UNSW CANBERRA

Public Service Research Group

Things worth sharing in 2021

A major theme of the work done by the **Public Service Research Group** at UNSW Canberra is to not only undertake research but to use it to inform both policy making and implementation. As a consequence, we often publish in non-academic forums, including The Mandarin, The Conversation and blog-site The Power to Persuade. This short booklet presents some of the key contributions we have made this year to highlight the range and scope of the things we do.

About PSRG

The Public Service Research Group (PSRG) performs timely, high-quality and reliable research into public policy implementation and draws on this to deliver world-class executive education and professional development. We partner with organisation clients to produce new insights into effective public service implementation and evaluation to solve real-world problems. When we partner with the public service, including not-for-profits, the public sector and private organisations, we work with them to understand their needs, develop a tailored solution, and build up the organisational and individual capacity for problem solving.

Key Research Strengths
Research within the PSRG broadly focuses on issues of policy implementation in a public service context. Our research crosses several different disciplinary, methodological and subject boundaries.

To organise our research, we use four major themes to focus our activity:
- Capability
- Complex Systems
- Ethics
- Inclusion

PSRG research projects build local practice while advancing global knowledge. We enable independent practice and collaborative thinking and provide educational activities that embed new policy and program implementation insights into practice settings.

Depending on the issues of the day and the research interests of our associates, the focus of the Group's activities may change. We currently have a critical mass of capabilities in:
- reform of disability services
- public service implementation
- gender and flexible working
- project and program management
- public service institutions, governance and management
- public sector strategic human resources.

We hope you enjoy reading the **PSRG Things Worth Sharing in 2021**, our collection of publications in non-academic forums. Other booklets in this series:
Things worth sharing in 2018
Things worth sharing in 2019
Things worth sharing in 2020

To view all of our publications, including submissions to government, journal articles, and our own research briefs and issues papers please visit our website at https://unsw.adfa.edu.au/public-service-research-group/publications.

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We need urgent COVID-19 vaccination for people with disability

By Anne Kavanagh, **Helen Dickinson**, Nancy Baxter.
Published online October 18, 2021 by **InSight+**.

As New South Wales reopens and Victoria edges towards its own reopening, recent modelling suggests these reopenings will trigger an escalation in cases, hospitalisations and deaths (here, here and here).

Vaccine targets have become part of the narrative; however, these are based on the average for the whole population. At current pace, groups at risk of poorer outcomes from COVID-19 – First First Nations Australians, people with disability and other disadvantaged populations — may be vaccinated at lower rates than the broader population as the country starts to reopen.

People with disability as an at risk population group

International experience shows people with disability are at increased risk of acquiring COVID-19 and more likely to become seriously ill or die if infected. In the UK, people with intellectual disability were eight times more likely to die of COVID-19 than the general population, and disabled people made up 58% of deaths.

Additionally, many people with disability are clinically vulnerable: they are more likely to smoke; have higher levels of obesity and chronic conditions such as diabetes and respiratory and cardiovascular disorders; and face barriers accessing high quality health care.

People with disability who require face-to-face support are more likely to be exposed to COVID-19 from support workers who may support other people with disability, with higher exposure for those living in settings with other people with disability, such as group homes and boarding houses.

Ethical and equitable vaccine allocation frameworks

Most countries faced the problem of limited vaccine supply. The World Health Organization has a roadmap for the allocation of COVID-19 vaccinations and the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine released a framework for Equitable Allocation of vaccines. Both focus on maximising benefit in terms of social and economic wellbeing and health for the public. They also emphasise values and principles, including equal respect, where every individual is given meaningful opportunity to be vaccinated; equity, considering risks of groups who are vulnerable due to societal, geographic and biomedical factors; engagement with the public; and transparent, accountable and fair processes.

Prioritisation is part of an equity-focused vaccination, but it is insufficient. Schmidt and colleagues (2021) identify additional activities for equity-focused vaccination strategies, namely: greater share of vaccine appointments to priority groups, tailored outreach and communication, locating vaccination sites to ensure accessibility, and monitoring uptake of vaccination, including aspirations to reaching higher vaccination rates among disadvantaged, at-risk groups.

How does Australia's vaccine strategy stack up for people with disability?

Prioritisation of people with disability

Consistent with principles of equal respect and equity, Australian people with disability were prioritised for vaccination. Those living in residential settings (group homes) were in Phase 1A – the highest priority. People with disability with chronic conditions and those with severe mental illness and intellectual disability were included in Phase 1B. Vaccination for Phase 1A was to commence in February 2021 and be complete by April 2021 and Phase 1B to commence in March 2021. Later, all participants in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) over 12 years of age were prioritised for vaccines.

More vaccine appointments

In February and March 2021, the vaccine rollout was limited to priority groups, meaning vaccine appointments should have been available. However, because of the failures in outreach, communication, and accessibility of vaccination sites, described below, this did not occur.

People with disability report the inaccessibility of the online vaccine booking system, difficulties getting through on the phone line for bookings, the eligibility tracker not being up to date preventing them from making bookings or not being recognised as being in the priority group, and getting conflicting advice from medical practitioners and COVID-19 helplines about their eligibility. As states and territories began to offer vaccines to people in later phases (eg, people aged 50–59 years, then 40–49 etc) people with disabilities found themselves jostling for vaccine appointments with people who had not been prioritised.

Tailored outreach and communication

The Commonwealth government did not do any targeted communication about vaccines before mid-2021. Even then, communications were largely on government websites with mixed availability of Easy Read material for people with low literacy, and Auslan videos. The first webinar on vaccines for people with disability, their families, and carers, was held by the Commonwealth government on 15 August 2021, and a webinar for people with intellectual disability and families was held on 1 September 2021 in partnership with Inclusion Australia – the peak advocacy body for intellectual disability.

In the absence of government leadership, many organisations have developed their own materials, but the lack of resources has them and other stakeholders doing more. The Victorian Government enhanced the role of their Disability Liaison Officers across health regions to support people with disability and supporters to find vaccine appointments in appropriate settings.

Planned location of vaccination sites to ensure accessibility

People with disability living in residential settings were promised a home visit for vaccination. Scheduled to begin in February 2021, by 17 May, only 999 residents (4%) had received at least one dose. In-reach COVID-19 vaccination clinics did not really start until mid-June.

Like the general population, people with disability were eligible to receive vaccination through GPs and vaccination clinics. However, some sites are not physically accessible and large vaccination hubs are not appropriate for some people with disability for whom crowded, noisy spaces may be overwhelming. Others have extreme fear of needles so sedation may be required, but access has been limited.

