

SUBMISSION No. 26

The Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety
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Response to 'Kids and cyber-safety'

Summary:

- Online resources transcend social and geographical obstacles to learning.
- Internet filtering is at the expense of educational outcomes and social-equity.
- Public libraries are the core Australian centres for equitable internet access and would be most damaged by a reckless filter.
- Australia's high school and higher education completion rates are being supported by open access to online resources.
- The recommended control method is training and awareness for risk management, rather than an attempt to simply cover-up of cyber-threats.

This submission aims to make the Committee aware of the risks inherent in broad-based internet filtering at the expense of educational outcomes and social-equity among Australians. Despite the recent media and public concern over online safety, the reality for Australian education and industry is that the internet is an overwhelmingly positive resource. It is, in fact, one of the only far-reaching assurances of equal-access to learning, and one that transcends social, economic, and geographic circumstances.

Australia's 1,610 public libraries offer extensive access to online resources and have embraced the internet as a tool to support every family - regardless of their circumstances. Public libraries are often the only access point to online resources for those who don't own personal technology, and there is substantial evidence to show that public libraries' online resources positively affect schools, businesses, families, as well as the long-term economy of local communities. Any effort towards widespread electronic precaution by the Commonwealth (such as blanket filtering), will result in public libraries and their users facing the worst of the consequences. While there is reason to consider the risks of online safety generally, unnecessarily aggressive filtering of internet content will only interrupt the positive interactions occurring in communities.

Our experience and perspective: What we know

Our organisation is Australia's only provider of online, one-to-one, on-demand tutoring. Our mission is to help all students across Australia overcome socio-economic, geographic, cultural and other obstacles to learning, making high quality, one-to-one tutoring accessible in every community. To accomplish our mission we work with public libraries and other institutions to ensure every family has access to free educational tutoring.

To make use of our service - called **yourtutor** - requires no software, no registration, just access to a website. This ensures the greatest number of Australian families can connect to the service without any complex technical requirements. **yourtutor** uses the internet's reach to transcend social and geographical obstacles to learning. Now high quality after-school tutoring is available beyond the wealthiest pockets of our cities; students in the most remote and isolated communities -- including the Pilbara, Kimberley, Arnhem Land and Cape York -- can all get connected to a tutor for real-time learning.

More than 150 local government areas across Australia and more than 60 schools use **yourtutor** every night to access schoolwork support. As soon as a student becomes confused, frustrated, or interested in a particular concept, they can log in online and begin a live conversation with an expert, trained, and background-checked Australian tutor who will guide them through their question. We've delivered more than 300,000 of these learning sessions, with demand doubling every year since 2004.

The Committee needs to be aware that any type of filter it considers recommending for the purpose of addressing cyber-safety, may or may not prohibit cyber-threats, but certainly could prohibit the positive aspects of online learning, and thus harm Australian families and students who find online tutoring such a compelling way to learn.

The impact of the internet on higher education in Australia

In recent years universities have also started to provide support for **yourtutor** in communities to help strengthen students' ambition to enter higher education and their ability to succeed once there. Research into Australia's weak university enrolments led to the Bradley Review in 2008. The report concludes that the '*mobility*' of people, ideas, and institutions and the fast rise in '*open source knowledge*' are vital ingredients for the health of Australia's economy, for Australia to compete for university enrolments internationally, and to build a culture of learning nationally for generations going forward.

While cyber-safety threats must be carefully considered and acted upon, the most damaging outcome would be to establish general filters that restrict the effectiveness and benefits of online learning. Rather than hinder these benefits, alternative solutions based on promotion of awareness and information on the use of online resources would better suit Australia's needs.

Human vs electronic controls

Our organisation's experience in cyber-safety is extensive. As an organisation that helps hundreds of thousands of students engage with qualified tutors using interactive online tools, our policies and monitoring are comprehensive. Our safety controls are both human and technological. Electronic filtering and control methods can only go so far and are also capable of being subverted by willful human activity. We employ hundreds of tutors, and our core control method is training and awareness to keep students safe and keep both tutors and students anonymous. Similarly, we work to educate students and their families on the correct use of online tutoring and the consequences of inappropriate behaviour.

Taking action: Recommendations for the Committee

Education and prevention have always been more effective than technical band-aid solutions when addressing society-wide challenges. Covering up cyber-risks with a broad filter will not teach families best practice use of the internet. Instead such steps may give a false sense of security to adults while temporarily hiding risks from sight. Those young people most at risk are, in fact, also most likely to find their way around filtering technology. Such artificial barriers only provide more incentives for bypassing those obstructions.

The solution to the issue of online safety for Australia's youth is clear. As a nation we need to educate the public about online resources and safe behaviour, not lull the public into a false sense of security using a paternalistic and infantilising technological solution. The current work being done by ACARA (the Australian Curriculum And Reporting Authority) to develop a national curriculum should include a component that covers online safety and awareness for all school children, starting in kindergarten. Only by a concerted, national education effort that encompasses schools, teachers, parents, and children will we develop the societal knowledge base to make use of the great potential of the internet without putting our children at risk.

In its consideration of online mitigation, the Committee should make its top priority establishing public awareness so that families and young people can make the right decisions about their online behaviour.

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