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Governance networks that strengthen older adults' digital inclusion: The challenges of metagovernance

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ABSTRACT

Studies show that digital skills and literacy training programs for older adults can help to extend digital inclusion, which remains a policy challenge around the world. However existing research provides little insight into how policy-makers can best deliver large-scale programs. This article examines the design and implementation of a nation-wide, state-led digital skills and literacy program in Australia called Be Connected that aimed to empower older adults (50 years and older) to thrive in the digital world. The article combines an exploratory survey ($n = 201$) with semi-structured interviews of training providers ($n = 19$) and draws on public management concepts of metagovernance and governance networks to explain and contextualise the program's model of implementation. It explains how policy makers and community-based organisations can successfully address the digital literacy needs and interests of older adults through a metagovernance model. We argue that the effectiveness of the model relies on finding balance between a) provision of standardised resources versus customised support, and b) achieving cohesion through shared goals whilst also promoting the diversity and independence of local organisations. An effective balance can be achieved through processes of co-creation.

1. Introduction

Coordinated networks have emerged as tools that enable governments to engage multiple actors in processes of policy making and service delivery. By providing the state with access to local knowledge and resources, networked organisations can improve the efficacy of public programs (Head & Alford, 2015) and bolster democratic processes that strengthen state legitimacy (Daugbjerg & Fawcett, 2017). Governance networks currently inform the Australian Government's strategy to improve the digital literacy of older adults. The strategy establishes and invests in a new network of over 3000 community-based organisations that can leverage local knowledge and local resources to support older adults to 'get online', to participate socially and economically through digital technologies. This state-led initiative has emerged in the context of an ageing population and digital transformations aimed at improving delivery of core public services, often prioritising 'digital by default', digital first and digital only arrangements (Bertot, Estevez, & Janowski, 2016; Yates, Kirby, & Lockley, 2015).

State-led initiatives that aim to strengthen digital participation and democratise digital citizenship, particularly among older adults, benefit from the ICT training and mentoring that local groups and organisations provide. Whether through intergenerational mentoring (Breck, Dennis, & Leedahl, 2018; Lee and Kim, 2019), training programs in local public libraries (Jaeger, Bertot, Thompson, Katz, & DeCoster, 2012) or 'computer club' gatherings in local informal spaces for culturally diverse groups (Millard, Baldassar, & Wilding, 2018), community-based organisations provide interpersonal support that helps older adults address reluctance to adopt ICTs, reduce ICT-related anxiety and improve digital self-efficacy (Arthanat, Vroman, Lysack, & Grizzetti, 2019). To implement a national digital inclusion strategy, it makes sense to work with community-based organisations and leverage their capacity to understand and address the particular barriers and drivers of digital participation for their members.

Although a network of community-based organisations can enhance digital inclusion in numerous diverse communities, there are certain political and administrative challenges to coordinating the goals and activities of member organisations so that they work towards shared, nation-wide goals. For example, while the state may promote the goal of equitability of outcomes across the network, this goal can impinge on organisations' sense of autonomy and responsibility to local communities, particularly if organisations are diverse and locally-embedded (Daugbjerg & Fawcett, 2017). Equitability of outcomes may also be

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compromised if poorly resourced organisations are unable to carry the administrative burden of engaging in all aspects of government programs, thus not being able to provide the benefits of the program to members (Chudnovsky & Peeters, 2021 Herd, 2015). These tensions are significant if the purpose of digital inclusion programs is to shift the burden of learning to use poorly designed, exclusionary and low-accessibility online services, sites and tools—for example those used to coordinate taxation, health and aged care—onto individual citizens and the community-based organisations that support them. These public administration perspectives flag the possible challenges of establishing a new, nation-wide network of over 3000 community-based organisations that supports digital inclusion among older adults.

This article examines the design and implementation of the first nation-wide, state-led digital skills and literacy program in Australia that aimed to empower older adults (50 years and older) to thrive in the digital world. The article combines an exploratory survey ($n = 201$) with analysis of qualitative interviews (n = 19) with network partner providers of the digital skills program Be Connected and draws on public management concepts of governance networks and metagovernance to explain and contextualise the model of implementation for the Be Connected program. The aim is to explain how policy makers and community-based organisations can successfully address the digital literacy needs and interests of older adults through a metagovernance model. The paper addresses two research questions. RQ1: what are the challenges of implementing a nation-wide digital literacy program that addresses digital inequities via a metagovernance model? RQ2: how do different types of community-based organisations leverage program resources and strategy to engage and address the needs of the program's target group?

