



Employment White Paper

Submission by the Alannah & Madeline
Foundation

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Executive summary

As an organisation dedicated to ensuring that all young Australians are safe and inspired with the freedom to flourish, the Alannah & Madeline Foundation welcomed the Australian Government's pledge to create a roadmap for employment 'to boost incomes and living standards and create more opportunities for more Australians'.¹

While we are not well-placed to comment on employment in general, our work addresses two topics which we believe are relevant to the coming Employment White Paper: empowering positive digital citizens and upholding the rights of children and young people online.

Our submission responds to two questions posed in the issues paper released before the Australian Government's recent Jobs and Skills Summit:

- 'How can we best take advantage of structural changes like digitalisation, climate change, the shift to renewable energy, the ageing population, and growth in the services sector and care economy to boost productivity and sustain full employment?'
- 'What investments in education and skills are needed now to take advantage of these opportunities?'²

We welcome the undertakings made by the Australian Government after the Summit to invest in work experience, apprenticeships and traineeships in digital and tech fields, and to review STEM programs with the intention of attracting more Australians who have traditionally faced barriers to participation.

However, we submit that growing the workforce of Australians with specialist skills in digital/tech roles – while important – is not enough. New and evolving digital technologies are bringing massive changes to multiple jobs and industries, affecting the majority of people. We trust the Employment White Paper will address this issue in full and consider (amongst other things) how Australia can prepare to uphold the rights of young people entering an increasingly digitalised workforce and encourage optimal life outcomes for them.

This submission addresses three approaches we believe are especially important:

- Preparing for the impact of new immersive, interactive and interconnected technologies;
- Ensuring young Australians have the knowledge, skills, values and intentions to participate responsibly, respectfully and ethically in society online; and –
- Preventing and addressing threats to the rights and wellbeing of Australians at work, occurring via digital technologies.

At the Alannah & Madeline Foundation, we help to build digital intelligence in young Australians by developing and implementing a suite of evidence-informed interventions, which are delivered at individual, interpersonal, organisational and/or community levels. These have been created in partnership with thought leaders, researchers and key industries. We also advocate for structural changes at the levels of legislation, policy, regulation and product design in order to deliver a digital world where the best interests of children and young people are upheld.

We are grateful for the strong support of the Australian Government for our work, and for this opportunity to continue to advocate for the best interests of young Australians.

Recommendations

Ensure that the Employment White Paper addresses the following topics, with clear short-, medium- and long-term steps outlined in order to deliver positive results for Australians, especially young Australians.

1. The massive changes to jobs and industries occurring due to new and evolving digital technologies. Particular attention should be paid to the ramifications of immersive, realistic, interactive and highly connected technologies known variously (and loosely) as 'the metaverse', 'immersive technology', 'extended reality' and 'Web 3.0'.
2. The importance of high-quality education and training to support Australian children and young people to build the knowledge, skills, values and intentions to participate responsibly, respectfully and ethically in society online, including in the context of their transition to work. Education and training should go beyond 'hard skills' in the use of specific technologies (although these are important) and address the full range of cognitive and social-emotional skills which individuals need in order to make positive choices online. An overview of these competencies is provided through the DQ Global Standards. It is especially important to keep building strong digital citizenship skills in Australian communities experiencing high levels of digital exclusion – a phenomenon which tends to align with rural, regional and remote locations and socio-economic disadvantage.
3. The need to prevent and address threats to the rights of Australians at work, including threats that occur via digital technologies. Examples include exposure to online bullying and harassment in the context of work and unreasonable intrusions into individuals' personal lives via digital technologies. In relation to the former issue, it might be useful to revisit the recommendations made earlier this year by the Select Committee into Social Media and Online Safety and consider how some of these could align with plans made through the Employment White Paper to deliver improved incomes and opportunities for Australians at work.

About us

The Foundation was established the year after the Port Arthur tragedy, by Walter Mikac AM in memory of his two young daughters, Alannah and Madeline. Our vision is that all children and young people are safe, inspired and have freedom to flourish.

