

Whitlam Institute

WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY

Submission to the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group

First Nations Digital Inclusion in
Western Sydney

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Submission to the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group: A Roadmap for First Nations Digital Inclusion

First Nations Digital Inclusion in Western Sydney

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Target 17 of the Closing the Gap Agreement states that by 2026, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will achieve equal levels of digital inclusion. Western Sydney is home to the largest Indigenous population in Australia, but little is known about the levels of Indigenous digital exclusion in the region. This lack of data hinders efforts to close the digital gap.

This submission is made by Professor Azadeh Dastyari, Director of Research and Policy at the Whitlam Institute, Wiradjuri Professor Corrinne Sullivan, and Dr Rhonda Itaoui, Director of the Centre for Western Sydney with reference to a study titled 'First Nations Digital Inclusion in Western Sydney' currently underway by the researchers. The study is a collaboration with BlaQ Aboriginal Corporation, Think and Do Tank, Jesuit Social Services, Bidwill Uniting, Digital Literacy Foundation, Salvation Army, Blacktown City Council, and Baptist Care. It is funded by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) and is carried out under the guidance of an Indigenous Governance Committee.

The 'First Nations Digital Inclusion in Western Sydney' study will provide a better understanding of the digital needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Western Sydney and will produce Indigenous co-designed recommendations for closing the digital gap. The project began in July 2023 and will conclude in June 2025. It is currently gathering data through a survey, yarning circles, and interviews.

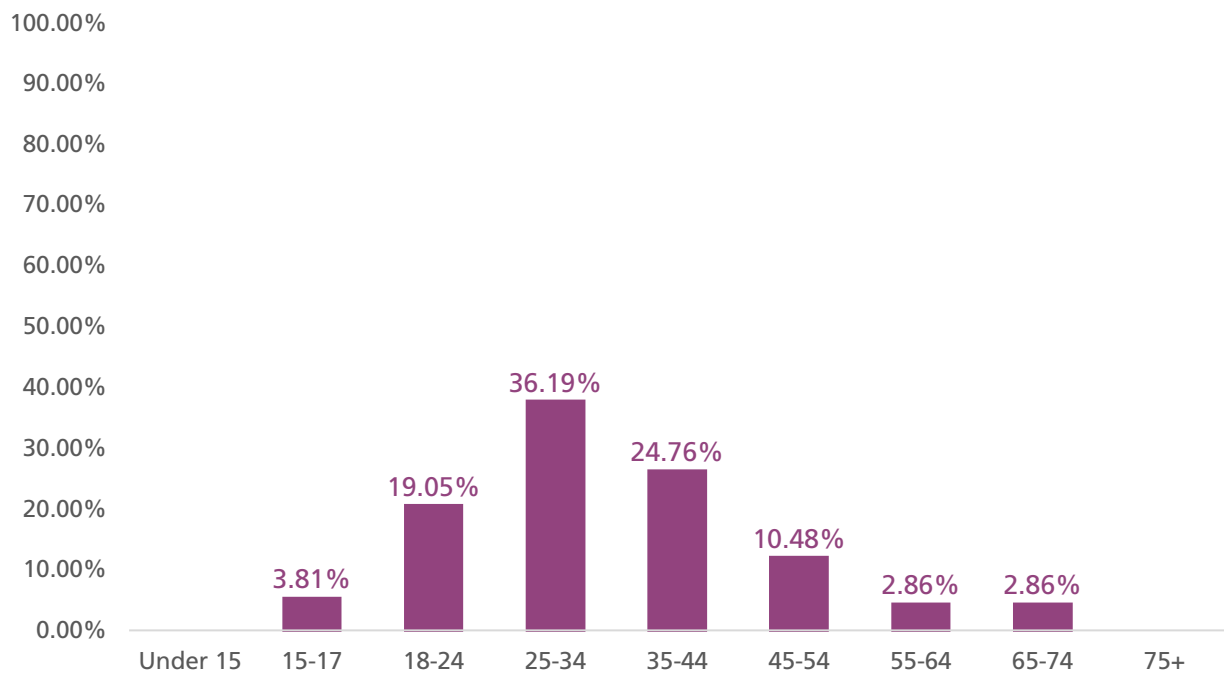
Whilst the study on First Nations Digital Inclusion in Western Sydney is in progress some early findings suggest a pressing imperative to address the digital needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The findings reported in this submission are preliminary and refer only to the survey component of this study.

