

# The role of technology to facilitate and support intercultural engagement

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## SUMMARY

This brief provides an overview of academic and grey literature on the role of technology to facilitate intercultural engagement. We focus on the practices undertaken by three key sectors – NGOs and local government, education, and community organisations – that seek to strengthen communication among diverse groups. Much of this research has highlighted that intercultural digital engagement remains more informative than interactive. There is also a need to integrate such engagement collaboratively with diverse groups to ensure there is a transfer of technological knowledge and skills.

Increasingly, education, government, and community services are moving online, with internet access regarded as essential. This shift has revealed a 'digital divide' (van Dijk, 2006; Wilson et al., 2019), drawing attention to barriers that people face including access, affordability, and ability. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index provides a comprehensive overview of Australia's online situation (Wilson et al., 2019). While the Index captures how people's social, cultural, and economic circumstances, and geographic locations, affect their digital stance, it overlooks how organisations working with diverse communities fare when it comes to digital connections and social inclusion.

Academic literature on the role of technology in migrants' lives is expanding (Fortunati et al., 2011; Greschke, 2011; Alam & Imran, 2014; Felton, 2014; Felton, 2015). On an individual level, studies find that migrants are technologically capable and can maintain connections by using the internet. We also acknowledge a growing number of studies, grounded in contact theory (Allport, 1954), that investigate the role of digital technologies in reducing discrimination, interethnic prejudice, and racism (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006; Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2015; Kim & Wojcieszak, 2018). The results from these experiments, tested with diverse groups in multiple contexts (including in online social groups, online commenting functions, and social media), indicate that digital platforms can be effectively used to reduce harmful attitudes. Further, culturally inclusive online learning has the potential to facilitate cross cultural collaborative online learning environments. Yet, a focused analysis of how migrants create intercultural connections within their neighbourhoods, using technology, is neglected. There is also little academic evidence that supports the efficacy of practices employed by NGOs, local governments, and community organisations to facilitate intercultural engagement in diverse neighbourhoods (Hanson et al., 2018; Giglito et al., 2019; Winschiers-Theophilus et al., 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought attention to gaps that exist in academic and grey literature, pushing for more evidence-based research to be conducted around social and

digital inclusion among diverse communities in Australia. To support and sustain intercultural engagement and dialogue across our communities and organisations, there is an urgent and significant need to identify the technology-based engagement practices that connect and empower interethnic connections. In what follows, we review<sup>1</sup> the existing literature around technology use and intercultural engagement while also providing key practices of strengthening communication in diverse communities. There are three sectors covered in this Research Brief: non-government organisations (NGOs) and local governments; education; and community organisations.

## NGOs and local governments

An examination of digital engagement initiatives by a number of NGOs and local governments in Australia shows that there has been a concerted transition online. For example, websites and social media are increasingly used to connect communities. Organisations are using digital methods, such as online surveys, to facilitate community consultations. For local governments, these shifts stem from the 1990s movement towards an 'E-government' and the integration of digital government services (Hanson et al., 2018). During this transition, websites and social media platforms were used as extensions of service-related communication. Empirical studies on local governments from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Europe show that technology-based engagement with citizens is largely informative. Little is known about tailoring this engagement to intercultural groups. Local governments still rely on 'offline' engagement methods to interact with the community. In these cases, digital platforms and initiatives are often used to *enhance* offline practices (Musso et al., 1999; Scott, 2006; Yates et al., 2014; Firmstone & Coleman, 2015; Bartoletti, 2016; Liden, 2016). A study by Teo et al. (2017) in the context of emergency and disaster management in Australia shows that vulnerable culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) community members are more likely to seek information via traditional mass media and mobile phone communications with friends and family as opposed to consulting local government websites. From a review of

1 Undertaking this systematic review involved using the Google Scholar platform and Web of Science database for academic literature. To ensure a comprehensive search, we used a range of keywords including 'intercultural engagement', 'intercultural dialogue', 'community networks', 'diasporas', and 'migrant engagement' coupled with keywords related to digital technologies and forms of online communication including 'technology', 'ICT', 'communication', 'online learning', 'online teaching', and/or 'collaborative online learning'. Alongside these, we also focused on sector-based keywords such as 'grassroots organisations', 'community groups/organisations', 'NGOs', 'education', and 'local councils'. We then used the keywords listed in these articles to further our search, followed by a rigorous citation search in each article. We conducted a broader search strategy for grey literature that directed us to relevant industry and practitioner reports. Moreover, we were guided by our stakeholder network to inform our initial NGO, local government, and community organisations searches to scope the work already being conducted in this space.

intercultural digital engagement initiatives from a number of local governments and NGOs in Australia, the approach here is also largely informative rather than interactive.