The case study evaluation of the Australian Government's Digital Literacy of Older Australians strategy (2016–2020)—a first national-scale evaluation of this kind (McCosker et al., 2020)—offers an opportunity to explore some of the core tenets of public management concepts of governance networks and metagovernance in a digital inclusion context. After contextualising the need for coordinated policy approaches to addressing inequalities of digital inclusion and participation, we relate principles of metagovernance to the program's provision of financial, educational and administrative resources. Our findings show that while the diversity of participating organisations was one of the strengths of the governance network, it posed challenges to hands-off approaches to metagovernance because administrative burdens often prevented organisations in greatest need of support from drawing on the resources provided. We argue that a network governance model can be successful in addressing inequalities of digital participation if there is a good balance between a) provision of standardised resources versus customised support, and b) achieving cohesion through shared goals whilst also promoting the diversity and independence of local organisations. An effective balance can be achieved through processes of co-creation.

2. Deepening digital participation through co-creation

In international research examining digital inequalities, distinctions have been drawn between measures of access to digital technologies to how those technologies are used and the tangible outcomes they generate (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). Among other populations, older adults are considered particularly vulnerable to missing out on the benefits of digital technologies, signalling a significant participation gap (Hargittai, Piper, & Morris, 2019). Digital participation is understood in this context to involve citizens' intentional and explicit action in the varied domains of (online) life such as business, politics, culture, health and education (Lutz, Hoffmann, & Meckel, 2014). According to Lutz and Hoffmann (2017), the concept of digital participation tends to be used in ways that frame citizens' experiences of digital media as positive and empowering. Digital literacies and skills can be addressed as pathway competencies enabling or improving these forms of digital, social and economic participation (Eshet, 2004).

State-led programs can support digital participation by improving digital literacies—or the digital skills, digital self-efficacy and attitudes that guide individuals' decision making about *how* to engage online. For Gatti, Brivio, and Galimberti (2017), older adults become more confident to use internet technologies when they are supported to develop a greater awareness of the terminology and uses of particular internet technologies ('integration'), and to experience new ways of communicating with others and expressing themselves ('empowerment'). These two processes bolster digital self-efficacy by improving one's awareness and sense of control over his or her role when using internet technologies ('autonomy').

Studies show that the efficacy of digital literacy programs depends in part, on the extent to which various actors—including governments, community-based organisations, researchers and learners—contribute to *co-creating* programs (Hughes, Foth, Dezuanni, Mallan, & Allan, 2018; Quan-Haase, Martin, & Schreurs, 2016; Seo, Erba, Altschwager, & Geana, 2019). Co-creation enables ICT training and mentoring programs to combine insights into the interests and needs of individuals or communities, with expertise in pedagogical approaches to improving digital literacies and participation. Programs that emphasise a learner-oriented interests-based approach have been particularly successful in building skills and sustaining engagement among older adults (Beh, Pedell, & Mascitelli, 2018; Davis, McCosker, Bossio, & Schleser, 2018). This approach promotes understandings of digital participation not as external to the lives of individuals or communities but rather, as embedded in everyday practices (Helsper, 2012; Quan-Haase et al., 2016).

When studying the implementation and co-creation of ICT training and mentoring programs, researchers have focused on pilot programs that are small and localised. For example, Hughes et al. (2018) examine a social living lab in a regional town in Australia (Townsville), in which local residents and organisations worked with researchers to explore current and innovative uses of digital technologies relevant to their individual, social and work-related needs. In the USA, Seo et al. (2019) similarly conducted formative research to engage a seniors' community centre that serves low-income African Americans in the design and implementation of weekly ICT classes over four months. In both cases, research teams played key roles in facilitating the evolution of the programs and supporting organisations to build capacity to shape digital literacies *with* participants. It is difficult to extrapolate to what extent these localised, co-created initiatives can be effectively replicated on a larger, national scale.

There is some evidence to suggest that opportunities for co-creation may be compromised in larger, public-sector digital literacy programs that are instead more likely to strive for consistency. In South Korea, Lee and Porumbescu (2019) find that government regulation promotes consistency across communities by requiring local governments to follow a set curriculum for their ICT learning programs. While the program improved overall use of e-government services, Lee and Porumbescu found that standardisation of training also precluded progress for those with lower educational attainment, which often included citizens with unique learning needs. Prioritising consistency over co-creation may undermine opportunities for ICT training programs to meet diverse needs and thus alleviate digital inequalities. The study also leaves unanswered questions about the extent to which take up, adaptability and speed of service delivery differed across participating organisations. Engagement in state-led programs carries administrative burdens that often reinforce existing inequalities and exclusion, as vulnerable groups tend to have lower levels of program take-up (Chudnovsky & Peeters, 2021; Peeters, 2020).