Who filled in the survey?

The survey was completed by 105 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Western Sydney between December 2023 and June 2024. All the respondents to the survey were over the age of 15 and represented a diverse cross section of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Western Sydney.

AGE OF RESPONDENTS (% OF RESPONDENTS)



The following represents the employment status of respondents:

| EMPLOYMENT STATUS | % OF RESPONDENTS |
|----------------------|------------------|
| Employed (full-time) | 34.46% |
| Employed (part-time) | 13.51% |
| Employed (casual) | 9.46% |

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| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Self-employed (including as a freelancer) | 1.35% |
| Unemployed and actively looking for work in the last four weeks | 2.70% |
| Student | 16.22% |
| Home duties | 2.70% |
| On a pension (for example, Age Pension, JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, Disability Support Pension, Carer Allowance, Austudy, Abstudy, Parenting Payment or any other pensions or benefits). Please specify which kind. | 10.14% |
| Have a disability and not able to work | 0.68% |
| Full time unpaid carer | 0.68% |
| Other (please specify) | 2.70% |
| Prefer not to say | 5.41% |

The following is the personal income of respondents before tax or other deductions, (including wages and salaries, government pensions, benefits and allowances and income from interest, dividends, or other sources).

| INCOME | % OF RESPONDENTS |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| No income | 2.86% |
| Under \$15,000 per year (less than \$289 per week) | 10.48% |
| \$15,001 to \$33,799 per year (between \$289 and \$649 per week) | 12.38% |
| \$33,800 to \$51,999 per year (between \$650 and \$999 per week) | 14.29% |
| \$52,000 to \$77,999 per year (between \$1000 and \$1,499 per week) | 13.33% |
| \$78,000 to \$103,999 per year (between \$1,500 and \$1,999 per week) | 20.95% |
| \$104,000 to \$181,999 per year (between \$2,000 and \$3,499 per week) | 16.19% |
| \$208,000 or more per year (\$4,000 or more per week) | 1.90% |
| Prefer not to say | 7.62% |

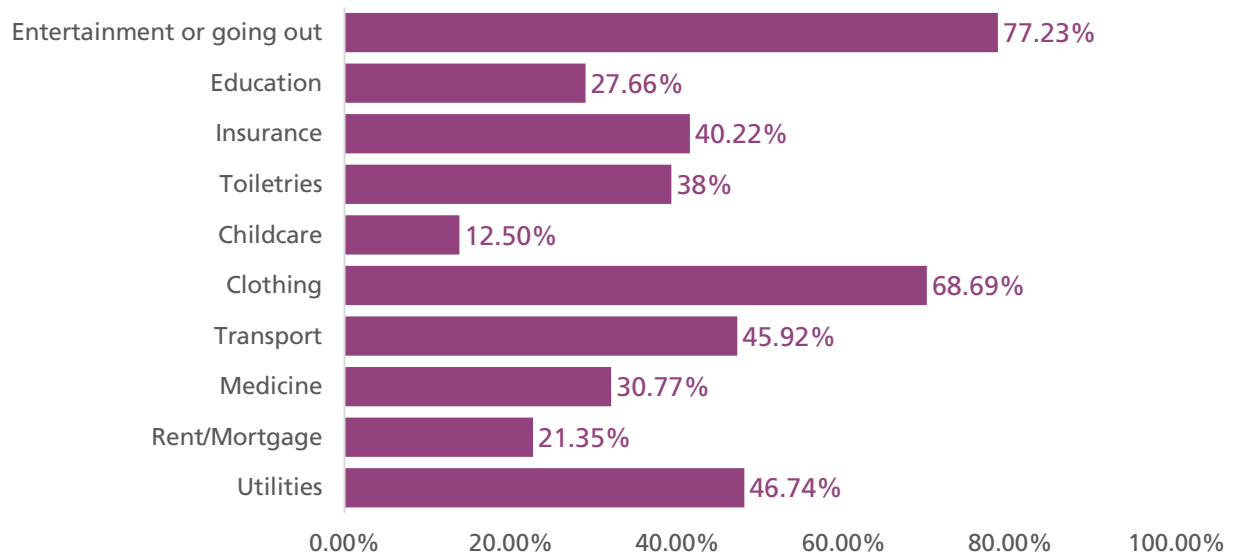
One limitation of these survey results is that most of the surveys (93%) were done online. Therefore, the surveys were likely to have been completed by those who experience some level of digital inclusion. Yarning Circles and interviews in the study are supplementing these findings with reports from those who are less likely to have access to computers and the internet. The reports of such high levels of sacrifice and digital exclusion discussed below, among respondents who had some degree of connectivity or support with connectivity to overwhelmingly answer the survey online is therefore, particularly alarming.