Initiatives such as the low sensory load clinics in the Australian Capital Territory and Sydney and in-reach vaccination to private homes have provided alternatives for some people with disability who might find it impossible to be vaccinated in other settings. But these initiatives have been patchy and not consistently implemented across States and Territories.

Monitoring vaccine uptake

The NDIS participant database and the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission's screened worker database have been linked to the Australian Immunisation Register (AIR) to monitor vaccination rates among NDIS participants living in disability residential settings and in the community as well as support worker vaccination rates.

While this information is critical, it misses many people with disability and an unknown number of care workers. NDIS participants must be less than 65 years at the age of entry, have a severe and permanent disability, and not be in another scheme that provides support (eg, accident compensation schemes). The NDIS includes nearly 470 000 participants, approximately 10% of the Australian population with disability. The NDIS screened worker database includes workers employed by providers registered with the Quality and Safeguarding Commission and linked to the AIR (approximately 170 000 workers). However, participants who manage their own funding can use unregistered providers, so the exact size of this workforce is unknown.

Until 5 September 2021, the government did not report any vaccination figures for disabled people or workers except in press releases, media reports and Senate Committees. Since then, the rates for NDIS participants living in residential settings and registered disability support workers are reported several times per week on their vaccine tracker dashboard. On 12 October the first dose vaccination national rates were 81.2% for NDIS participants in residential settings (n = 22 053) and 79.1% in disability support workers (DSWs) (n = 167 086) and second dose rates were 73.5% among NDIS participants in residential settings and 67.4% in DSWs. This compares to 83.2% and 64.4%, respectively, for the general population.

The most recent rates for all NDIS participants aged over 16 years (n = 267 526) were released by the Senator for the NDIS and relate to vaccination rates as of 12 October, and are shown in Figure 1 (a–c). Vaccination rates are compared with general population rate for Victoria and NSW for 12 October 2021 – the jurisdictions that have large caseloads and significant community transmission. We also compare vaccination rates for NDIS participants with people aged 70 years and older who were prioritised in Phase 1B.

Figure 1a. Vaccination rates NDIS participants 16+ years compared to Australian population 16+ years and 70+ years

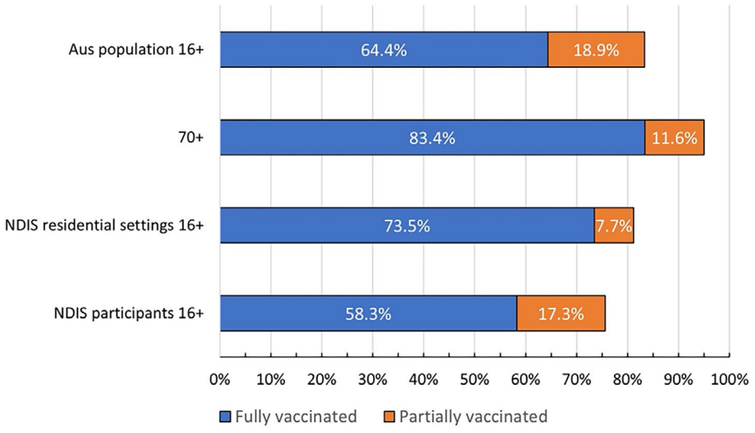


Figure 1b. Vaccination rates Victorian NDIS participants 16+ years compared to Australian population 16+ years and 70+ years

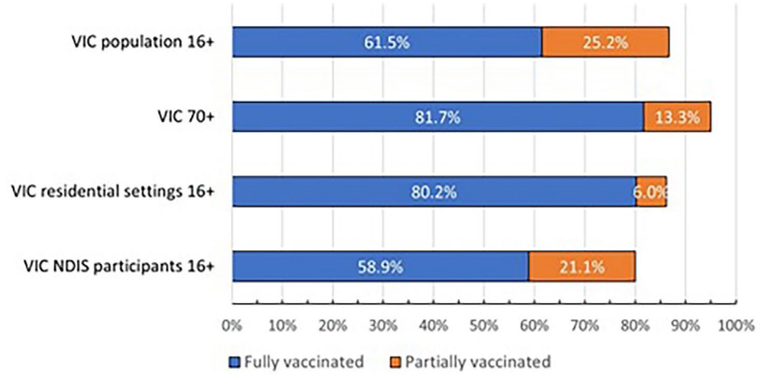
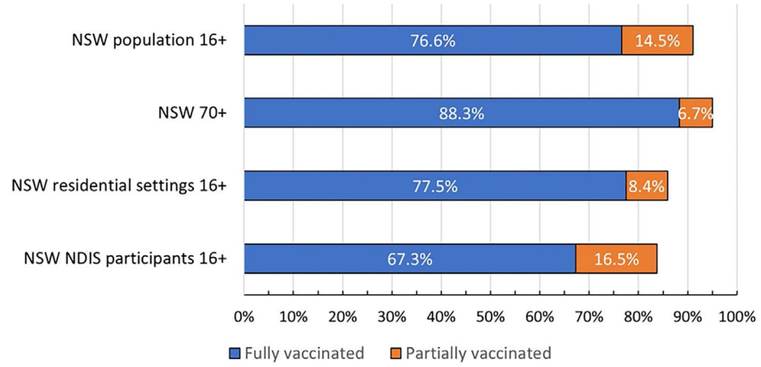


Figure 1c. Vaccination rates NSW NDIS participants 16+ years compared to Australian population 16+ years and 70+ years



Nationally, NDIS participants have at least one dose rate 8% below the national rate. Second dose rates lag by 6%. The gap in fully vaccinated NDIS participants is at least 25% lower than in Australians aged 70 years or over (the rate in this population is reported as >95%, so the gap could be larger).

Other than *The Guardian newspaper*, and recent government media releases, there has been no public reporting of vaccination rates across jurisdictions and local government areas and disaggregation by type of disability (eg, intellectual, autism, physical disability).

The lack of transparency and granularity in reporting of vaccination data makes it difficult to target vaccinations in particular areas with lower vaccination for people with disability and among people with different types of disability.

Have we achieved ethical and equitable vaccine allocation for people with disability?

Other than prioritising people with disability, Australia has comprehensively failed to meet ethical and equitable vaccine allocation for people with disability, according to internationally accepted frameworks supporting the findings of the Disability Royal Commission's Special Hearing on the COVID-19 vaccine rollout for people with disability. Additional appointments, tailored outreach and communication and accessibility of vaccines have not occurred. The lack of quality data to monitor uptake reflects long-standing problems with disability data in Australia. For the data that are available, there has been a lack of transparency in reporting, which has meant that the government has not been held accountable for their failures, and it has been impossible to plan targeted outreach to unvaccinated groups of people with disability.