In Australia, the federal government has set up a governance network with the aim of meeting digital literacy needs in multiple diverse communities. Operationalising the government's Digital Literacy for Older Australians strategy (2016–2020), the Be Connected network brings together over 3000 community-based organisations that

provide older adults with physical spaces for learning, internet access, ICT hard- and software, and interpersonal relationships among mentors and learners(McCosker et al., 2020). State actors draw on various metagovernance strategies, detailed below, to coordinate the network around shared goals and practices. Although this approach aims to move away from standardised service delivery, public administration scholars argue that local-level priorities and activities can nevertheless become constrained by network-level priorities and activities (Daugbjerg & Fawcett, 2017; Sørensen & Torfing, 2019). Before we address the question of how community-based organisations leveraged program resources to address members' needs, we first conceptualise the nature of these resources in terms of metagovernance strategies through which policy makers coordinate governance networks.

3. The metagovernance of Be Connected

Metagovernance is a good tool for understanding how in the context of a large-scale program, policy makers can work with community-based organisations to address the digital literacy needs and interests of older adults. In Public Administration research, the concept of 'metagovernance' refers to the strategies through which governments 'steer' governance networks to deliver public services that meet policy objectives (Bevir, 2013). Metagovernance is distinct from bureaucratic (or hierarchical) and market-based (or competitive) forms of governance (Osborne, 2010) in that it involves the implicit shaping of operating contexts—i.e., rules and norms, knowledge, institutional tactics and other political strategies (Whitehead, 2003)—with a view to steer organisations' goals, priorities and practices. Governance networks grew to prominence in the 2000s in response to wicked problems that called on policy makers to decentralise problem solving, encourage cross-sector collaboration, and leverage local knowledge and resources (Weber & Khademian, 2008).

A key metagovernance challenge, however, is for policy makers to work with complexities that arise from variation in organisational decision-making. Whilst conceptualisations of governance networks often emphasise the *interdependence* of networked actors (Sørensen & Torfing, 2007), scholars increasingly look at how the *autonomy* of actors affects opportunities for policy makers to steer networks (Stark, 2015). The literature on administrative burdens highlights how for individual citizens, voluntary engagement in government initiatives is often influenced by availability of time and skills, attitudes towards the state, and compliance costs (Chudnovsky & Peeters, 2021; Peeters, 2020). Organisations similarly vary in their command of resources, and how they make sense of a network's shared goal, what the future holds, and the formal and informal rules that shape their unique operating context (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2014). The challenge for policy makers is to select metagovernance strategies that create an operating context in which organisations will work towards shared goals, without undermining diversity and autonomy of organisations.

According to Sørensen and Torfing (2009), state actors can employ 'hands-off' and 'hands-on' strategies of metagovernance. Whereas hands-off strategies do not see state actors directly involved in day-to-day activities and interaction between networked organisations, hands-on strategies do. Strategies can also entail the governance of resources (including information and financial resources) or political power (Sørensen & Torfing, 2019). Table 1 shows how the distinction between hands-off and hand-on metagovernance, and governance of resources and political power enables a conceptualisation of four distinct strategies of metagovernance—network design, framing, management and participation (Sørensen & Torfing's, 2009)—that are mapped on a two-by-two matrix.

Table 1
Hands-off and hands-on metagovernance via governance of resources or power.

	Governance of resources	Governance of political power
Hands-off	Network design	Network framing
Hands-on	Network management	Network participation

Source: authors.

In the case of Be Connected, state actors focused on network design—i.e. *hands-off* metagovernance of *resources*. Before inviting community-based organisations to partner in the Be Connected network, state actors made decisions about overarching goals of the network, eligibility criteria of organisations and what resources would be made available. The shared goal was for organisations to increase the digital literacy, confidence and online safety of people over 50 years of age to enable them to participate online and access the fundamental social and economic benefits of internet technologies. Diverse types of community-based organisations that worked with older adults across Australia were eligible to partner in the network. The state steered and supported community-based organisations with *financial and educational resources*, including tiered grants and an online learning portal with instructional material and learning management system.