Among the local government and NGO websites we reviewed, there are sound examples of providing information on services in multiple languages, including the COVID-19 crisis. Examples from the local government and NGO sectors in Australia show notable efforts in providing information and support to different migrant and cultural groups both during, and outside of, the COVID-19 crisis on important issues. Settlement Services International, in partnership with SBS Australia, has established [a multilingual information and resource webpage](#) on COVID-19 with vital health information and links to relevant state and federal government websites. They also have a dedicated webpage of [COVID-19 health information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders](#). Similarly, the Victorian Multicultural Commission has developed a [Coronavirus in-language advice and information website](#) linking to relevant government departments, offering translation assistance and support, and multilingual campaign resources. Some local governments are also offering multilingual COVID-19 information via their websites (for example, see [Moreland City Council](#)). However, this fast-paced pivot towards online engagement in the current crisis has meant that not all councils have developed these kinds of resources for their communities.

The following examples from the NGO sector target intercultural groups to assist with the provision of information and to facilitate access to, and development of, culturally appropriate practices. Settlement Services International's [Multilingual Disability Hub](#) was developed to address the need for culturally competent entry points to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in 14 languages to help marginalised groups access. The Victorian Transcultural Mental Health organisation has developed the [Orientation to Cultural Responsiveness](#) online resource to facilitate greater intercultural diversity awareness among practitioners to create culturally responsive mental health systems. The [Settlement Council of Australia](#) showcases a number of case studies that support migrant community members using digital platforms that also help to increase their participation and engagement with civic life. For example, the Australian Migrant Resource Centre have developed the [DriveAbout App](#) that is available in multiple languages, including Indigenous languages, to assist young drivers to stay safe by improving their understanding of Australian road rules. There are also examples of initiatives to support [digital literacy](#) and [community leadership for migrant community members](#).

There has been a commendable effort made by the local government and NGO sector to develop technology-based strategies and practices to support greater interactive engagement and connectivity for communities and businesses, including for intercultural engagement. Yet these initiatives have not widely advanced beyond an informative capacity. Further development of such strategies and practices, for NGOs and councils, should consider the constraints of resourcing and response capacities to match the immediacy of online engagement. Moreover, the impacts on existing social inequalities and the potential to widen existing knowledge and digital literacy gaps must be considered (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015).

## Education

The use of technology in education is of great importance, particularly with students increasingly studying remotely. Diverse student cohorts across primary, secondary, and tertiary education face particular challenges when facilitating intercultural engagement including access to technology, student participation in coursework, and communication with peers and instructors (lecturers, tutors, and teachers).

The primary issue for students engaging through technology

is their access to a stable internet connection and a reliable computer. Students are continuing to experience hardship under the strain of COVID-19. This is an issue that education providers are trying to alleviate by providing financial support to students. For example, Monash University has made hardship funds available for their students, and organisations such as [Smith Family](#) and [State Schools Relief](#) (Victoria) are providing financial assistance to secondary school students.

A second barrier to learning for all levels of education – primary, secondary, and tertiary – is student participation rates. Participation is faced with further challenges with the increase in online learning, particularly for students from CALD backgrounds (McLoughlin, 2001; Hellsten & Prescott, 2004). Effective interaction with peers and instructors results in higher learning satisfaction (Chou, 2003). The challenges diverse students may face require a level of intercultural competence from instructors (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Hannon and D'Netto (2007) have noted that often instructors do not account for cultural differences at course design and delivery stages.