Where to from here for people with disability?

With NSW and Victoria about to remove restrictions with significant caseloads, there is no time to lose. We recommend:

- Commonwealth and state and territory governments provide resources to advocacy groups to provide tailored communication and, where necessary, advocacy groups organise appointments for people with disability experiencing barriers to access.
- Rapidly upscale accessibility through in-reach vaccination to settings where people with disability live, learn, work and recreate (eg, private homes, boarding houses, schools), and prioritise vaccination appointments through the eligibility checker and phone line.
- Increase the capacity of the Disability Gateway (provided through the Commonwealth Department of Social Services) to organise appointments for people with disability through a dedicated phone line, like the Disability Liaison Officers in Victoria.
- Provide regular reporting on vaccine rates across local government areas and type of disability on a public facing website.
- Set higher vaccination targets (over 90%) for people with disability, as has been called for by First Nations advocacy, medical and other expert groups.

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Australia needs more Pacific mid-skill migration: here's how to facilitate it

By **Satish Chand**, Michael Clemens, Helen Dempster.
Published online October 15, 2021 by **DevPolicy Blog**.

Turn on the news these days and you're likely to be confronted with articles about worker shortages. Nurses, cooks, construction workers, accountants, care home employees, all seem to be in demand throughout high-income countries. Despite this need, these countries currently do very little to attract migrants with vocational skills, hoping that local workers, automation, and offshoring will reduce the need.

The Center for Global Development (CGD) recently published two studies that explore this dynamic in Australia. The first outlines the demand for these "mid"-skill workers in Australia through to 2050, finding a gap of two million roles unlikely to be automated or offshored. Those won't be met through local labour supply unless Australians work at jobs below their skill level. The second study details how this vocationally-skilled migration could be facilitated from the Pacific Islands, through a new Pacific Skills Visa (PSV).

An eternal frustration in calculating the demand for immigration is understanding what the gap truly is. It's not enough to know the extent of the labour shortage, now and in the future: you also need to know how much of this labour shortage will be met by training local and how many roles will be automated or offshored. The difference could be considered the demand for migrant workers.

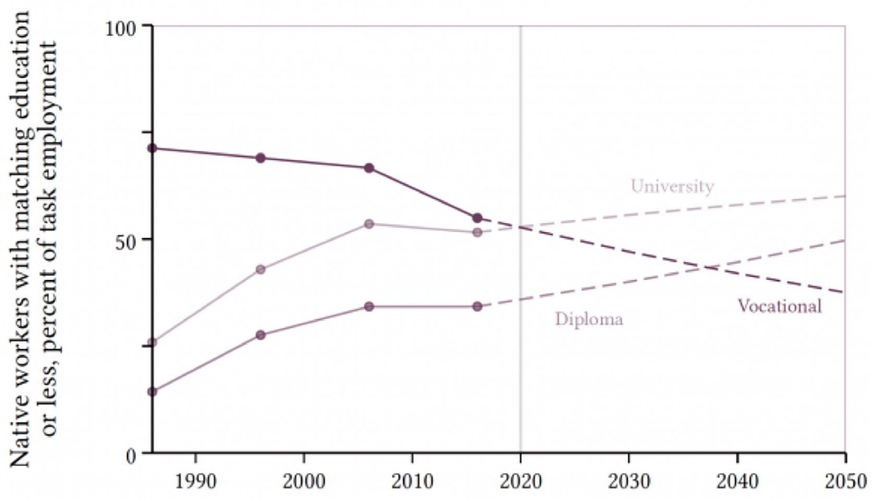
In our first paper, we built a simple model to distinguish between falling relative demand for some tasks that do not require a university education – those that are being automated or offshored – and those with stable relative demand. These we call fundamental workers, professions such as carers, carpenters, chefs, and hairdressers. We find a large gap between the demand for fundamental workers and local supply, reaching roughly two million by 2050.

Sustained economic growth requires highly educated workers, who in turn require fundamental workers to do their jobs. In a hospital room, for example, the surgeon works together with a nurse's assistant, a building cleaner, a food service worker, and an electrician to bring the patient back to health. No hospital room could function without the labour of all of these, and other, workers.

If historic economic growth is to continue, the gap between demand and supply of fundamental workers will exceed one million slots in the labour force by roughly 15 years from now. This estimate takes into account trends in technological change (automation of vocationally-skilled roles) and trends in Australian's educational choices (affecting the supply of local vocational skill).

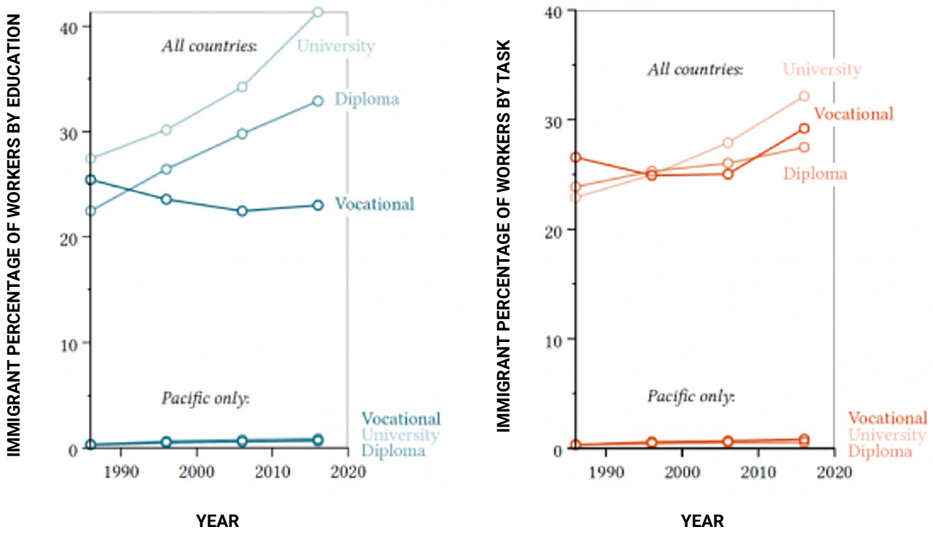
Australian demand for fundamental workers is fairly constant, but the number of locals who have the qualifications for these roles is declining (Figure 1): within a few years, more than half of all vocational-level work in Australia will be filled either by migrants or locals with more education than is needed to perform their jobs. Managed migration will be needed.

