16 Stephanus Road, Glen Marais
Kempton Park, 1619
ispa.org.za
010 500 1200
queries@ispa.org.za

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The Universal Service and Access Agency of South Africa (USAASA)

Attention: Mr Trevor Nivi (Policy Research and Strategy)

Email: consultation@usaasa.org.za

Dear Mr Nivi

SUBMISSION: DISCUSSION DOCUMENT ON UNIVERSAL ACCESS AND UNIVERSAL SERVICE

1. The Internet Service Providers' Association of South Africa (ISPA) refers to the Discussion Document on Universal Access and Universal Service published by the Agency on 1 October 2026 and sets out below its written submissions.

General submissions

2. The publication of the Discussion Document by the Agency is most welcome.
3. Having current and dynamic definitions of universal access and universal service and a shared understanding of what these terms mean is obviously fundamental to attaining universal and meaningful connectivity in South Africa.
4. It is also crucial to developing the regulatory framework governing universal access and universal service contemplated in the Electronic Communications Act (ECA), ensuring that the USAF is operational and that universal service and access obligations (USAOs) are targeted, effective and enforceable.
5. For these reasons ISPA strongly supports the initiation of this process.
6. ISPA has also noted the accompanying Discussion Document on Discussion Document on Categories of Needy persons and Subsidy Application and Payment Modalities and further supports the consideration of affordability of services and devices as a key aspect of reviewing the definitions of universal access and universal service.
7. ISPA has noted the publication by the Development Bank of South Africa (DBSA) of a Digital Infrastructure Investment Study, which finds in clear terms that the primary challenge before us in closing the digital divide is affordability of services and devices. The Agency is urged to review this Study if it has not already done so.
8. The timing of the two Discussion Documents also aligns with an initiative to establish a national broadband infrastructure GIS database, which ISPA sees as a complementary process.

The Agency's recommendations and the Minister's determinations should not include targets

9. ISPA submits that the scope of this process should be limited to defining what the terms universal access and universal service mean in the context of South Africa in 2027 (with a forward-looking element and subject to regular review).

10. ISPA acknowledges that the 2010 Determination included some short-term targets but notes that:

    10.1. At that time there were no explicit universal access and universal service targets, such as have been subsequently set out in policy documents such as the SA Connect National Broadband Policy and the Medium-Term Development Plan 2024-29 (MTDP 2024).

    10.2. It is not specifically within the Agency's brief, but it is hoped that updating the universal access and universal service definitions will prompt a review of the SA Connect targets against a current baseline.

    10.3. The setting of targets should be part of a broader review process led by the DCDT in consultation with public (such as the Agency, ICASA, DBE, COGTA and others) and private stakeholders.

Options for consultation

11. ISPA supports Option B (Targeted Revision) as the correct starting point for this exercise.

12. This option preserves the distinction between universal access as a community-level measure and universal service as a household or individual measure, while allowing for updating definitions to reflect current reality and future developments.

Access and service

Question 1: Should universal access continue to describe a reasonable opportunity for people in every community to use services through publicly available means, while universal service describes provision obtainable by individuals or households? What alternative distinction would be clearer?

13. ISPA supports retaining this distinction.

Question 2: What evidence would show that shared public access is available, usable, and accessible in different geographic and social settings?

14. ISPA notes the following:

    14.1. ICASA has publicly stated that it currently does not have the budget or the tools necessary to monitor the availability and quality of services across South Africa.

    14.2. ICASA and the Competition Commission both track affordability of fixed and mobile services through annual publications.

    14.3. In the short-term there will be continued reliance on operator reporting but it is submitted that better evidence can be obtained through crowd-sourcing and community-based metrics.

14.4. Further, the national broadband infrastructure map referred to above will help with establishing availability of connectivity across the country.

14.5. Availability in hard to serve areas can also be a function of energy availability and resilience. Resolving these issues is beyond the Agency's control but a lack of electricity or reliable alternative energy sources has a direct impact on universal access and universal service.

15. The development of a monitoring, enforcement and learning framework that works in rural areas should be prioritised.

Minimum services and technological neutrality

Question 3: Which service categories should the minimum set expressly include? Are there categories in the 2010 determination that should be restated or removed?