Key Findings

The survey has shown that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Western Sydney, even those who are mainly employed or students, are making significant sacrifices and cutbacks to afford internet connectivity.

The following percentage of respondents replied that they had to make cut backs in answer to the question: Have you or anyone in your household cut back on any expenses listed below **to afford internet access** (like mobile data, broadband, WiFi etc.)?

YES, HAD TO CUT BACK TO AFFORD INTERNET



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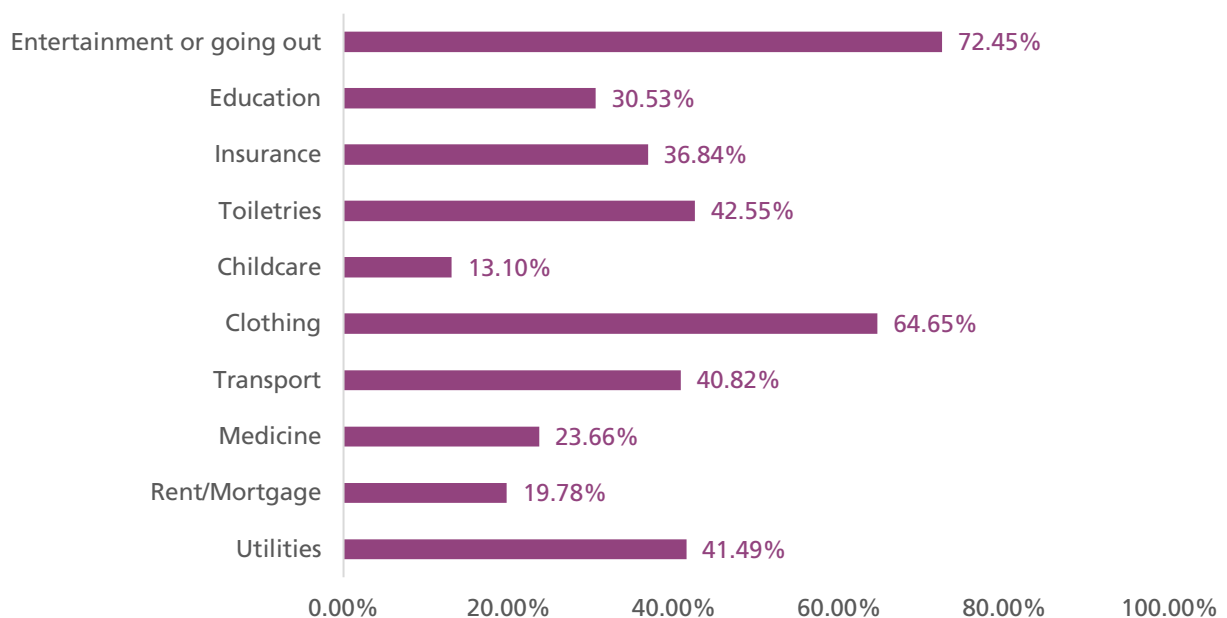
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That is, **46.7%** of respondents have had to **cut back on utilities**, **30.77%** of respondents have had to cut back **on medicine**, and **27.66%** have had to cut back on **education** in order to afford internet access.

Cut backs have also had to be made by people in order **to afford devices**. The following percentage of respondents replied that they had to make cut backs in answer to the question: Have you or anyone in your household had to cut back on any expenses listed below to afford devices used to access the internet (like laptops, desktop personal computers, tablets) etc.?