Figure 1. Changing supply of local workers by task group



In theory, Australia could get these workers from anywhere, but the greatest opportunities lie in the low- and middle-income nations of the Pacific Islands. These countries have long provided labour to Australia through seasonal agricultural programs. But the rates of migration remain very low; almost none of the work-based migration to Australia has come from the Pacific, at any level (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Immigrant fractions by task and education



Source: Tabulations from full-count census data provided by Australian Bureau of Statistics. "Pacific island countries" are all island member states of the Pacific Island Forum.

This highlights a major opportunity. Nearly every Pacific Island country has a large and increasingly skilled youth population, but struggles to generate the quantity and quality of jobs needed. This population could be trained in skills in demand in Australia and other high-income nations across the Pacific Rim.

One benefit to training these workers in the Pacific is cost. In our second paper, we outline the costs of training for three "mid"-skill professions: accountants, computer science graduates, and chefs. These costs are all much lower within local Pacific institutions than in comparable centres in Australia and New Zealand, despite the quality of the final degree being similar.

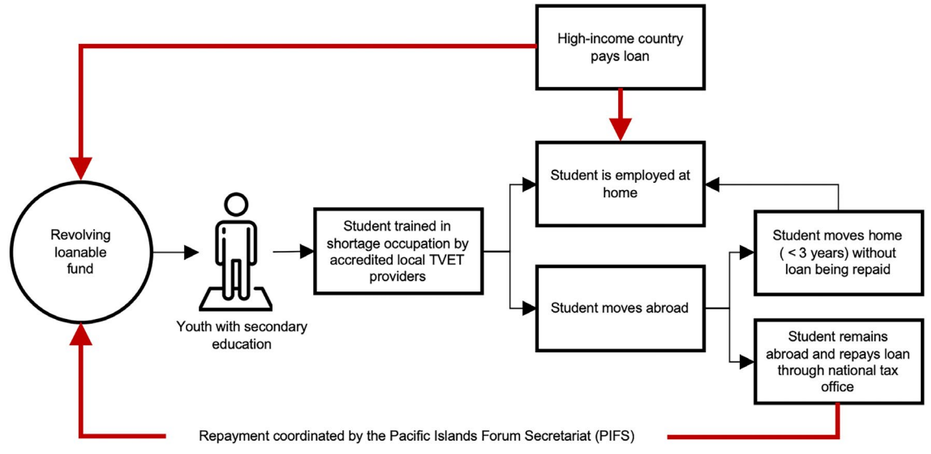
So how could these "mid"-skill workers be trained in the Pacific, and then have their migration facilitated to Australia? To date, Australia has relied on supporting graduates from their Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC), a vocational training institution operating throughout the Pacific Islands, to access the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS). While the scheme is growing efforts have been slow and limited (total numbers remain low; just 2,537 people by the end of May this year), and are less preferable than a more market-driven scheme.

We outline such a scheme in our paper. The "Pacific Skills Visa" (PSV) is a regional application of CGD's Global Skill Partnership model, combining investments in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) throughout the Pacific, with migration opportunities to the signatories of PACER Plus, a regional trade agreement. Effectively, it comes as close as possible to creating a single labour market between the countries of the Pacific.

Our proposal is to allow APTC graduates automatic access to the PSV, with the same access granted to accredited institutions throughout the Pacific Islands. This would encourage competition between these institutions to lift their standards, improving overall education quality.

Two other features distinguish the PSV from existing mobility schemes. Firstly, it would be open to all PACER Plus signatories, realising the commitment to "progressively liberalise the movement of natural persons among the Parties." Secondly, unlike the APTC which hinges on an unsustainable financial pipeline (Australian aid funding), the PSV would rely upon a loan scheme (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The PSV income-sharing model



The design details of such a loan scheme, and other particulars of the PSV, would need to be developed through a working group made up of government actors, training institutions, employers, and migrant rights associations. The PSV could then be trialled through a three-year pilot which would then be evaluated.

The potential benefits of expanding "mid"-skill migration between the Pacific Islands and Australia are vast. Continuing long-term trends in prosperity for Australians will require roughly two million foreign-born fundamental workers in Australia by 2050. If properly facilitated, the youth population of the Pacific Islands could help meet this need, with these countries supported to improve their own training institutions and boost supply of skills at home, addressing fears of "brain drain". All that remains is to create the enabling structures to make it happen.

The authors' would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in the support of this work, as well as comments and feedback from attendees at two events organised by the Development Policy Centre: the Pacific Migration Research Workshop (June 2021) and "How to meet Australian demand for Pacific foreign vocational workers" (August 2020).

Public service can lead the way with flexible work arrangements

By **Sue Williamson.**
Published online October 11, 2021 by **The Canberra Times.**

Much has been written in pages like these about the huge uptake of working from home during COVID lockdowns.

So much has been written, in fact, that my colleagues and I have reviewed the massive amount of literature that has emerged since the start of the pandemic to try and make sense of what it all means.

Researchers have found that younger employees prefer to work in their usual pre-pandemic workplace. This enables them to liaise with colleagues and engage in those all-important incidental conversations. Regional and rural workers are also less keen on working from home. Women with caring responsibilities and older workers generally want to continue to work from home. Employees in knowledge industries have indicated they would like to work hybridly - i.e. two to three days a week at home.

The popularity of other remote working arrangements is also increasing. Pre-pandemic, some public sector organisations had adopted activity-based working (ABW). ABW enables employees to work in settings that are created for specific activities. So, for example, office spaces incorporate areas for collaboration and creativity, and quiet spaces for research or policy work. ABW can increase productivity as the dedicated workspaces can increase efficiency.

Public services have also experimented with remote working hubs. Hubs can be located closer to people's homes, and use the organisation's infrastructure. This means they can be more ergonomic than employees' homes. Employees are also able to engage with colleagues in person, negating another negativity of working from home.

The next phase of remote working is "work from anywhere". This has developed in response to the broader upheavals wrought by the pandemic, including employees moving to regional and rural areas. Work from anywhere also accommodates employees working in different countries. Organisations benefit through a greatly expanded labour market, and employees benefit by working in their preferred location, even for short periods. Facebook, for example, enables employees to work away from their home country for up to 20 days a year.

- The material in this opinion piece has been adapted from the Future of Work report being launched today. Details of the event can be found here.
- Sue Williamson is an associate professor at UNSW Canberra's School of Business.