16. ISPA supports a complete review of the 2010 service categories.

17. A suggested minimum set could include:

17.1. Broadband internet access

17.2. Voice and messaging services

17.3. Free access to emergency numbers, and

17.4. Public and community broadcasting.

18. Service categories should be technology neutral to reflect the fact that universal access and universal service can be achieved through different communications technologies and combinations of technologies.

19. ISPA suggests that the Agency consult with ICASA in respect of its current process to update USAOs originally imposed on Telkom in 1997.

Question 4: How should broadband capability be described so that it is meaningful and measurable without rapidly becoming outdated?

20. Acknowledging constraints relating to monitoring of quality of service (QoS), ISPA supports the use of basic QoS metrics such as download and upload speed, latency and packet loss in the short to medium term.

21. The Agency should have reference to ICASA's imposition of coverage obligations in radio frequency spectrum licences issued subsequent to the 2022 spectrum auction.

22. These metrics must be frequently reviewed based on monitoring and data collected.

23. In future, ISPA would support a move towards describing broadband capability in terms of functional user outcomes: describing the available service in relation to things which consumers understand, such as video streaming by number of concurrent users.

24. It would also be useful to have an idea of the scalability of broadband capability: to what extent can this be upgraded to cater for (inevitable) future demand.

Question 5: How should broadcasting be reflected, including accessible services and language needs, within the scope of this determination?

25. No response.

Affordability, quality, and accessibility

Question 6: Which attributes should appear in the core determination, and which should be measured through periodically reviewed targets or guidance?

26. The Ministerial Determination under section 82 of the ECA should define the core elements of universal access and universal service:

    26.1. Availability, including QoS and energy availability

    26.2. Affordability, including affordability of devices

    26.3. Digital skills and online safety.

27. Dynamic metrics relating to the above should be stipulated in a schedule to the Ministerial Determination. The Agency has the powers under sections 82(3) and 82(4) to review these on a regular basis and make further recommendations to the Minister. ISPA submits that this should be a standing item in the Agency's Annual Performance Plan and other strategic documents.

Question 7: What affordability measures would best reflect the circumstances of people at risk of exclusion? Should connection charges, recurring charges and appropriate user equipment be considered separately?

28. Affordability metrics should account for total access costs.

29. ISPA has made further submissions on this topic in its response to the accompanying Discussion Document relating to affordability issues.

Question 8: Which measures of quality, reliability and accessibility are both meaningful to users and capable of credible independent verification?

30. Please see the response to question 4 above.

Use, enabling conditions and public institutions

Question 9: What role should devices, skills, safety, and relevant content play in defining or measuring universal access and universal service? Which should be addressed through complementary programmes?

31. ISPA supports the ITU Universal and Meaningful Connectivity (UMC) approach and recognises that the Agency has had reference to this framework in developing the two Discussion Documents.
32. There is no explicit policy support for this approach in South Africa but there are different policy documents and initiatives which target the six elements of UMC individually. ISPA notes that the targets included in the MTDP 2024 reflect a movement towards the broader UMC model on the part of National Government.
33. introducing a focus on devices and affordability as well as using international indices to benchmark progress.

34. If this approach is adopted – as ISPA submits it should be - then digital literacy, online safety and cybersecurity are also core elements of universal access and universal service and should be referenced in future definitions.

Question 10: How should access through public institutions be reflected without confusing the determination with eligibility for particular USAF subsidies?

35. ISPA has made further submissions on this topic in its response to the accompanying Discussion Document relating to affordability issues.

Targets and updating

Question 11: Should a future determination contain numerical targets? If so, which measures, source data, geographic scale, review interval and responsible institution should be specified?

36. Please refer to the response to question 6 above.

37. Under section 82(4) the Agency is empowered to be the responsible institution, but it will need to consult with ICASA, the Department, Statistics South Africa and other sources of data.

38. As noted above, ISPA believes this work should be ongoing with the intention of updating the schedule containing detailed metrics every 2 to 3 years.

Question 12: What transitional issues would arise if an existing substantive provision were amended or replaced?

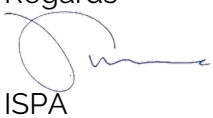
39. ISPA is not aware of any transitional issues.

Conclusion

40. ISPA emphasises its support for the Agency in moving forward with implementing the universal access and universal service regulatory framework.

41. ISPA requests the opportunity to participate in any upcoming stakeholder engagements and public hearings.

Regards



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