Rather than becoming involved in the *hands-on management* of the network, the state appointed an 'arms-length body' (Hammond et al., 2019)—a non-profit organisation with a mission to support socially excluded people to improve their lives via engagement in digital technologies—to serve as National Network Manager. In the first stage of the program, the National Network Manager focused on recruiting diverse organisations and administering tiered government grants. The National Network Manager also developed *administrative resources* such as newsletters, a website and telephone helpline that provided community-based organisations with suggestions for how to recruit, apply for financial support, and plan and provide digital mentoring sessions. The National Network Manager was in ongoing, high-level consultation with state actors.

Although state actors did not leverage political power to establish the Be Connected network, this can be an effective strategy for coordinating large networks of community-based organisations. Through hands-off network framing, state actors can position the network and its purpose relative to other policy priorities, thus giving it particular status in the public eye. The alternative is to leverage political power whilst taking a hands-on approach to network participation, where the state can become involved in networks' shared decision-making—leveraging its authority to influence policy agendas, the range of feasible options, premises for decision-making and negotiated policy outputs (Klijn, Steijn, & Edelenbos, 2010; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). While these metagovernance strategies were not used to establish the Be Connected network, they may nevertheless enable state actors to manage the complexities that arise from the autonomous decision-making of networked organisations (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2014).

Before illustrating how community-based organisations responded to metagovernance in the context of the Australian Government's Digital Literacy of Older Australians strategy (2016–2020), we briefly outline the research design and method.

4. Research design

Targeting the second research question, the study collected qualitative and quantitative data from program managers to gain insight into how community-based organisations leveraged Be Connected resources to support the digital literacy needs of older adults in local communities. Whilst findings from qualitative, semi-structured interviews ($n = 19$) are the focus of this article, we also include findings from an exploratory quantitative survey (Pertl & Hevey, 2010) of network partner providers ($n = 201$) to illustrate the extent of shared experience among different types of participating organisations. The article later addresses the first research question, regarding the challenges for policy makers in using a metagovernance model to implement a nation-wide digital literacy program that addresses digital inequities, by discussing the implications of varied organisational engagement with program resources.

The purpose of 19 semi-structured phone interviews was to gain

insight into how and why different types of organisations (with unique goals, practices, structure and culture) provided digital literacy support to older adults in their local communities, and what implications these organisational contexts held for how organisations engaged with Be Connected program resources. Interviews were conducted in April and May 2018 and were 30–45 min in duration. Organisations were purposefully selected to ensure diversity across location (covering regional and metropolitan areas in each state of Australia) and organisation type (including libraries, neighbourhood houses, senior citizen clubs, aged care providers, lifestyle villages, shared interest groups, ethnic community groups, and others). From a metagovernance perspective, variation in organisational features and decision-making create complexities in governance networks that pose challenges for policy-makers to steer organisations (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2014).

Transcriptions of audio-recordings were analysed in NVivo via a two-step thematic coding process. Data that reflected on the financial, administrative and educational resources of Be Connected were first deductively indexed according to those categories (Saldaña, 2015). Working with existing concepts of digital participation and governance networks, an inductive and deductive process was then used to thematically analyse data within each category (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). A sample of five interviews were double-coded by two researchers to assess inter-coder reliability and iterate themes.

Findings from analysis of qualitative data were complemented by an exploratory analysis (Pertl & Hevey, 2010) of a short survey of network partner providers ($n = 201$). The survey included multiple choice and short-answer questions to assess the uptake of program resources, the usefulness of available resources, preparedness to deliver the Be Connected program and how aspects of the program had been adapted and delivered. At the time of data collection, the Be Connected network included 992 community-based organisations and all organisations were invited to complete the online survey. As some respondents administrated the program in multiple organisations, the 201 responses reported for a combined 350 organisations. Survey findings carry a 95% confidence level with a margin of error of ±5.5%. Logistic regression and descriptive statistical analysis were used to examine how the use of Be Connected resources and delivery of program elements differed across different types of organisations.

Three types of community-based organisations were distinguished from the survey responses: digital skills, community welfare and lifestyle organisations. *Digital skills organisations* (37% of respondents) included public libraries and computer clubs—organisations that had a history of providing formal digital skills learning programs. *Community welfare organisations* (33% of respondents) included local councils, neighbourhood houses and aged care providers—organisations in which digital skills training was one of many areas of support for essential social and economic participation. *Lifestyle organisations* (30% of respondents) included retirement villages, senior citizens' clubs and ethnic councils. These organisations provided digital literacy support as a way of promoting community connectedness through socialising, shared interest and shared identity. Each category of organisation interpreted the purpose of digital literacy and participation in different ways (e.g. to access information versus to access essential services versus to foster community connectedness and solidarity) with implications for how and why the organisations provided digital literacy support to older adults in their local communities.