Public Sector Informant: Public servants have agency - so let's harness it

By Russell Ayres, **Wendy Jarvie** and Trish Mercer.
Published online October 5, 2021 by **The Canberra Times.**

Public servants matter. Let's consider some recent cases. On the plus side, we have seen:

- Quick policy advice and collaborative implementation of the pandemic various emergency responses (the "surge" to help delivery of JobSeeker, for example);
- chief medical officers finding points of influence for their analysis and advice (discussed by Katharine Murphy in her Quarterly Essay, The End of Certainty); and
- officials in key portfolios working closely with industry and outside experts to analyse issues and garner policy ideas (for example, Treasury's relationship with the Commonwealth Bank).
- A controversial Sydney airport land deal;
- sports grants rorts;
- the robodebt debacle; and
- car park rorts.

What connects these cases? It is the influence - sometimes positive, sometimes not - exercised by public servants. Public servants clearly have agency; the question is, what sort of agency do we want them to have and how can it best be deployed for the public good?

The notion of public service agency gives political leaders - if they are willing and able - a foundation to strengthen the role of government and to augment their own policy effort.

On the other hand, effective use of the power and energy of the public service can generate good outcomes for all concerned, as emphasised by public administration expert Helen Dickinson when she recently spoke of agency as underpinning a new international handbook on public service.

This form of agency is:

Crucially, agency is related to but differs from other forms of power. Unlike political power, public service agency need not be a zero-sum game. A public servant who garners and exercises agency does not necessarily diminish or challenge the power of others, especially ministers. Politicians should value the public service as a partner in developing and implementing policy, not as a competitor for power, nor as a servile factotum.

Clearly, bureaucratic agency is crucial to civil society and political discourse. Public servants exercising appropriate agency can facilitate but should not dominate or distort policy deliberation, decision-making and implementation.

- Clear scope for action (an "authorising environment" with legal and regulatory guiderails);
- the knowledge, skills and resources to act (professional development and adequate budgets); and
- accountability and transparency (rewards for good agency, and sanctions for misuse of power).

The starting point is for leaders to see that public servants' agency is foundational to our system of government. Trying to suppress it risks distorted and negative outcomes. The next step is to build this agency into the lexicon, valuing and celebrating it, not hiding it from view. Examples of positive agency should be rewarded. There are many to choose from in the public service's recent history.

Since developing a multi library database in 1981, the NLA has invested about $100 million in Trove, using its recurrent funds plus some recent government funding. It is a long story of hard decisions, active collaboration with many institutions, and the nurturing of specialist capability in the NLA.

The key authority for Trove has been the NLA's legislated national leadership in developing library services and its governing council, guiding and enabling the public service agency that underpins the Trove story.

Working on Country was developed through deep consultation with Aboriginal communities. It reflects their strengths, wishes and priorities. But doctoral research by Kathleen Mackie also found a key "unexpected" success factor to be the agency of public servants.

Public servants continued to actively promote the program with their colleagues and with ministers, and have seized all opportunities to go for funding, under both Coalition and Labor governments. Over subsequent years the program has weathered changes in governments, their philosophies, and machinery of government changes.

Early childhood education became an early battleground in the 2007 national election. Kevin Rudd's Labor opposition made ambitious early childhood reform a signature element of its proposed "Education Revolution" reforms, with support from a phalanx of state Labor governments, who in turn were strongly supported by several key officials. Labor's "Plan for Early Childhood" was based on international research showing the return on investment in "universal preschool for four-year-olds".

The notion of agency needs to be built into public servants' professional ethos, through formal and informal training and education, and through on-the-job practice, which is how public servants learn much of their craft.

Informing such a shift in our collective understanding of public service, there needs to be sustained research and discussion about how public servants exercise agency, taking the lid off the black box and helping us all better understand this crucial factor in the nation's life.

Russell Ayres is an adjunct associate professor at the University of Canberra; Wendy Jarvie is an adjunct professor at the University of NSW, Canberra; and Trish Mercer is a visiting fellow at the Australia and New Zealand School of Government.

Children with disability are prioritised in the vaccine rollout, but many struggle to get an appointment

By **Helen Dickinson**, Catherine Smith & **Sophie Yates.**
Published online September 30, 2021 by **The Conversation.**

This week the Disability Royal Commission highlighted several failings in ensuring people with disability – a priority group in the rollout – could access vaccinations.

Children and adolescents don't feature strongly in this report as they only became eligible for vaccination last month.

Yet 62% of parents responding to a recent survey by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) report having trouble securing a vaccination for their child or children with disability. While numbers of children contracting severe illness because of COVID have been low to date, the Delta variant has changed this situation. Countries such as the United States are seeing spikes in hospitalisations among children and adolescents.

As Australia starts to "live with" COVID and restrictions ease, we will see substantial increases in severe infection in children and young people with disability – unless vaccination rates rise significantly among this group.

Why are children with disability at greater risk?

Australians with disability are at heightened risk during the COVID pandemic because many have other health conditions, such as respiratory problems, heart disease, and diabetes. This makes them more likely to get sicker or die if they become infected. This is the case for children with disability too.

People with disability are also more likely to be poor, unemployed and socially isolated, making them more likely to experience poor health outcomes.

In other countries we've seen people with disability die from COVID-19 at higher rates than their non-disabled peers. In England, nearly six out of every ten people who died with COVID in 2020 were disabled, and this risk increases with level of disability

Severe COVID is uncommon in children and adolescents and rarely causes death, although children with pre-existing conditions are at greater risk of severe disease.

There is debate over whether the Delta variant of COVID causes more severe disease than previous variants in children. However, it does spread faster so the number of children who will develop severe disease will be increased.

Also, because older groups have been prioritised in vaccination campaigns, we will see infections grow in children as a proportion of overall infections.

We have seen this in the United States. Schools recommenced recently and the country reported its highest weekly rate of new cases in children and young people since the pandemic began.

US children's hospitals are reported to be straining under pressure, with a fivefold increase in COVID hospitalisations. In any rise in cases, those with disability disproportionately bear the burden of severe disease.

Children with disability can't book vaccinations

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) wanted to understand whether children and young people and their families were experiencing challenges accessing vaccinations and if so, what the nature of those were.

Its online survey was open for one week and received 150 responses, which our research team then analysed. Some responses were from young people and most were from parents/caregivers of children and young people with disability.

The survey finds 62% of respondents were parents or carers who report having trouble in securing a vaccination for their child or children, some of whom had also experienced challenges getting vaccinated themselves.

In total, 72% of survey respondents were either parents or young people who'd had challenges with vaccination. This includes difficulties with booking systems, not being recognised as part of the priority rollout, and not being able to book with GPs.