Over the last 25 years our work has grown and evolved but our purpose remains the same. We have three program streams:

- **Safe and Strong: recovering and healing from trauma.** Linked to our origin story, we have a specialist trauma recovery and therapy service for children who have experienced significant trauma. This has grown in recent years to include working with early childcare providers, kindergartens, and now primary schools to help them build their trauma informed capability and practices. Most of our work in trauma healing and recovery is Victorian based, with our therapists and consultants working from our client's homes and places of work.
- **Safe and Strong: building positive digital citizens.** The Foundation works with schools, families and communities nationally to help children build the digital intelligence, skills and competencies they need to stay safe online and to be active, positive digital citizens. With over 10 years' experience working in the cyber bullying and wellbeing space, as technology has become ubiquitous, our work has developed into building digital intelligence, digital ethics and media literacy for all children aged 3-18.
- **Safe and Strong: bringing children's rights to life.** As a rights-based organisation, this is our policy and advocacy work. Since inception, we have advocated for firearms safety, and we convene the

Australian Gun Safety Alliance. In other key policy matters related to our programs, we work closely with the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, the Prime Minister's National Office for Child Safety and other major agencies such as the Australian Federal Police.

In 2018, we partnered with Kate and Tick Everett, after the tragic suicide of their daughter, Dolly. With them we worked to establish Dolly's Dream.

- Safe and Strong: Dolly's Dream, changing the culture of bullying. The purpose is the same, but the programs and services (Parent Hub, telephone help line, school, and community workshops etc.) are specifically designed for remote, rural, and regional families and communities, to meet their unique needs and contexts.

Preparing for the impacts of technological change

The issues paper released to inform the Jobs and Skills Summit identified as one of the key trends affecting our nation's economy over the medium- to long-term: 'Increased digitalisation, which will change the nature of work and increase demand for workers with high levels of digital and data literacy.'

The issues paper observed:

- The adoption of new and emerging technologies, creating demand for new skills and business models;
- Rapid growth in demand for STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) skills, and the relatively low rates of female participation in these areas;
- The digital exclusion of some 28% of the Australian population; and –
- A finding that only half of professional workers feel competent handling digital information and problem-solving using data.³

These are very significant issues. The Jobs and Skills Summit involved the Tech Council of Australia and some businesses specialising in digital technologies,⁴ but capacity was limited. Unfortunately, as far as we could discern, there were no participants at the Summit whose work focused on building the digital citizenship of young Australians or upholding the rights of Australians online.

Following the Summit, the Government undertook to:

- Partner with the Tech Council of Australia to develop and deliver a free national virtual work experience program, which will build awareness of tech careers and support early stage talent pathways for those who face heightened barriers to employment.
- Implement a Digital and Tech Skills Compact with business and unions to deliver 'Digital Apprenticeships'. These will support workers to earn while they learn in entry level tech roles, with equity targets for those traditionally under-represented in digital and tech fields.
- Deliver 1,000 digital traineeships in the Australian Public Service over four years, with a focus on opportunities for women, First Nations people, older Australians, and veterans transitioning to civilian life.
- Review STEM programs to attract and retain more women, First Nations people, Australians in regions, those who are culturally and linguistically diverse, people with a disability and Australians from low socio-economic backgrounds into STEM careers.⁵

These undertakings are very welcome. However, they appear to focus on one approach only: building the 'hard skills' needed by some individuals to work in specialist digital / tech roles.

It is important to go further and address the full impacts of new and evolving technologies on Australian workplaces, affecting individuals across a wide range of different roles. For example, a recent survey of 4,453 Australian adults found that nearly two-thirds used the internet at least once a day for their jobs.⁶

Another survey of over 1,000 Australian workers from many different sectors found that 61% believed that work in five years' time would require skills they did not yet possess.⁷

This belief aligns with the findings of the World Economic Forum and the global professional services company Accenture, whose recent research concluded that the pace of technology development and adoption in the workforce is likely to remain or accelerate, with digital technologies transforming the working lives of countless people, not just those in tech-specific jobs.⁸

One topic of particular importance is the emergence of what is sometimes called 'the metaverse'. This new iteration of the internet does not have a single, accepted definition but is likely to include these characteristics:

- Realistic – 3D virtual environments which participants perceive as lifelike;
- Immersive – participants feel partly or fully immersed in digital space;
- Interactive – participants interact with their surroundings and other participants, engage in transactions, and create content;
- Interoperable or integrated – participants travel between virtual spaces, taking their virtual assets with them;
- Intrusive – technologies may collect, use and share vast amounts of personal information, e.g. via facial scanning and monitoring of eye movements and heartbeat;
- Virtual economy – a digital economy powers the metaverse, with blockchain and cryptocurrencies allowing avatars to trade and buy digital items.⁹

Powerful stakeholders have invested hugely in the metaverse, with corporations, venture capital and private equity investing more than \$120 billion in the first five months of 2022 alone.¹⁰ According to Statista, the global metaverse market is tipped to be worth US\$678.8 billion by 2030.¹¹ At present, the biggest investors are large tech companies like Meta, Google, Apple and Microsoft. There has also been investment by venture capital like NFT marketplace OpenSea, and corporations traditionally based outside of the digital sector, like LEGO and Disney.¹² The current foundation for investment resembles that of social media: tracking individuals in order to target advertising and sell products.¹³