The analysis that follows focuses mainly on the qualitative component of the study to illustrate how different types of community-based organisations leveraged program resources to engage and address the digital needs of older adults in their respective communities. The findings inform a discussion about how policy makers can best design metagovernance strategies to overcome the challenges of coordinating a large network of community-based organisations to effectively address digital inequities.

5. Findings

The study found that in most cases, the different types of resources that the state provided as part of Be Connected helped organisations to enhance their capacity to deliver digital skills and literacy support. Organisations engaged with financial resources differently to administrative and educational resources, with implications for how Be Connected addressed digital inequities across communities. Standardised community grants were readily taken up by all types of organisations, enabling the program to reach older adults at numerous locations and of varied life circumstance. Use of administrative and educational resources, by comparison, depended on how well the resources could be integrated with existing organisational practices or the capacity of organisations to adjust these resources if needed. Organisations that were not already providing structured digital literacy and participation programs found it most difficult to use educational and administrative resources in meaningful ways.

5.1. Financial resources

To support community-based organisations, 40% of the Be Connected budget was allocated to community grants. At the time of this study, organisations had applied for the initial 'start-up' grant, which could be spent on enhancing the ICT learning set-up—including ICT devices, broadband fees, general liability insurance and police checks of mentors. Organisations were generally successful in obtaining funding, so long as they had certain risk management processes in place (regarding police checks, insurance and accessible buildings), and a commitment to recruit the required number of learners in the subsequent 10-month timeframe.

Community-based organisations spent their start-up grants in similar ways, with the majority of interview participants stating that they had spent the income on purchasing new ICT devices. This had different effects in different organisations. Relatively well-resourced organisations that had long been offering digital skills support diversified their ICT equipment, whereas less-resourced organisations that were just starting to offer digital skills support often procured one new device for the group to share and/or paid for internet connection fees. A logistic regression of survey data shows that lifestyle organisations were 5.4 times more likely to use funding to pay for internet fees compared with digital skills organisations that tended to already be providing digital literacy programs prior to joining Be Connected ($p = .004$). Because digital skills organisations, including libraries and computer clubs, already had the infrastructure in place to provide support, their needs and uses of start-up grants differed greatly from those organisations new to digital inclusion activities.

The following excerpts illustrate the different impact of standardised grants in different organisational contexts:

> *We have sufficient money to buy a lot of things ourselves if we need it, however [someone] rang from Be Connected and intimated that it'd be a good thing if we did apply for it. We know bugger all about Apple, so we thought it'd be good if we could get an iPad.*
>
> (Computer club, metropolitan South Australia)

> *The $1500 is not going to go a long way for new places to start up. …the seniors club that does not own a computer, how are they going to start up with $1500?*
>
> (Retirement Village, regional Victoria)

Aged care providers were often in greatest need of financial help. These organisations grappled with compounding factors of residents' higher needs, requiring ICT set-ups for both learning and recreational personal use, and needing to justify investment in ICT over a breadth of other wellbeing programs. A wellbeing officer in a not-for-profit aged care provider explained that her building was not fitted with wireless

internet and so residents were required to come to a 'computer lab' to learn, practice and recreationally use the internet. Standardised funding made it difficult for this organisation to access sufficient financial resources to create an ICT set-up that enabled residents to progress meaningful digital literacy and participation.

Although diverse types of organisations were equally able to appropriate financial resources, the standardisation of grant value prevented organisations that had poorer ICT infrastructure and/or serviced citizens with higher needs from catching up to the standards of better resourced organisations. In cases where organisations had ongoing investment in ICT devices and upskilling of mentors to enable ongoing provision of structured digital skills learning programs (as was the case digital skills organisations), the grants tended to serve as 'top-up' rather than 'start-up' grants.

5.2. Educational resources

Alongside financial resources, Be Connected also included a new online learning portal that hosted educational resources—specifically, training modules and a learning management system (beconnected.esafety.gov.au). The online learning portal aimed to help organisations to save time and other costs related to independently creating resources and monitoring the progress of learners. How organisations used the Be Connected online resources depended on the fit between training modules and digital skills of learners, and whether the learning management system complemented the processes through which organisations already engaged and supported its members.