YES, HAD TO CUT BACK TO AFFORD DEVICES



That is, **41.49%** of respondents have had to **cut back on utilities**, **23.66%** of respondents have had to cut back on **medicine** and **30.53%** have had to cut back on **education** in order to afford devices used to access the internet.

12.38% of respondents **never have or mostly don't have** the **internet connection** they need to **study** without any problems.¹

7.62% of respondents **never have or mostly don't have** the **internet connection** they need to do **paid work** without any problems.

¹ These results exclude people who do not need to participate in the activity.

6% of respondents do not have the internet connection they need to **use government services** (such as health services, taxation, social security payments through Centrelink etc...) that they need.

41% of respondents do not believe that they have the **devices they need for their work, studies and social interactions.**

83% of respondents who identified a laptop as a device that they needed for their work, studies and social interactions said that the reason they did not have a laptop was because laptops were **too expensive.**²

87.5% of respondents who identified a **Desktop computer** as a device that they needed for their work, studies and social interactions said that the reason they did not have a **Desktop computer** was because it was **too expensive.**³

78% of respondents have experienced **racism online.**

61% of respondents have **experienced security issues** (for example hacking, identity theft or data breaches).

² 16% of respondents said that they needed but currently don't have a laptop for their work, studies and social interactions.

³ 14% of respondents said that they needed but currently don't have a desktop computer for their work, studies and social interactions.

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Solutions

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples surveyed identified the following as helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Western Sydney get connected to the internet.

| SOLUTIONS | % OF RESPONDENTS |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Better internet service in our area | 15.18% |
| Classes to help people learn digital skills | 11.93% |
| Digital resources that respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people | 12.58% |
| Cheaper devices | 18.66% |
| Affordable services in my area that fix devices | 13.02% |
| More services from Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) (e.g. Aboriginal Medical Services, Aboriginal Legal Services, etc.) | 10.63% |
| Cheaper internet services | 17.14% |

Other suggestions from respondents include:

- “Accessible resources that take into account that some ways of learning are inaccessible to neurodiverse brains, or people who cannot read or write English. Or people who DON'T have internet or want it.”
- “Access to devices, either second hand or affordable, with classes for use”
- “Price is a big one. I also see lots of Elders to put on really unnecessarily expensive plans (\$100+ a month when they only know how to use the phone to make calls), they get taken advantage of by companies or sometimes relatives. This causes big financial strain especially for our Elders on pensions. There is the issue of unethical business signing mob up for all this data and packages they never use.”
- “Places that loan equipment to students in need during their time of study”

Hearing the Voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Western Sydney

The following are direct quotes from what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Western Sydney told us about Digital Inclusion in Western Sydney in response to the question: 'Is there anything else you would like to share or suggest about how to improve Indigenous people's access to the internet in Western Sydney?'

- "We need to get rid of the need to confirm health appointments on mobile phones. People are missing out on healthcare because they don't have a phone and can't confirm their appointments."
- "It's harder to get a mobile phone than it is to get Centrelink. Not everyone has access to enough ID to get a mobile phone. You need your phone for everything. We need to change the system so people who don't have enough ID can get phones too."
- "Involve Indigenous leaders and community members in the planning and decision-making processes to ensure that solutions are culturally sensitive and relevant."
- "I think if the uni or government could offer cheaper plans for students/Indigenous people and help with purchasing devices for study and for use at home it will benefit all of us in a positive way. It will give us more strength in asking for help than being ashamed."
- "Since I was given a second-hand laptop I did and completed 6 or more courses at TAFE, this is what is holding back our mob, give them access to an iPad or laptop and also a basic course how to use them that is available in Sydney areas (not just the country), this could and would help so many of us if it was available with no shame."
- "Have free hubs set up so that when I have limited data I can go access it especially if I need more data for work or health services."
- "Koori orgs should have computers or laptops to borrow for students. Or somewhere should lend them. I get bad marks for handwriting assignments because I don't have a laptop or anywhere to print. Printing can be expensive."
- "I can't afford the access I need to work and study from home. I often go to places that have free Wi-Fi like the library but that's hard with a kid. Also, there are bills that I don't have choices to reduce like childcare and transport. I think the government allowances do not reflect how much things cost. Like you have to have a mobile these days and internet, I have no control of rental prices. Rent keeps going up but my wage and Centrelink doesn't

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cover everything. Every week it's hard to manage. I end up buying less food but I need to feed my kid. I often skip meals to afford my bills. I feel like I'm always behind. It's scary."

