



Media Release

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'Australia Tax' on IT hits people with disability hardest

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) has urged both sides of federal politics to commit to a whole-of-government accessible IT procurement policy, which has been recommended in the final report of the IT pricing inquiry.

Among multiple recommendations aimed at reducing the so-called "Australia Tax" applied to technology products sold in Australia, the parliamentary committee acknowledged in its report that the higher prices can leave people with disability disproportionately worse off because they are often in the lower income brackets and rely on specialised technology for communication, inclusion and independence.

These issues and more will be discussed next month at ACCAN and Telstra's M-Enabling Australasia 2013 conference (www.regonline.com.au/m-enabling), being held at the Australian Technology Park Conference Centre in Sydney on August 14-15.

About one in five Australians have some form of permanent disability but many apps, gadgets and websites are not accessible, meaning [millions are potentially missing out](#) on the digital revolution.

ACCAN argued in [its submission](#) to the IT pricing inquiry that Australia lags behind many OECD countries, which have included IT accessibility criteria in their public procurement regimes.

ACCAN believes the government should implement a whole-of-government accessible IT procurement policy as it would help drive down the exorbitant prices currently paid by people with disability for IT products and significantly increase the employment opportunities for people with disability.

In the US, an accessible IT procurement policy has already led to an increase in availability and lower prices for accessible IT products.

"As one of the largest buyers of ICT, the government has the purchasing power to stimulate the market to give us a greater choice of accessible products and services," said ACCAN disability policy advisor Wayne Hawkins.

"If, as part of the tender process, governments explicitly say they wanted to buy ICT that is accessible for people with disability, companies will try harder to include those features when designing and developing new products."

Mr Hawkins added: "The lack of a comprehensive public procurement policy for accessible IT undermines Australia's commitment to its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities."

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The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is Australia's peak communications consumer organisation. The operation of ACCAN is made possible by funding provided by the Commonwealth of Australia under section 593 of the Telecommunications Act 1997. This funding is recovered from charges on telecommunications carriers.

Last week Minister Assisting for the Digital Economy, Kate Lundy, said the government [remained committed](#) under its Digital First policy to delivering the majority of government services online, including via smartphones and tablets, by December 2017. ACCAN believes this must include accessibility requirements from the outset.

During the switchover from analogue to digital TV, the government required accessibility to be included in set-top boxes in its Household Assistance Scheme. As a result of this requirement, two Australian manufacturers have included accessibility in their set top boxes whereas previously there were no Australian manufacturers making them.

In its report the committee recommends that the Australian Government consider adopting a whole-of-government accessible IT procurement policy to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities and their carers. It said such a scheme should be undertaken by relevant agencies including AGIMO and involve consultation with stakeholders including ACCAN.

The committee also acknowledged that many IT products, hardware and software designed for people with disability are expensive and often cost significantly more in Australia than overseas. These products include optical character recognition software used to scan printed material, screen readers that provide speech or Braille output, magnification software to enlarge text, adapted keyboards, onscreen keyboards and voice recognition software.

For example, the JAWS screen reading software is available in the US for \$1095 and for \$1420 in Australia.

Mr Hawkins told the committee that “the higher price that consumers in Australia pay is detrimental to all consumers, but there is a significantly higher impact on vulnerable consumers and particularly consumers with disability”.

“The research that is available shows us that Australians living with disability are over-represented in the low income socioeconomic groupings, and these higher prices significantly impede their access to all of the vital services that are now being provided online with telecommunications,” Mr Hawkins said.

According to the Australian Council of Social Services, recent studies have shown that of the people receiving the Disability Support Pension, 38% lack at least \$500 of emergency savings and 26% have recently been unable to pay utility bills.

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Interviews: ACCAN disability policy advisor Wayne Hawkins is available for interviews. Call Asher Moses on 0438 008 616 or email asher.moses@accan.org.au