While content developers aimed to provide learning material that would support absolute beginners, community-based organisations found the material to be too advanced for some, and too basic for others:

> *With some of the people… their English is like Pidgin English… I went onto a couple of the programs myself just to see, like the ones, 'What is a computer' and I thought, 'That is actually too advanced for them'.*
>
> (Community Group, metropolitan Victoria)

> *The programs that are on there are very basic. A lot of people are looking for the next step. Be Connected doesn't have that.*
>
> (Community Resources Centre, regional NSW)

In other cases, research participants reported that educational resources did not meet their learners' needs because modules (e.g. about email or internet browsing) were not tailored to specific types of devices (e.g. tablets, laptops or smartphones) and/or did not incorporate interactive activities that engaged learners. Rather than taking on the administrative burden of adjusting the educational resources to meet the needs and interests of learners, many organisations reported looking for other content to support engagement of older adults.

Similarly, if the Be Connected learning management system did not complement organisations' existing practices, organisations rarely explored how to change what they were already doing to align with the design of Be Connected. A senior citizens' club in a regional area, for example, had a particularly flexible approach to providing digital literacy support: '*We just say: The doors are open. The computers are there. Just turn it on and do whatever, yell out for help.*' Rather than direct learners to the Be Connected learning portal, this organisation preferred to search the internet for information as the need and interest arose: '*We don't use the learning resources... we can find out anything just by searching on the internet.*'

Organisations were more likely to refer to the Be Connected educational resources if they had previously delivered digital literacy support. Survey data show a positive relationship between the number of digital skills programs an organisation had previously been involved in and their use of the Be Connected learning portal (Spearman correlation, $r_s = 0.21$, $p = .003$). A logistic regression also shows that digital skills organisations were 2.47 times more likely to use the learning management system compared to lifestyle organisations ($p = .02$) and 2.29 times more likely than community welfare organisations ($p = .02$). Rather than change the digital skills support that they already provided, digital skills organisations tended to find ways of integrating the new online learning portal into existing practices.

In particular, public libraries and computer clubs often referred learners to the online learning portal to support revision and further learning at home:

> *Part of the goal is to teach people how to find things for themselves, and that's where Be Connected site is very useful. In half an hour you can really only cover a couple of things… 'If you want to go over that or you want to do the next thing here's a really good site that I recommend that you come in and do on your own time'.*
>
> (Public library, ACT)

A well-established computer club similarly added the new Be Connected educational resources to its existing catalogue of instructional material and encouraged learners to draw on these resources at home as a way of revising what they had learnt in class.

The challenges of addressing digital inequities through provision of educational resources are different to those of offering financial resources. Unlike financial resources, standardised educational resources carry assumptions about the skill level of learners and the organisational practices that guide interaction between mentors and learners. These assumptions cause standardised educational resources to be better suited to support certain learners and types of organisations.

5.3. Administrative resources

To help adjust educational and financial resources to local needs, community-based organisations could access administrative resources that were developed by the National Network Manager. Resources included fortnightly e-newsletters, a telephone helpline, and a website with instructional material about how to administer Be Connected—including, for example, how to apply for program funding, how to recruit new learners, how to support mentors and how to understand learners' needs when preparing sessions.

Administrative resources offered to support community-based organisations to address common challenges of administering digital literacy programs, such as upskilling mentors:

> *The other really big [challenge] is the digital mentors: how to create them from people who are as basic as the people that we're trying to teach… we will need to make it not scary to become one as well.*
>
> (Public Library, ACT)

> *…we have to try and find time to train the volunteers*
>
> (Community Resource Centre, regional NSW)

Yet, despite the widespread need to upskill mentors, organisations rarely drew on the administrative resources that were provided for this purpose. The survey data indicated that less than half of respondents accessed resources for mentors. Research participants said that they did not have the time or money to use the resources and/or they did not consider the resources helpful for their existing practices. Lifestyle organisations, in particular, were significantly less likely to report accessing online resources for mentors than either digital skills (OR = 0.38, $p = .01$) or community welfare organisations (OR = 0.31, $p = .002$). Organisations struggled to make use of administrative resources when it required that they adjust and invest in internal organisational practices.