- "Getting services that are reliable for all people. My access to the internet is only ok because my husband works in IT. It constantly drops out and is not always reliable in a way that I can manage it. Without him, I have no reliable or consistent access to internet. And without internet I am completely cut off from everything. I rely on the internet to make phone calls and connect to all resources online. Without it, I am isolated. Without reliable internet it is a danger to myself if anything ever goes wrong, I can't call for help."
- "Indigenous peoples from Western Sydney who live in suburban and rural communities find accessibility to the internet to be challenging, as the government attempts to improve internet connectivity but the companies fail to provide Indigenous people with adequate accessibility. The cost of living crisis has proven the challenges of the costs of internet access where it is to the point that we need to reduce expenses to be able to afford the internet."
- "Cost of service, program to maintain and keep devices so as not to sell or damage, incentives."
- "One of the biggest struggles is the Indigenous peoples who live in rural areas where service connections are awful. Not sure how that can be rectified without the government committing to fixing infrastructure. Also, the skill set to utilise devices, almost every town has a club or society. Maybe there is room to work with those clubs to build knowledge for Indigenous people."
- "I think by allowing and educating our Elders it will assist their abilities to receive and make connections to services and support when need."
- "By providing more spaces that are manageable to access and require little assistance."
- "Internet is still a luxury item for many people living in Western Sydney."
- "The area in which we live has really bad service, where the access to the internet is the most important which is why we pay extra for a Telstra service as our phones don't work otherwise. We use the internet for WiFi calls a lot. If we could improve the phone service to these areas it would be really beneficial because if the NBN is out or whatever else, our phones still can't connect properly to the internet on mobile data."
- "Whilst I am currently financially stable with access, I grew up without access to internet at home up until the third year of undergraduate (2015) - I know many young people in

the area without stable access, or only shared access to devices. Thank you for doing this important work."

- "The biggest barrier Aboriginal people face in accessing the internet in western Sydney is the cost in my opinion. I have been able to purchase devices in the past because of scholarships I have been awarded, not because I have had the funds available to me. I am very privileged to have support from my parents in paying for the ongoing cost of electronics such as data plans and insurance; without that assistance I would not be able to access the internet in my home or outside of the university or library."
- "Further opportunities to learn key technology navigational skills."
- "More initiatives to improve device skills and access to devices/internet through local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations (i.e. free sim cards, classes)."
- "More information, making mob familiar with technology and internet."

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Conclusion

The 'First Nations Digital Inclusion in Western Sydney' study underscores a critical need for improved digital access and resources among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Western Sydney. Preliminary findings reveal significant sacrifices made by individuals to afford internet access and devices, highlighting the urgent need for affordable and reliable digital services.

The survey results demonstrate that a considerable portion of respondents have had to cut back on essential expenses, such as utilities, medicine and education, to maintain internet connectivity. Additionally, many respondents report inadequate internet connections and devices, which hampers their ability to study, work, and access government services effectively. The pervasive experience of online racism and security issues further exacerbates the digital divide.

Respondents have identified several potential solutions, including better internet services, affordable devices, and culturally respectful digital resources. Indigenous people in Western Sydney emphasise the importance of involving Indigenous leaders and community members in planning processes, providing accessible learning resources, and addressing the high costs of data plans and devices.

As the study progresses, these preliminary findings from the survey will be supplemented by interview and yarning circles and will be instrumental in shaping co-designed recommendations to close the digital gap.

Ensuring digital inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is not only a matter of access but also of equity and justice, aligning with Target 17 of the Closing the Gap Agreement. The Whitlam Institute, alongside its partners, remains committed to advocating for and implementing solutions that will empower Indigenous communities through enhanced digital connectivity and inclusion.

*Thank you for this important work and the opportunity to share our research. The full report of this study will be published in 2025. Most of the data already collected for this study could not be shared in this short submission. For additional data or to discuss the study's implications further, please contact **Professor Azadeh Dastyari** at A.Dastyari@westernsydney.edu.au.*