptops and tablets which would be a challenge though manufacturer warranties for 3 years and replacement provided after 3 years. Another option which is provided in some communities are community online access centres where a community hub can provide a bank of computers with internet access. While this can provide a solution for some who need access is can lack convenience and timely ability to access the internet which can be found in the home. (Daly 2006)

There are various ways which the internet can be accessed. This can be through wireless hot spotting, mobile phones, mobile data, fixed line and satellite. The current gold standard option is NBN fixed line which most Australians now have access but much lower rates for First Nations people. As outlines in the rationale the quality and reliability of internet is much lower for First Nations people and the data costs much higher which is compounded by the lower digital literacy which impacts on the ability to maximise the benefits of internet access.

### Leveraging the public and private sectors

The government has committed to addressing First Nations disadvantage through a variety of measures which react to the historical underlying issues which created the disparity. The government now has an opportunity to invest in the technology gaps in First Nations communities. The corporate sector can play a significant role in addressing the digital divide. There are already existing programs for disadvantaged children and communities through data donation.

### 5G capabilities

The new technology of 5G has enormous potential for enabling stable and optimal online access and phone services. 5G offers higher data volumes with lower latency thank previous 4G. This means that remote communities who have relied on 4G with limited reliability and capability. 5G can be built on existing 4G networks meaning no infrastructure requirements in some remote areas. There is however large gaps that remain and will require investment into infrastructure in some remote communities.

### Building digital literacy

Future proofing First Nations communities for technological advances is critical to ensure the overwhelming disparities which exist are not amplified are First Nations communities are strongly placed to lead into the future. While the structural solution to the digital divide is the provision of adequate internet connection and appropriate hardware to access online services and resources. What is of absolute importance is the education and training which must be provided alongside the online access. On the NAP–ICT Literacy scale, levels 1 and 2 represent very basic proficiency. Students working at these levels can execute only basic technical skills when working with ICT and will need high levels of scaffolding and support. Students working at these levels are unlikely to complete tasks independently without support. A digital divide in student learning skills with ICT is clearly evident in Australia with reference to students’ Indigenous status, school location, and educational capital measured by their parents’ level of education and occupational status. Evidence of this divide, extracted from data collected in NAP–ICT Literacy 2017,4 are provided below:

● 77 per cent of Year 6 Indigenous students were performing at Levels 1 or 2 in comparison to 45 per cent of non-Indigenous students.

● 40 per cent of Year 10 Indigenous students were performing at Levels 1 or 2 in comparison to 13 per cent of non-Indigenous students.

(Masters, Taylor-Guy et al. 2020) (Rowsell, Morrell et al. 2017)

The ADII shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in non-remote areas are more likely than other Australians to be mobile-only users (more than one third of this population versus one-ﬁfth of all Australians).”

### Digitising First Nations history and culture

There are immense opportunities for digitally connected First Nations communities. The digital advances which present opportunities for all Australians should equally be available for First Nations people and communities. (Dyson 2003) Digital technology provides an immense opportunity for the sharing of First Nations history and culture from traditional custodians on country across the world. Language protection and repatriation (Carew, Green et al. 2015)

### Managing digital risks

It’s of critical importance to not only embrace the potential of increases the online capabilities for First Nations students but to also understand the risks associated with increased online participation. Cyber security is of paramount importance and World Vision as a child rights and development focused organisation is highly experienced and knowledgeable in child exploitation which is ever present in the online space. Online predatory behaviour will be a continuing threat or children as they become ever more reliant on internet for education access and a way of life. There must be targeted education programs for both parents and children on the risks.

# Recommendations

1. Public-private partnerships to close the digital divide
2. Government subsidies for digital equipment and online access in remote communities
3. Expanding opportunities for online access at school (schools operating as an internet café of sorts)
4. Monitor gaps in broadband access between different demographic groups and geographic areas
5. Have a target on closing the digital divide in the Closing the Gap framework
6. Make digital and data literacy, as well as broadband connectivity in all schools, a part of every child’s right to education
7. Establish 5g networks in remote areas where there is no internet coverage

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