Systems are not designed with children and young people with disability in mind. Parents and caregivers struggled to get vaccination appointments and to prove their or their child's eligibility.

The system is not set up to book for dependants, so if children do not have their own phone number and email address, parents cannot easily book appointments.

When phoning the call centre, things did not always get easier as one parent explains:

The person at call centre only wanted to talk to my son who is 16 and non-verbal. Refused to talk to me.

Parents report having to do much work via a number of different channels to secure an appointment for their child or young person, for example:

I ended up spending 7 hours in total calling different GP practices and sitting on hold and eventually secured my child an appointment. NSW Health hubs took a month to catch up with priority eligibility for 12-15-year-olds with disabilities.

I know people who have not been able to secure an appointment for their child with a disability. Many GP practices did not know that this group were eligible or would not accept anyone who wasn't an existing patient. This is inherently discriminatory.

Inaccessible vaccination experiences

Once appointments were booked, several respondents reported vaccination hubs and GP practices were not accessible or able to cater to the needs of their child or young person. As one parent explained:

My son is Downs Syndrome and severe Intellectual Disability and going to a Vaccination Hub is traumatic. He has a phobia of needles and to take blood he has to go under general anaesthetic at […] Hospital.

Some young people with disability have experienced high degrees of medical trauma in the past and so find accessing regular vaccination processes very difficult. One parent told us that:

I know of many incidences where parents have had to do restrictive type practices to ensure that their child with a disability was able to remain still during their vaccination, lots of trauma and anxiety, not to mention the potential for future stress/trauma.

In many places a lack of access to GPs or specialist services mean parents have to make difficult decisions about whether to put their child through a traumatic process or else risk them being unvaccinated.

Some good practice but not widespread enough

However, there are some areas where things have worked.

Victoria has a disability liaison officer service that seeks to link up people with disability with appropriate vaccination experiences. One parent explained:

Initially had this challenge until I was made aware of the Vic Disability Liaison support for COVID vaccination. They were awesome and my daughter was supported to have her first dose yesterday. Without them I'd still be waiting, without support and anxious. I understand this is only available in Victoria and should be available everywhere.

And some families have GPs who went the extra mile to vaccinate in a safe and appropriate way. But these good examples are not widespread and the communication around specialist services is not as strong as it might be.

As the country moves towards living with COVID and progressively lifting public health restrictions, it's imperative we vaccinate as many children and young people with disability as possible. Otherwise we're likely to see significant numbers of infections and severe illness in this group.

Identifying individuals and families who are eligible and providing appropriate specialist support so they can be vaccinated is a priority.

Five questions to understand epistemology and its influence on integrative research processes

By **Katie Moon**, Chris Cvitanovic, **Deborah A. Blackman**, Ivan R. Scales and Nicola K. Browne.
Published online September 21, 2021 by **Integration and Implementation Insights.**

How can we reduce the barriers to successful integrative research processes? In particular, how can we understand the different epistemologies that underpin knowledge?

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that asks: how do we know what we know? It is concerned with how we can ensure that knowledge is both adequate and legitimate, by considering:

a. what constitutes a knowledge claim, including the assumptions that are made
b. how knowledge is produced or acquired
c. how the extent of its applicability can be determined.

Accordingly, understanding and accounting for different epistemologies is important for developing solutions to contemporary challenges where a range of disciplines and practices converge, each with their own methods and assumptions regarding the adequacy and legitimacy of knowledge.

To help researchers understand different epistemologies and their influence on integrative research practices we have come up with five questions they can ask themselves (and one another).

Question 1: What Do We Seek to Create Knowledge About?

Exploratory questions:

- What is it that the researcher seeks to create or discover knowledge about?
- Why and how do they determine what to study?
- What are the objects of study – are they tangible or intangible?

For example, the natural sciences focus on the biophysical dimensions of systems, where the object of study is usually tangible. The focus on physical objects stems from the aims of understanding and describing natural phenomena, which is typically achieved through observation and experimentation focused on establishing a high level of validity and reliability in the knowledge.

In contrast, the social sciences focus on human dimensions of the system. These dimensions can be physical and observable (eg., a person's behaviour), and non-physical and non-observable (eg., a person's beliefs).

Question 2: How Do We Create Knowledge in Integrated Research Sciences?

Exploratory questions:

- What beliefs underpin the research?
- How have the researchers sought to justify their beliefs as true?

It can be helpful to think, quite broadly, about knowledge as a 'justified, true belief,' that is, the way in which an individual or group 'knows' something is true. Yet, people can construct the meaning of the same object or phenomenon in different ways on the basis of their cultural, historical and social perspectives, and interactions with human communities (eg., their social network). It therefore becomes necessary to consider how different beliefs are justified (eg., via reason, emotion, perception and language) and accepted as knowledge.

Question 3: Who Accepts Knowledge as 'True' and How?

Exploratory questions:

- What methods of data collection have been used? How we they justified?
- What sampling strategies were adopted and why?
- How did the researchers identify and reflect bias in designing and implementing the research?
- Who determines whether the methods, results and truth claims are valid?
- What criteria were used to assess the quality of the truth claims?

Generally speaking, for knowledge to be 'accepted' (ie., justified, true beliefs), an epistemic community is required. An epistemic community is a group of people who are considered experts in a knowledge domain, for example, within a discipline (eg., physics, ecology, anthropology), industry (eg., aquaculture, diving tourism) or cultural group (eg., religious, indigenous). The important role of epistemology here is asking us to be involved in an ongoing examination of 'what I know', 'how I know it' and 'how it corresponds (or not) with the knowledge of others'. This last question is particularly important in integrated research, where different knowledge sets often exist.