As the National Network Manager was commissioned to be 'hands on' in the creation and management of the network, it was best placed to assist community-based organisation in the day-to-day administration of Be Connected. During the first six months of the program, however, the

National Network Manager was focused on the resource-intensive process of establishing the network—i.e. recruiting and inducting thousands of diverse, community-based organisations. Research participants often found that the forthcoming, customised support that they received whilst joining the network dropped off as the National Network Manager channelled efforts to expanding the network. To receive further support, organisations needed to follow-up:

> *Just the first week or so that I joined up, they gave me a good welcome and everything but I haven't heard—apart from their newsletter—I've heard nothing from them.*
>
> (Seniors club, regional Victoria)

> *In early days when we first signed up…the information flow was excellent. Then there was the lag time… I do need to follow through with them.*
>
> (Vocational education provider, regional Queensland)

With organisations reluctant to be guided by generic online material, customised support (e.g. through the telephone hotline) tended to be the preferred type of support. This highlights the challenge for administrators in navigating the tension between early facilitation of hands-on co-creation within organisations (particularly within resource-poor organisations keen to improve internal capabilities or practices) whilst also establishing a large network of organisations united around shared goals and practices.

6. Discussion

In this article we have examined how policy makers and a network of community-based organisations can address the digital literacy needs and interests of older adults through a metagovernance model. The challenges and successes of this approach have been examined via a case study of Be Connected, a national digital inclusion program in Australia, in which the state commissioned a new network of more than 3000 organisations and provided new resources for digital literacy support in local communities.

Many community-based organisations benefited from being involved in this state-led initiative. Access to financial resources in particular enabled organisations to improve, update and extend the ICT and digital literacy support that they provided, even if this did not fully meet members' needs. But organisations varied in the ease with which they integrated new administrative and educational resources into existing organisational practices. In the first stage of Be Connected, the design of educational and administrative resources better suited structured learning programs that tended to be provided by organisations with a strong existing commitment to digital literacy and mentoring. Yet, it is the organisations that provide general social support to older adults that may offer new opportunities to expand the reach of digital literacy support into new communities.

Whilst the findings and analysis presented above point to the broad success of the metagovernance model of this program, they also highlight the challenge for policy-makers of finding balance between a) provision of standardised resources versus customised support, and b) achieving cohesion through shared goals whilst also promoting the diversity and independence of local organisations. The conceptual distinctions that this article has drawn between hands-off versus hands-on metagovernance, and provision of resources versus use of political power are valuable for discussing opportunities for co-creation in the context of governance networks, particularly in terms of the roles that actors could play to enable governments to better address digital inequities.

The key feature of the Be Connected network that enabled it to deal with the social complexities underpinning digital inequities was the *diversity* of participating organisations. Among network members were public libraries that offered one-on-one ICT appointments with patrons, aged care providers that integrated use of ICT into wellbeing programs, community associations that supported groups with low English proficiency, and others. Research shows that creating a network of diverse actors is challenging. According to Qvist (2017), organisations tend to join networks if they *already* relate to or identify with other network actors. This process of self-selection brings about networks of homogenous actors. Be Connected overcame this challenge through the state's *network design,* which called for diversity among participating organisations with a large target number of organisations (this was a key performance indicator for the National Network Manager) that was greater than the traditional 'digital skills organisations' that already existed. Financial resources incentivised organisations that felt they did not necessarily have much to benefit from the program (e.g. computer clubs that felt that had what they needed to meet their members' ICT needs) and organisations that knew they could benefit however at a high cost (e.g. some retirement villages and cultural clubs). These hands-off, resource-focused strategies of metagovernance encouraged diversity among network members.

Paradoxically, the *diversity* of organisations also made it challenging to address digital inequities through standardised financial and educational resources. Organisations differed in their systems and practices (affecting how they interacted with members) and resourcing (including existing ICT equipment, capacity of staff or volunteers to engage with new programs, and skills of members). Had the organisations with the poorest resources (such as not-for-profit aged care providers whose ICT set up did not meet residents' needs) reported the best alignment with program resources, then one could argue that the program was geared towards addressing digital inequities through effective resource distribution. Instead, our analysis shows that in the first six months of the program, resources resonated most strongly with organisations such as public libraries and computer clubs that had a history of offering relatively structured digital literacy learning programs. Some of these organisations certainly serviced communities in significant need of support. However, there were also organisations (such as senior citizens' clubs in regional areas) that serviced in-need populations via less formal practices. These organisations tended to have more difficulty in leveraging program resources to bolster their provision of digital literacy support. This may be because co-creation is an integral part of effectively engaging and working with vulnerable groups and works well to generate 'buy-in' in the production of shared value (Grönroos & Voima, 2013).