Cross-cultural, collaborative online learning has the potential to promote intercultural communication progress between student-student and instructor-student relationships. In tertiary education, international students have expressed concerns around using online communication tools (Liu et al., 2010). Interviews with Chinese international students in the United States found students were not confident in their English proficiency (Thompson & Ku, 2005). The informal nature of online discussion platforms led to conversations using colloquial language that required local knowledge. To create an inclusive environment, it is recommended that instructors remain mindful of these forms of conversing and promote consistent communication (Kumi-Yeboah, 2018). Online discussion spaces, such as social media, adopt a beneficial collaborative approach which provides opportunities for students to ask questions and interact with their peers (Sleeman et al., 2016). Further, opportunities to contribute to knowledge building through features in a platform on which students gather and share ideas can improve communication between students and instructors (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016; Hew, 2018).

A culturally sensitive design of online courses can also provide opportunities for engagement with students and teachers (Kumi-Yeboah, 2018). For example, employing international content in learning activities promotes intercultural collaboration in groups (Mittelmeier et al., 2018). Mittelmeier and colleagues (2018) conducted a randomised control trial of over 400 undergraduate students who had enrolled in an introductory statistics course. The instructors used both content from the local context and content from an international context when teaching students. For example, students may be asked to work with data or a case study from other countries alongside local examples. Their findings revealed that student participation increases when course content is representative of diverse backgrounds, and this allows students the opportunity to encounter new ideas and values from peers with different backgrounds.

The Victorian state education department has online databases with resources for parents and teachers. [The Languages and Multicultural Education Resource Centre](#) is a specialised library for teachers. It has online resources which aim to facilitate intercultural capability, with a focus on English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners.

## Community members and organisations

Community organisations bring diverse groups together to facilitate social cohesion through various activities and programs (Cordero-Guzman, 2005). These in-person, face-to-face activities can help to grow intercultural communication and engagement, but there are challenges associated with these programs. Often, these programs and schemes,

sometimes referred to as ‘bridge-building activities’ (Harris & Young, 2009), can become non-participative if they are dormant for an extended period of time (Phillips et al., 2014). Moreover, language barriers can make it difficult for community organisations to facilitate participation and connection with diverse community members (Wali et al., 2018).

Among some vulnerable groups (for example, refugees and asylum seekers), the uptake of technology relies on “culture and language, education level, age, language proficiency, socio-economic conditions, communication preferences, [and] familiarity with technology” (Alam & Imran, 2015, p. 347). These components should be factored into online practices and programs created by community organisations. Moreover, communication (in-person and through technology) among group members, the mutual sharing of practices between organisations, and ensuring digital safety are imperative in the pursuit of intercultural community engagement (Giglietto et al., 2019). Winschiers-Theophilus et al. (2019) have also called for a collaborative process with community members when moving to online modes of service delivery. Their research about transferring indigenous knowledge online with indigenous groups in Malaysia-Borneo and Namibia promoted an ongoing and engaged design process with group members themselves. Maintaining cultural sensitivity during these design stages, similarly to the design of online education courses above (Kumi-Yeboah, 2018), can foster increased engagement with diverse communities. These recent examples highlight that technology should comprise a robust community-oriented focus, rather than simply being functionality-oriented (Giglietto et al., 2019; Winschiers-Theophilus et al., 2019). Such collaborations will ensure that digital ways of working with diverse communities aligns with technological ability, knowledge, and access levels.

A significant challenge of promoting intercultural engagement in online settings is that the engagement barriers presented in the ‘real world’ are likely to be heightened in online settings. Currently, understanding how and under what conditions technology can facilitate intercultural engagement is largely overlooked in the academic and grey literature. As is the case with local governments, community organisations tend to use technology in an informative capacity only. At present, there is limited knowledge about how community organisations can facilitate intercultural engagement through technology. Instead, community organisations must look to practices undertaken by NGOs, local governments, and the education sectors. These technological innovations and assessment approaches can be adapted to inform grassroots practices of maintaining inclusion and cohesion. For example, the Settlement Council of Australia’s [Community Toolbox](#) provides a range of resources that community organisations could harness as they develop digital programs and activities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, [We Are Together](#), a community group created from Monash University’s ‘Leave No One Behind’ program, have held a virtual festival with activities for local community members including yoga, drawing, and music. Drawing from different sectors, and similar organisations, community organisations can implement meaningful ways of connecting diverse communities together, yet more research is needed to identify the kinds of practices that bring about significant advances in online intercultural engagement.

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