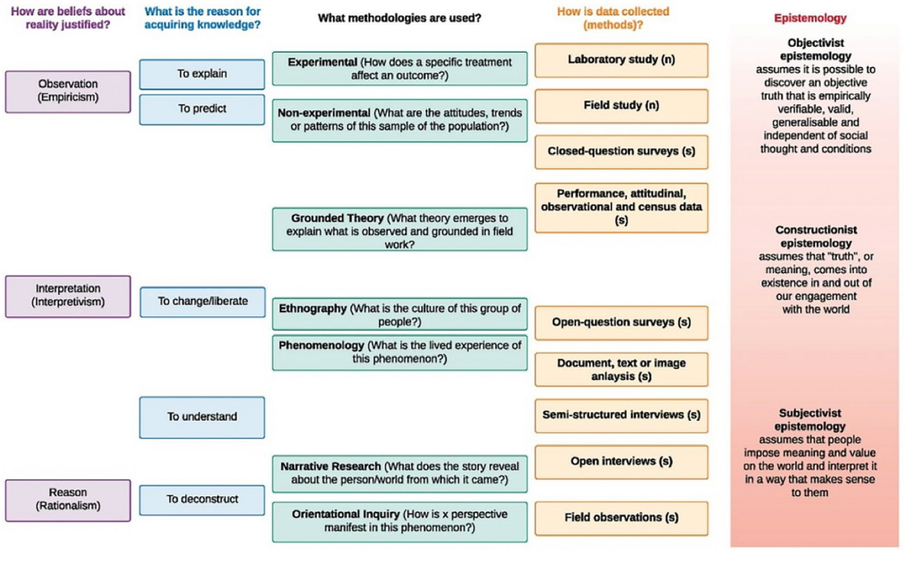
By recognising that (groups of) people create or discover and assess knowledge in a variety of ways, we can begin to open our minds to multiple ways of knowing, all of which can be validated in different ways within and across defined epistemic communities.

Question 4: How Do We Determine the Epistemology Underpinning the Research Processes?

Exploratory questions:

- What assumptions about reality underpin the research?
- What methodologies and methods were used?
- How was the data analysed and interpreted?

We have developed a simple heuristic device to assist in understanding the epistemology of integrated research and what it means in terms of research practice and outcomes (see figure below). The intention here is not to be comprehensive, but to provide a simple map of how to get a sense of where researchers' assumptions might lie in relation to how they have sought to create knowledge.



A heuristic device to assist with understanding the epistemology of integrative research (Moon et al., 2021). By locating the aims of the research (reason for acquiring knowledge), the methodologies or methods used, or the ways in which beliefs are justified, it becomes possible to understand the assumptions underpinning the research (ie., epistemology). ('n' denotes common methods in natural science; 's' denotes common methods in the social sciences.)

Question 5: What Are the Implications of Epistemology for Applied Integrated Research?

Exploratory questions:

- In what ways could the data be applied (eg., can it be generalised to the population or is it context- or site- specific)?
- How were different stakeholders engaged in the research process?
- How were marginalised groups considered and engaged?

Two particularly important benefits arise from understanding the role of epistemology in the application of integrated research:

1. an understanding of epistemology can increase our awareness of the partiality of our knowledge, which can only ever be provisional, qualified and even uncertain due to the nature of research questions and designs that only focus on a part of the system
2. an understanding of epistemology provides opportunities to consider power relations in research and practice. Academic knowledge is only one type of knowledge, yet it is often privileged above others, such as Indigenous, experiential and cultural knowledge.

Concluding questions

What is the dominant epistemology of your research practice, and how might it differ from that of others? What methods have you used to account for differences in assumptions of research team members? How have you sought and and worked with different stakeholders to share knowledge?

To find out more:
Moon, K., Cvitanovic, C., Blackman, D. A., Scales, I. R. and Browne, N. K. (2021). Five questions to understand epistemology and its influence on integrative marine research. Frontiers in Marine Science, 8, 173. (Online – open access): https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmars.2021.574158/full

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Destroying vegetation along fences and roads could worsen our extinction crisis — yet the NSW government just allowed it

By Euan Ritchie, Ben Moore Jen Martin, Mark Hall, **Megan C Evans** & Ross Crates. Published online September 17, 2021 by **The Conversation.**

What do koalas, barking owls, greater gliders, southern rainbow skinks, native bees, and regent honeyeaters all have in common? Like many native species, they can all be found in vegetation along fences and roadsides outside formal conservation areas.

They may be relatively small, but these patches and strips conserve critical remnant habitat and have disproportionate conservation value worldwide. They represent the last vestiges of once-expansive tracts of woodland and forests, long lost to the chainsaw or plough.

And yet, the NSW government last week made it legal for rural landholders to clear vegetation on their properties, up to 25 metres from their property boundaries, without approval. This radical measure is proposed to protect people and properties from fires, despite the lack of such an explicit recommendation from federal and state-based inquiries into the devastating 2019-20 bushfires.

This is poor environmental policy that lacks apparent consideration or justification of its potentially substantial ecological costs. It also gravely undermines the NSW government's recent announcement of a plan for "zero extinction" within the state's national parks, as the success of protected reserves for conservation is greatly enhanced by connection with surrounding "off-reserve" habitat.

Small breaks in habitat can have big impacts

A 25m firebreak might sound innocuous, but when multiplied by the length of property boundaries in NSW, the scale of potential clearing and impacts is alarming, and could run into the hundreds of thousands of kilometres.

Some plants, animals and fungi live in these strips of vegetation permanently. Others use them to travel between larger habitat patches. And for migratory species, the vegetation provides crucial refuelling stops on long distance journeys.

For example, the roadside area in Victoria's Strathbogie Ranges shown below is home to nine species of tree-dwelling native mammals: two species of brushtail possums, three species of gliders (including threatened greater gliders), common ringtail possums, koalas, brush-tailed phascogales, and agile antechinus (small marsupials).

Many of these species depend on tree hollows that can take a hundred years to form. If destroyed, they are effectively irreplaceable.

Creating breaks in largely continuous vegetation, or further fragmenting already disjointed vegetation, will not only directly destroy habitat, but can severely lower the quality of adjoining habitat.

This is because firebreaks of 25m (or 50m where neighbouring landholders both clear) could prevent the movement and dispersal of many plant and animal species, including critical pollinators such as native bees.

An entire suite of woodland birds, including the critically endangered regent honeyeater, are threatened because they depend on thin strips of vegetation communities that often occur inside fence-lines on private land.

For instance, scientific monitoring has shown five pairs of regent honeyeaters (50% of all birds located so far this season) are nesting or foraging within 25m of a single fence-line in the upper Hunter Valley. This highlights just how big an impact the loss of one small, private location could have on a species already on the brink of extinction.

But it's not just regent honeyeaters. The management plan for the vulnerable glossy black cockatoo makes specific recommendation that vegetation corridors be maintained, as they're essential for the cockatoos to travel between suitable large patches.

Native bee conservation also relies on the protection of remnant habitat adjoining fields. Continued removal of habitat on private land will hinder chances of conserving these species.

Disastrous clearing laws

The new clearing code does have some regulations in place, albeit meagre. For example, on the Rural Fire Service website, it says the code allows "clearing only in identified areas, such as areas which are zoned as Rural, and which are considered bush fire prone". And according to the RFS boundary clearing tool landowners aren't allowed to clear vegetation near watercourses (riparian vegetation).

