Digital Inclusion Policy for Nova Scotia

Background

The pandemic has made clear the importance of digital communication for all members of our society. Immigrants who have beginner or no digital literacy skills, like many other Nova Scotians, are isolated, with either limited or no access to important information, education, and job opportunities.

Skills training in digital literacy, access to appropriate technology, and access to affordable, broadband, high-speed internet connections are important tools and strategies to enable immigrants to successfully settle and integrate in our province and to contribute to the economic development of Nova Scotia.

Digital Inclusion Policy for Nova Scotia

We believe that a digital inclusion policy would benefit individuals and communities across our province – not only immigrants, but also thousands of community members who are struggling to connect virtually in an effective and accessible way.

The goal of this policy would be to create a community where everyone can participate in and benefit from digital technologies. The policy would help guide the government investment needed to meet this goal, and it would require an approach that spans all government departments.

The policy would address:

- Digital literacy education and training for all members of our community
- Access to technology and affordable internet service for low-income households
- Availability of accessible and assistive technologies for people with disabilities
- Availability of broadband, high-speed internet service across the province (access to both fixed and mobile digital networks)
- Design of government applications and online content that enables and encourages self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration, which would also evolve as technology advances
- Equal access and opportunity for individuals and groups that represent a diversity of race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, language, gender, and ability

For more examples of the benefits of digital inclusion and what form it can take at the provincial level, see Ontario Digital Services' key priorities.

Why is a Digital Inclusion Policy Important?

It would directly support vulnerable immigrants and citizens by decreasing isolation and improving information accessibility.

- Digital equity and inclusion strategies have been identified by settlement agencies across Canada as key to long-term, successful settlement and integration. While some immigrants can be among the most digitally literate and connected, others can be among the most vulnerable, therefore remaining digitally, socially, and economically isolated. It is important that immigrants not be left behind.

- Digital inclusion is key for many immigrants who have beginner English/French language skills, as it would enable them to access information in their first languages – particularly during crisis events such as the COVID pandemic. Many government agencies (the Canadian Public Health Agency, for example) are now translating critical information in multiple languages that is only available online.

It would increase integration and retention, and thus strengthen our economy.

- Many government programs, educational institutions, and businesses are delivering significant services online. In some cases, signing up for programs (for example, local recreation programs) can only be done by online registration. For immigrants to participate fully in the social and cultural opportunities in our communities, which would enable them to integrate successfully and meaningfully, there is a need to ensure they can access these services online.

- A strong digital economy that supports everyone in their engagement with the labour market would attract immigrants and international investment to our province, and it would encourage the retention of immigrants.

- Many of the largest employers in the province recruit new staff partially or fully via online platforms. As gaining employment is key to the successful retention of immigrants to Nova Scotia, equitable access to digital skills and technology is imperative even outside of the technology labour market sector.

It would define how the province plans to integrate digital technology in its public service and improve digital literacy.

- A provincial digital inclusion policy would develop a roadmap for digital transformation as well as a vision for digital literacy for all Nova Scotians, with an emphasis on supporting those most vulnerable. This policy would support organizations working with specialized groups so that digital literacy can be adapted to their context/needs.

- Digital transformation is happening at a rapid pace, so we need a comprehensive government approach that supports adaptation.

It would create a more inclusive, equitable, and welcoming province overall.

- Digital inclusion is a social justice issue.

- For many immigrants, the only way they can stay connected to family and friends is through virtual platforms. Enabling easy, affordable, and accessible virtual connection is a strong statement we can say as a province that we care about you, your families, and friends and we want to support you in staying connected with others while you make your home here with us in Nova Scotia.

Overall Benefit to Our Province

As Marco Campana writes, "to fully participate in education, access community resources, and be a part of the democratic process, people must have access to the internet, working devices, and technical skills." ("Digital Inclusion and the Digital Divide")

A digital inclusion policy would support all Nova Scotians participating in the social, economic, and cultural life of our province now and into the future, and it would strengthen our local communities across the province.

For more on the importance of digital inclusion, please read Ryerson University's report "Digital Infrastructure for the Post-Pandemic World" and Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA)'s press release on the "staggering scale of Canada's urban-rural digital divide."