How metaverse technologies will evolve is hotly contested. However, it seems likely that over the next 5 to 10 years, these technologies will affect areas of the workforce including education and training, healthcare, retail, public service provision, tourism, entertainment (especially gaming), fitness, and policing. Areas like remote working, product modelling, design, marketing and fundraising may see particular changes.¹⁴

These new technologies will create many positive opportunities for Australians, but they also pose significant risks. When developing a blueprint for employment, it is important to understand and prepare for the dilemmas which are likely to emerge in the context of the metaverse. These may include:

- The emergence, growth, transformation, decline, and/or obsolescence of various industries and jobs.
- Dilemmas for workers as new technologies may be used to gather, use and share their personal data (e.g. eye-tracking, voice recording) and new threats emerge to their wellbeing – e.g. increased isolation, mental health concerns, and exposure to new forms of bullying or discrimination.
- Dilemmas for employers in relation to behaviour of customers, employees and competitors in the new digital spaces, and the need to handle new threats of cyber attacks, scams, mis/disinformation, and threats to brand or identity.¹⁵

Strong ethical and governance standards are needed for the new technologies, including comprehensive 'safety by design', relevant online safety legislation, and strong levels of digital literacy within government to enable timely, responsive and well-informed policy-making.¹⁶

Building the right skills for working in the digital age

To prepare for an increasingly digitalised workforce, it is important that Australian children and young people continue to have access to high-quality education to build their digital intelligence. This measure aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.25 ('children's rights in relation to the digital environment'), which states that digital literacy should be taught in schools as part of basic curricula from preschool onward.¹⁷

Education should go beyond the knowledge and skills needed in order to operate digital devices and platforms (although this is important). The ICT capability of the Australian Curriculum recognises the need to build not just technical skills, but also abilities such as identifying ethical dilemmas, establishing codes of conduct, protecting rights and privacy, and assessing the impact of ICT in the workplace.¹⁸

Similarly, the Australian Digital Inclusion Index defines digital ability (one component of inclusion) not only in terms of operational and creative abilities in using digital technologies, but also in terms of social and interpersonal abilities, such as deciding what to share, how and with whom; communicating with others; and verifying trustworthy information.¹⁹

As digital technologies transform Australian workplaces, such 'soft skills' remain important. Broadly speaking, 'soft skills' refer to non-technical personal attributes in areas such as communication, leadership, conflict resolution, time management and teamwork, as well as psychological qualities like self-efficacy, resilience and self-esteem. The 2016 Survey of Employers' Recruitment Experiences found that 72% of employers placed as much, if not more, emphasis on soft skills as on technical skills.²⁰

Such skills will continue to evolve with the rise of digital technologies – indeed, demand may be growing. In their research report 'The New Work Smarts', the Foundation for Young Australians concluded that the evolution of technology will mean that by 2030, young Australian workers will be expected to spend more time than ever on tasks that require problem-solving, critical thinking, verbal communication, interpersonal skills, learning on the job, and working independently, as well as STEM skills.²¹

Related points emerged from a recent survey of companies for the World Economic Forum. This survey found that while the rise of technology had increased demand for specialist skills in areas like artificial intelligence and machine learning, many of the top skills valued by companies were 'soft' ones like analytical thinking, complex problem-solving, creativity, leadership, emotional intelligence, and negotiation.²²

Similarly, in a report on the digital economy, the global professional services company Accenture concluded that the skills needed for the workforce included hard skills in using digital technologies and soft skills relevant to in-person and online environments, such as communication, collaboration, social and emotional intelligence, self-regulation, critical thinking, curiosity, creative problem-solving, and decision-making.

'As work becomes increasingly collaborative and task-based, social and relationship-building skills are gaining importance. These skills have always been in high demand among employers and are equally crucial to running a business ... With the rise of electronic communication and virtual workforces, these skills must be fine-tuned.'²³

In order to help young Australians prepare for working life in the context of ever-evolving digital technologies, we refer to the insights of the DQ Institute, an international think-tank dedicated to setting global standards for digital intelligence to ensure safety, empowerment, and well-being of individuals, organizations and nations in the digital age. Through their work with the World Economic Forum, the OECD, and IEEE Standards Association, they established the DQ (Digital Intelligence) Standards.

