The Digital Economy: Opening Up the Conversation

Response to the Consultation Paper
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Overview

The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) is the peak leadership organisation for university libraries in Australia. CAUL members are the University Librarians or equivalent of the 39 institutions that have representation on Universities Australia. University libraries are diverse institutions, which intersect core university business.

CAUL's vision is that society is transformed through the power of research, teaching and learning. University libraries are essential knowledge and information infrastructures that enable student achievement and research excellence. CAUL makes a significant contribution to higher education strategy, policy and outcomes through a commitment to a shared purpose:

> **To transform how people experience knowledge – how it can be discovered, used and shared.**

Central to our vision is an Australia that thrives in a digital economy, one where all Australians have access to knowledge and information and are empowered to take full advantage of the benefits which digital technology brings.

University libraries and library organisations broadly play a leading role in enabling fair, affordable and open access to knowledge. They are also instrumental in building society's capacity for digital dexterity – fluency in the use of digital technology, skills and essential literacies.

We welcome the government's commitment to a national strategy for Australia's digital economy and are grateful for this opportunity to provide feedback in response to the consultation paper.

Our response

We agree with the three broad themes presented in the discussion paper on page 5 framed as priority areas for the strategy. Particularly we support the following objectives for the strategy listed on page 7 which are to:

- Drive a culture and mindset that supports lifelong learning, a global outlook and [that] helps us respond positively to change.
- Address the 'digital divide' in skills and confidence to help all Australians succeed in a digital economy.

Our response focuses on how the development of a national strategy for Australia's digital economy must be underpinned by social policy, and be cognisant of Australia's domestic and global context. A national strategy for our digital economy also presents an opportunity to make progress towards the United Nations (UN) 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Australia.

We recommend that economic objectives in a national strategy for Australia's digital economy must be underpinned by social policy that:

1. Addresses the gaps in digital inclusion identified by the Australian Digital Inclusion Index particularly for people with a disability and indigenous people.
2. Provides a long term roadmap for ensuring that all Australians are digital citizens.
3. Incentivises and encourages partnerships between key stakeholders such as libraries and local communities to establish projects that develop digital citizenship and address digital inclusion.
4. Is mindful of our domestic and global context, with particular attention to the UN 2030 SDGs and how they can be progressed domestically through digital inclusion and citizenship.

Background

The discussion paper rightly lists the need to empower Australians to take advantage of the digital economy though digital skills and inclusion as one of its three core themes. The digital divide in Australia presents an important challenge for the digital economy and our progress towards the UN SDGs.

The Digital Divide in Australia

In 2017 the New Media Consortium (NMC) library edition[1] of the annual NMC horizons report identified that improving digital literacy is an important challenge to be tackled over for the next five years, but one that we know how to solve.

The launch of the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII)[2] in 2016 is an important acknowledgement that access to modern information and communication technologies is essential to our way of life in Australia. It highlights that not every Australian is yet able to take advantage of the economic, educational, health, social and financial benefits that digital technology brings. For some, there is still a risk that the digital divide leads to exclusion from the wider economy, preventing some citizens from participating fully in our society.

The ADII 2017 report[3] indicates that while access in Australia is widening, capability remains an area for improvement.

The ADII uses three dimensions to track different aspects of digital inclusion: access, affordability and digital ability. The 2017 index observed that all measures have shown improvement over time, but while access (with an index score of 69.6) is above the national average (56.5), affordability (52.7) and digital ability (47.3) are not faring so well. Particularly where outcomes for specific groups such as people with a disability, or indigenous Australians are concerned.

The ADII report recommends that gaps in digital ability need to be an important focus for policy makers, business, the education sector and community groups. The challenge is to achieve digital inclusion by enabling all Australians to make full use of digital technologies.

Sustainable development goals

Globally libraries, and library organisations function as authorities on digital literacy, at the forefront of skills development, and leading digital literacy initiatives.

A current example is the spread of fake news. Libraries play an important role in promoting mindful media consumption, a facet of digital literacy. The skills to know when and what information is needed, where and how to obtain it, how to evaluate it critically and organise it once it is found, and how to use it in an ethical way, are essential for combating fake news.

In 2017 the UK Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) launched a campaign called #FactsMatter[4]. The campaign addresses the issues of misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and fake news. Its purpose is to 'champion the value of quality

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[1] https://www.nmc.org/publication/nmc-horizon-report-2017-library-edition, viewed 30/11/2017

[2] https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au, viewed 30/11/2017

[3] https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Australian-Digital-Inclusion-Index-2017.pdf, viewed 30/11/2017

[4] https://archive.cilip.org.uk/advocacy-awards/advocacy-campaigns/facts-matter, viewed 30/11/2017

information and evidence for learning, to [the UK] economy, to health and healthcare, in democracy and for equal, inclusive communities'.

Nick Poole, Chief Executive of CILIP, explains the important role that information professionals can play and why the ability to assess and make ethical, informed judgments about information has become critical.

> 'As we look ahead to the days of big data, machine learning and decisions about public services made by unaccountable algorithms which risk deepening inequality, now more than ever we need the ethics of an information professional making sure that information is used for the good of the people'[5].

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)[6] argues that media and information literacy (components of digital literacy) are an emerging area of human rights in an increasingly digital world. A focus on these literacies can help bridge gaps between the information rich and the information poor.

Information is also at the heart of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. Ethics and informed decision making built on facts and evidence are essential for addressing all 17 goals. By improving digital literacy in Australia, we can also work towards the SDGs.

Where to start

In 2016 Adobe Systems commissioned an NMC report[7] to explore the challenge of advancing digital literacy among students and faculty at higher education institutions in the United State of America. The report aimed to find common ground among definitions of digital literacy, but goes further by offering an overview of the digital literacies landscape, including understanding and practices.

It provides several observations which are pertinent to the development of a national strategy for Australia's digital economy which addresses both digital literacy and the UN SDGs in Australia. The relevant observations are that:

- Digital literacy is not only about understanding how digital technology works but also why it is useful and when to use it. This broader understanding gives rise to the concept of digital citizenship – the responsible and appropriate use of technology.
- In an increasingly digital society, government policies and programs can provide consistency and direction for how global challenges such as digital literacy and fake news are addressed.
- Smart partnerships between stakeholders such as libraries, educational institutions, industry, government and other parties are essential. These can catalyse projects that build on existing capacity, promote the sharing of information, build communities of practice, and contribute to understanding workforce demands.

Based on the overview provided here we offer four recommendations for the national strategy.

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[5] https://archive.cilip.org.uk/news/keynote-address-ifla-government-libraries-section-world-library-information-congress-wroclaw-poland, viewed 30/11/2017

[6] https://www.ifla.org/publications/ifla-media-and-information-literacy-recommendations, viewed 30/11/2017

[7] https://www.nmc.org/publication/digital-literacy-an-nmc-horizon-project-strategic-brief, viewed 30/11/2017

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