The state's hands-off approach to developing resources offered few opportunities for community-based organisations to be involved in shaping the resources they were encouraged to use. While some organisations and learners were involved in consultation during the development of resources, it was only once resources were centrally created that the majority of organisations were invited to adapt and appropriate them to suit local need. In the absence of an early co-design process, the expertise of those who created resources was separated from the expertise of those at ground level who had good insight into the particular needs, interests and practices of individual learners and organisations. The separation of expertise complements hands-off metagovernance. Theoretically, it gives community-based organisations space to act independently, in the interest of their own members and communities. But it also assumes that community-based organisations have the *capacity* to independently adapt and appropriate resources as needed. Our analysis shows that this was not always the case.

Organisations made decisions about whether the administrative burden of becoming involved in Be Connected, particularly via the appropriation of program resources, was worth it. The public administration literature on administrative burdens shows that variation in people's capacity and willingness to engage in state-citizen interactions is often influenced by the individual's availability of time and skills, attitudes towards the state, and compliance costs (Chudnovsky & Peeters, 2021; Peeters, 2020). Our study has shown that organisations are also affected by these and other considerations. As administrative burdens—including waiting times, treatment by bureaucrats, learning

costs, costs of stigma and stress (Herd, 2015; Peeters, 2020)—tend to be felt most severely by vulnerable social groups, they often have the effect of reinforcing existing inequalities (Peeters, 2020).

Hughes et al. (2018) and Seo et al. (2019) have shown how third parties can support organisations at ground level by facilitating the feedback loops that inform the adjustment of resources. Later stages of administering the Be Connected community grants increasingly began to incorporate feedback mechanisms—enabling iterative adaptation and flexibility that was not present in the early stages. This raises questions about the extent to which it is possible for administrators to simultaneously facilitate co-creation (particularly within resource-poor organisations) whilst also establishing the shared goals and practices that unites a large network. If opportunities for co-creation are offered early in the development of new initiatives, the deeper and more effective they are likely to be.

An ongoing challenge for metagovernors, therefore, is to provide strong, visible leadership at a time when leadership on complex social problems is best enhanced by interactive consultation and community-level involvement or co-design (Sørensen & Torfing, 2019). To address this challenge, state actors need to be creative with how they combine distinct metagovernance strategies. In the context of Be Connected, more *hands-on* involvement in the day-to-day activities of networked organisations could have offered new opportunities for co-creation that brought together different types of expertise to improve the validity of the content of resources and how they were structured. Co-creation could assist in diversifying resources so that they better suit the needs of diverse community-based organisations.

The process of co-creating resources may also open new flows of information and resources across the network—helping networked organisations to become aware of how they could support each other. To encourage this sense of solidarity and cooperation across the network, the state could look to leverage its political authority to pursue the hands-off metagovernance strategy of network framing—positioning the purpose of the network as a policy priority. While nation-wide digital literacy programs may never resolve the tension between the need for state leadership and the need for local responses (Daugbjerg & Fawcett, 2017; Sørensen & Torfing, 2019), a combination of metagovernance strategies is most likely to create opportunities for co-creation of resources and the program more broadly—thus mitigating inequities of digital participation through community-level, digital literacy support.

7. Conclusion

State-led, nation-wide initiatives that support older adults to develop digital skills and confidence present unique opportunities to alleviate digital inequity. When administered through a network of diverse, community-based organisations, these state-led initiatives have the capacity to support older adults in various life circumstance, as well as to share learnings and resources across communities. The challenge for policy makers is to enhance local and network activity via a good balance between being involved in the day-to-day activities of organisations and networks (hands-on metagovernance) and providing resources and issue framing from a distance (hands-off metagovernance).

This article has argued that metagovernance that creates opportunities for co-creation is essential in programs that have the capacity to address digital inequity. In large programs, co-creation may be achieved by clustering organisations according to mission, resourcing and client needs, and using hands-on metagovernance to involve them, even if only representatively, in the development of resources. Promoting the visibility of the network (via hands-off network framing) and encouraging community-based organisations to conceive themselves as part of a larger network may also encourage flows of information across organisations and communities. If state-based administrators and networked organisations are aware of the relative strengths and needs of organisations, they may be better positioned to tailor resources and political support in accordance with need.

This article has forged new ground in research on the government's role and approach to alleviating digital inequities. It has examined the key challenges for policy makers in resourcing and coordinating nation-wide digital participation programs that leverage diverse, community-based organisations. These initial insights could be extended via a longitudinal study that examines whether and how the challenges illustrated above are resolved as programs develop. Further, understanding the perspectives of policy makers could help elucidate the political and/or logistical issues that prevent state actors from engaging in more network framing, network management and network participation, that this article has suggested could assist in working with the social complexities that give rise to digital inequities.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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