This is a set of 24 competencies comprising knowledge, skills, attitudes and values across eight critical areas of digital life: identity, use, safety, security, emotional intelligence, literacy, communication, and rights. Amongst other things, the DQ competencies cover the balanced use of technology, digital empathy, relationship management, digital footprint management, media literacy, healthy use of technology, self-

awareness and impulse management, as well as management of things like privacy, intellectual property rights, network security and cyber risks.²⁴ DQ Institute comments:

'In summary, the digital competencies should include not only the technical skills one might expect but also comprehensive competencies that include digital safety, digital rights, and digital emotional intelligence. In other words, these competencies should allow people to not just use a computer or smartphone, but to deal with the modern social and economic challenges and demands resulting from technological advances.'²⁵

It is particularly important to keep building strong digital citizenship in Australian communities that are vulnerable to disadvantage. For example, rural, remote and regional communities continue to have lower levels of digital inclusion than metropolitan centres. Digital exclusion also tends to align with low educational qualifications, low incomes, and unemployment.²⁶ Meanwhile, the 'Growing Up Digital in Australia' study found that families who were living on low incomes or experiencing school disengagement were more likely to report struggling to appropriately regulate their children's use of digital devices.²⁷

Addressing digital threats to Australians' rights and wellbeing at work

While digital technologies have brought many benefits, unfortunately many Australians have suffered harm due to negative experiences online. Some people experience harm so serious that it affects their ability to work. And some negative experiences with digital technology occur in the context of the workplace itself.

To deliver a better working future for all Australians, employers, regulators, policy-makers, digital platforms and individuals will need to get better at preventing and addressing digital harms. This is especially important in light of the Australian Government's wish to promote the participation of women and other under-represented groups in STEM careers.

Being the target of harassment, bullying or abuse inflicted via digital technologies can be especially distressing, with ramifications for people's working lives. Different studies have delivered various findings about how common this problem is. However, it's clear that a significant number of Australians have had their working lives impacted by abusive behaviours online. For example:

- A survey of 25,000 Australian workers found that in the past 12 months, 3% had been sent sexually suggestive or explicit texts, emails or social media messages in a work context, while 2% said they had been exposed to pornographic or sexual imagery in a work context.²⁸
- A survey of 1,491 Australian women and 731 Australian men found that 35% of women and 32% of men reported experiencing some form of work-related abuse online, such as unwanted messaging, negative comments, defamation or professional slurs. 71% of women and 66% of men agreed 'online abuse is prevalent in the professional world'. Half the women who had been the targets of online abuse said it had impacted their professional or personal lives – e.g. they stopped online activities for work, lost job satisfaction, or lost confidence at work.²⁹
- A survey of Australians who admitted to behaving negatively towards other people online during the past 12 months found that 7% said their target had been a colleague or former colleague.³⁰
- A survey of 1,109 Victorians working remotely during the pandemic found that sexual harassment decreased somewhat during remote working, but that almost 1 in 5 still experienced sexism or sexual harassment while working remotely.³¹
- A survey of 1,557 Australians found that 4% had experienced online harassment or abuse so severe that it affected their ability to work. Researchers estimated that online harassment and cyber hate had cost Australia's economy \$330 million in medical costs and lost income.³²

Earlier this year, the Select Committee into Social Media and Online Safety made 26 recommendations for reducing and addressing the exposure of Australians to harmful behaviours online. It might be useful to consider how some of these recommendations could align with plans under the Employment White Paper to deliver improved incomes and opportunities for Australians at work.³³

Of course, not all digital harms in the workplace are attributable to anti-social behaviour by individuals. It is also important to consider the structural threats that some technologies represent to the rights of Australians at work. It is possible that young people entering the workforce may be especially vulnerable, given their junior status and high use of digital technologies.

The expansion of digital technologies in the workplace has brought many benefits for individuals in terms of opportunity and flexibility. However, many Australians have also experienced inappropriate intrusion into their homes and personal lives. For example, a 2018 survey of 1,429 Australians found that 5% said their employers used digital technologies to monitor staff even when they were not at work.³⁴ A recent survey of 1,410 Australians found that 51% said their workplace expected or encouraged staff to work outside of their scheduled hours, and that the proliferation of digital technologies was one factor feeding this trend. Persistent exposure to such intrusion is associated with damage to people's physical and mental health, family lives and relationships with their employers. 84% of Australians surveyed expressed support for the idea of legislation to address the issue.³⁵

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of these matters further. Please contact:

Sarah Davies AM, CEO
sarah.davies@amf.org.au

Ariana Kurzeme, Director, Policy & Prevention
ariana.kurzeme@amf.org.au

Dr Jessie Mitchell, Manager, Advocacy
jessie.mitchell@amf.org.au

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