



Adult Learning Australia

*Lifelong and Lifewide Learning
for All Australians*

Mr Andrew McGowan
Inquiry Secretary
Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications
PO Box 6021
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr McGowan,

Re: National Broadband Network Inquiry

Adult Learning Australia is the peak body for Adult and Community Education in Australia. We are a 51 year old organisation with members in all states and territories. Our vision is an Australia in which all citizens have equitable access to lifelong and lifewide learning. By “lifelong learning” we mean learning beyond school throughout the adult years via the formal education system, in workplaces and through community participation. By “lifewide learning” we mean developing the skills and knowledge required to engage in meaningful work, to participate fully as a citizen in a vibrant democracy, to live in harmony in a diverse, multi-cultural and rapidly changing society and to manage ones health and personal wellbeing, particularly in the senior years.

Our areas of interest and expertise relate to the education and social inclusion components of the enquiry (items c and h in the Terms of Reference).

It is our experience that technology can greatly enhance the learning experience, and build social inclusion. We believe that these can be dramatically increased by the NBN, through the right policy approach, not just because of the NBN’s speed, but more because of its ubiquitousness.

Lowest Common Denominator Approach

Currently, around the country, in TAFE institutes, Community Colleges, Neighbourhood Houses, Libraries and Learning Centre there are a range of technologies that are used to provide learning experiences and enhance social inclusion. However, each one is stymied by some participants having access to reasonably fast broadband and others having limited or no access. This leads to a “lowest common denominator” approach, where excellent learning and

engagement tools are not used or are used at the level that matches the internet speed of the user with the worst connection. Here are two examples:

E-Learning in Remote Communities

From 2004 – 2007, ALA was involved in the Community Engagement Building Creative E-learning Partnerships program, funded through the DEEWR Flexible Learning Framework. Some of the pilot projects included one based in the North East of Victoria where GPS Software was used to engage older men with low IT skills in learning. Another called “Intown or Outbush” based in Alice Springs, engaged young Indigenous people online using pedagogies suited to low literacy learners around the notion of whether they were ‘intown or outbush’. In all there were 20 projects with similar aims to use technology to build community based partnerships to deliver learning to hard to reach groups.

The review of the project found that “Some of the pilots experienced infrastructure limitations, but overcame problems by ...using banks of computers loaned from others when needed and only using simple electronic tools”.ⁱ While an NBN won’t increase the amount of computers, it will eliminate the need for important social inclusion projects like Creative E-Learning Partnerships to only use “simple electronic tools”. The tools could be determined by the learning needs of the participants, not the limits of the bandwidth.

Broadband for Seniors

ALA has been proud to partner since 2008 with NEC computers, U3A online and the Australian Computer Seniors Association to deliver the FACHSIA funded Broadband for Seniors project. This project has resulted in over 94000 senior Australians accessing one of the 2000 free Broadband kiosks across the country and over 10000 of these seniors completing free computer and internet training. The seniors involved report increased access to grandchildren and friends, of regularly hearing from family overseas, of accessing services online rather than attending in person and of feeling confident to volunteer in environments where computers are regularly used.

The potential of an NBN to enhance social inclusion programs like Broadband for Seniors is enormous. The higher the internet speed, the higher the capacity for peer to peer networking to mimic face to face human interaction and therefore the more likely that programs like Broadband for Seniors will bring in people unwilling or unable to deal with the slow speed of our current internet systems.

ⁱ Community Engagement building creative e-learning partnerships, Strategic review of the Community Engagement Project (2005-2007) by Dr Kaye Bowman, 2007, flexiblelearning.net.au

When evaluating the Broadband for Seniors program, the overwhelming response when asked how the program could be improved was requests for more computer programs, particularly those used for social networking. Broadband for Seniors kiosk equipment is new and best available for purpose. However, in many kiosks, simultaneous use by a number of Seniors of functions such as video streaming would be clunky at best. As one participant, from the Austrian Seniors Club of Sydney put it, Broadband for Seniors aim should be “that using computer is now so simple like driving a car - that you do not need to be an expert programmer to use a computer.”ⁱⁱ There are, of course, programs that can make using a computer as “simple as driving a car” but they require significant bandwidth.

ALA’s role has included supporting the volunteer tutors working in the 2000 kiosks around the country through a Bulletin Board and regular Webinars using an Elluminate online classroom. Elluminate has the capacity to stream video and audio; to run interactive power points, have multiple scribes to a shared whiteboard, to allow multiple speakers and to distribute documents to create a classroom situation with tutors across the country that is very close in nature to a face to face workshop. However, currently about half of Elluminate’s functionality is employed because the bandwidth of some participants simply can’t sustain its full use. The NBN would allow the full suite of functions to be employed and would make linking volunteer tutors nationwide in learning more efficient, dynamic and engaging.

Good Program Design

At the moment, government funded learning and social engagement programs like the Community Engagement Creative E-Learning Partnerships, and Broadband for Seniors can’t operate at their full potential due to the lack of high speed internet. However, high speed internet alone won’t provide the learning and social engagement offered by programs such as these. Just as a hammer can be used to either build a cathedral or rob a bank, so too high speed internet has the potential to engage Indigenous young people in Alice Springs with literacy activities and older men in Corryong with GPS mapping software or it can be used to fill the days of these same groups of people with faster access to meaningless tasks and shallow relationships.

The potential of the NBN can only be realised through attention to the 3 C’s of E-Learning: Connectivity, Content and Capability. We are currently seeing significant investment in Connectivity. This needs to be married with investment in Content and Capability to enhance the social inclusion and learning activities of

ⁱⁱ NEC Broadband for Seniors Evaluation Survey, 2011

the country's educators and to build the activities that will emerge as the technology reveals new possibilities.

ALA recently received the following email from one of its members, Barrie Brennan, who is the President of the Tamworth U3A. It highlights the importance of investing in training for older users of the NBN, but could be extrapolated to all groups who remain on the wrong side of the "digital divide" whose separation will only increase after the introduction of the NBN without significant investment in Content and Capability.

"We have become aware of the fact that many of our members have been 'given' or had an old computer 'passed over' to them from children or grandchildren. But without any assistance/training or help or delivered with such speed and lack of checking whether the training terminology was being understood.

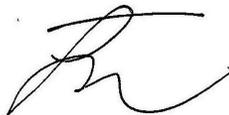
Our members have email addresses, usually kindly organised by the 'donors'. So they inform us of this. We sent messages and our Newsletter to them. They are not informed as we find out that they have no idea how to respond to our emails or download and/or print out our Newsletter.

So what our experience is that the potential of the NBN for the older generation will not be realised unless there is a concerted effort to explain to those without the technical knowledge and/or experience what the NBN is all about.

There will be a need therefore for an ongoing program of information not just about how many gigs the NBN offered (someone in our group thought 'gigs' were about having musical events) but what the NBN can do and how people with limited technical knowledge can use the technology for their own benefit (as is their right) and to remain 'connected' to their community and family. A big learning task!!"

We commend this Inquiry for beginning the conversation about "what the NBN can do" and how people "can use the technology for their own benefit" and look forward to its recommendations.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Sally Thompson', written in a cursive style.

Sally Thompson
Chief Executive Officer