



Australian Human Rights Commission: Human Rights and Technology Issues Paper

Assistive technology (aids and equipment) is of great benefit to many people with disability. It can:

- boost personal independence;
- improve quality of life;
- assist with social inclusion; and
- reduce the need for personal supports.

Investment in assistive technology helps people with disability to remain living at home, thereby delaying their need for costly residential support options, reducing hospital admissions and assisting carers in their critically important provision of informal support. It supports people with their education, training and employment. It helps give people with disability control over their lives.

Before the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), state and territory governments ran their own aids and equipment schemes. Eligibility criteria differed across the country, as did the equipment people could access and the amount of funding they received. Funding limits meant people frequently had to make a significant personal contribution in order to purchase the equipment (with a shortfall sometimes running into \$1000s—a prohibitive amount for many). Waiting lists were often long.

These equipment schemes, however, did have some positive features. They included recycled equipment, which accelerated access to equipment for children whose needs were changing rapidly and for people with degenerative conditions for whom it made no sense to wait for a bespoke option.

Across the country, there was a network of Independent Living Centres. Staffed by therapists, they provided advice and allowed people to test equipment options (independent of a sales service). Similarly, there were specialist centres providing advice on computer access, speech generation, complex driving and environmental controls. These information and advice centres were invaluable.

The following comments aim to improving the access people with disability have to essential and often cost-effective assistive technology.

Provision of assistive technology under the NDIS

- **Planning**

The provision of assistive technology has been problematic under the NDIS. Participants have endured long waiting periods, even to the point of having to repeat assessments or obtain new quotes because the existing assessments and quotes expired.

Problems start with planning. When a health professional's opinion is sought, it is typically sought after a plan is in place, rather than prior to the plan's development. As a consequence, the health professional can only assess the participant to provide what is already specified in the plan. If the professional believes that a different type of equipment is needed, the change can be made only by activating a plan review, which is a lengthy process.

Obtaining equipment, therefore, depends mostly on the participant being able to articulate their need well or a planner being astute enough to identify it – and, if the need is for complex equipment, including funds in the plan to pay for an assessment.

Currently, recommendations for multiple pieces of equipment each require the completion of a separate NDIS document. This is time-consuming and duplicates information.

- **Specialist advice**

As mentioned above, a strength of the aids and equipment programs administered by state and territory governments was the existence of information and advice services (often referred to as Independent Living Centres). In some jurisdictions there were also specialist centres providing advice on computer access, speech generation, and complex driving and environmental controls.

Access to independent professional advice and testing of aids and equipment (outside a sales environment) is invaluable. Unfortunately, the state funding for these centres has ceased or is likely to cease (as funding is transferred to the NDIS). The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), through its funding rounds for Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC), has shown little inclination to enable these independent centres to continue. This is short-sighted.

Opportunities and challenges

As a significant proportion of people with disability are on low incomes, the affordability of technology is a challenge.

Increasingly, technology solutions for people with disability are becoming available on mainstream devices (such as through apps that run on mobile phones or tablets). Increasingly, the NDIA is not funding these devices as it assumes they are an ordinary cost borne by the majority of the population.

This ignores the fact that some people genuinely cannot afford the device on which the required technology will operate. As a result, they or their family member go without. This can deny a child access to the communication aid that will best assist

them to learn, develop and interact with peers and teachers. Finding a way to overcome this for people in genuine financial hardship should be a priority.

A 'systems approach' needs to be applied to the funding of these supports. The success of technology for people with disability depends on access not only to the specialised technology but also the hardware that supports it and training for both the user and their carer.

Opportunities exist in the use of new technology such as AI and virtual reality to increase independence and experience for people with disability. This equipment may lessen the reliance on support from a carer and enable greater personal autonomy. Again, these opportunities should be viewed as part of a holistic solution that involves both equipment and services, and not necessarily the replacement of one with the other.

Promoting accessible technology

Public buildings should meet access requirements. Consideration should be given to installing publicly-available technology that meets minimum inclusive design and accessibility guidelines.

Policies and design codes are mechanisms to promote the acceptance and use of universal design and inclusive technologies. This would be enhanced by illustrating universal design and inclusive technology principles with practical examples.

Importantly, the promotion of universal design principles entails access for people with all forms of disability. As well as physical and sensory disability, we also need to ensure design principles enhance access for people with cognitive, language and learning disability. Doing this well will respond not only to disability needs but also enhance access for people of all ages and varying literacy abilities, thus addressing human rights principles regarding non-discrimination and equity of access for all.

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National Disability Services is the peak industry body for non-government disability services. It represents service providers across Australia in their work to deliver high-quality supports and life opportunities for people with disability. Its Australia-wide membership includes 1100 non-government organisations which support people with all forms of disability. Its members collectively provide the full range of disability services—from accommodation support and therapy to community access and employment. NDS provides information and networking opportunities to its members and policy advice to State, Territory and Federal governments.

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