Even before introducing this new code, NSW's clearing laws were an environmental disaster. In 2019, The NSW Audit Office found:

clearing of native vegetation on rural land is not effectively regulated [and] action is rarely taken against landholders who unlawfully clear native vegetation.

The data back this up. In 2019, over 54,500 hectares were cleared in NSW. Of this, 74% was "unexplained", which means the clearing was either lawful (but didn't require state government approval), unlawful or not fully compliant with approvals.

Landholders need to show they've complied with clearing laws only after they've already cleared the land. But this is too late for wildlife, including plant species, many of which are threatened.

Landholders follow self-assessable codes, but problems with these policies have been identified time and time again — they cumulatively allow a huge amount of clearing, and compliance and enforcement are ineffective.

Vegetation along roadsides and close to fences can be critical habitat for greater gliders.

We also know, thanks to various case studies, the policy of "offsetting" environmental damage by improving biodiversity elsewhere doesn't work.

So, could the federal environment and biodiversity protection law step in if habitat clearing gets out of hand? Probably not. The problem is these 25m strips are unlikely to be referred in the first place, or be considered a "significant impact" to trigger the federal law.

The code should be amended

Nobody disputes the need to keep people and their assets safe against the risks of fire. The code should be amended to ensure clearing is only permitted where a genuinely clear and measurable fire risk reduction is demonstrated.

Granting permission to clear considerable amounts of native vegetation, hundreds if not thousands of metres away from homes and key infrastructure in large properties is hard to reconcile, and it seems that no attempt has been made to properly justify this legislation.
We should expect that a comprehensive assessment of the likely impacts of a significant change like this would inform public debate prior to decisions being made. But to our knowledge, no one has analysed, or at least revealed, how much land this rule change will affect, nor exactly what vegetation types and wildlife will likely be most affected.

A potentially devastating environmental precedent is being set, if other regions of Australia were to follow suit. The environment and Australians deserve better.

Demonstrating hidden value in a complex public service system: Consider the HR business partner

By **Deborah Blackman & Sophie Yates.**
Published online September 8, 2021 by **The Mandarin.**

With some colleagues from ANU and the Australia and New Zealand School of Government, we have been thinking about how to demonstrate hidden value in complex dynamic public service systems.

To break that down a bit more, what we mean is how can people in certain types of roles and functions a) understand the value they create and b) demonstrate that value to others? We're talking about the types of roles that are less about directly producing or contributing to publicly valuable outputs, and more about facilitating levers within the system to ensure that publicly valuable outputs are eventually created; the types of jobs where you can't look at an output and say "hey, I created that", but you know that what you've done somehow influenced its creation.

HR business partnering

The aim of the project is to examine hidden value in several different case study contexts, and the first context we have examined relates to the human resources (HR) business partnering function in the Australian Taxation Office (ATO). HR business partners exist to actively integrate the business strategy with people management practices – so they are strategic connectors between business and HR. Any large organisation will have several different business lines and a commensurately large HR department comprising a number of different specialist functions (e.g. training and development, recruitment, industrial relations). Assigning an HR business partner to each line (in theory) ensures that business line executives can go to one person to facilitate all their HR needs, and that business partner will either get them the right answer or connect them to the right people within the HR area. Crucially, business partners also provide high-level strategic HR advice to their business lines, and due to their familiarity with the particular business line, can progress corporate HR initiatives in a business-relevant way.

But one of the problems faced by this function in the ATO was how it could demonstrate its value. There were few standard HR or business-relevant metrics that business partners could point to and say that this happened as a result of the business partnering team. Business line clients were generally very positive about their business partners and valued their work immensely, but couldn't decide exactly how this could be measured. We interviewed 17 business partners and business line clients to determine how the business partnering function created value and think about how that value could be demonstrated.

How do HR business partners create value?

Through talking to all these people, we realised that business partners created value in many different ways:

- As a one-stop shop for HR needs
- As a strategic adviser on HR issues
- As a business-relevant translator of corporate HR priorities

But business partners don't control the levers they are trying to influence, either when organising for HR specialists to do something for clients, or when advising clients about HR issues. One business partner reflected (emphasis added):

So there are parts of [HR department] where there is that clearly defined work, whereas we in the business partner sense, anything that we are looking to develop as a solution or strategy or something to address a workforce need in the client, we are reliant on others within [HR department], working with others, with our colleagues, to come up with the solution or whatever it is that we need to address what it was that we're trying to address.

So at its heart, we thought what they did was about influencing agentic decisions. What this means is that business partners are required to influence senior people to make decisions in a particular way when they could have decided otherwise, with the aim of improving workforce-related outcomes. As one business partner put it:

…the value of the BP function for me is in the ability to influence or change a decision, a business decision, prior to it being made, based on the impacts that has on its workforce.

Through their business line knowledge, through their HR generalist knowledge, through their broader view of their own and other business lines within the organisation, they provide advice to business line decision-makers in ways that influence executives to change the ways they think and make decisions about HR issues. This is what happens when a business partnering function is working well.

Spanning boundaries and creating levers

Thinking more about what in the business partner role enables them to influence agentic decisions, we realised a key part of the role is boundary spanning. Business partners connect business lines to HR specialist areas and vice versa, sometimes bringing together multidisciplinary teams to address emerging issues; they horizon scan for HR practices and initiatives to bring in from outside; and connect with each other and thus have an overview of many different business lines within the organisation. As one business partner reflected:

…it can be quite hard to describe what it is I do, but I sometimes describe myself almost as a concierge for [the HR area], so I operate on the sort of premise or principle that anybody within [business line] who I look after can contact me. So whatever the HR or workforce issue is, they can contact me, and if I don't know the solution to the problem or I don't have the necessary advice to answer their question, I will refer them to a colleague in [HR area] to get that advice or I will go and seek the information on their behalf. Or if it is a larger piece of work, as an example, I would go and broker with some colleagues in [HR area] to do the work to support whatever that need is that's come from the client.

Through these boundary spanning activities, they create levers for change by facilitating work rather than doing the actual work themselves. If a system is to change there has to be an alteration in the way that something is moving within it. In this perspective the role of the business partner is to establish what is currently either holding a system in place, or pushing it in the wrong direction, and then advise others into how to create an alternative set of levers. For that they need to be strategic 'thinkers and advisers', for the most part staying out of the tactical (and more easily measurable) realm.

Relationships and trust

It was clear from our interviews that developing and maintaining trust (particularly with senior business line managers) was critical, as without it advice would be neither sought nor followed. This would prevent any opportunities to influence agentic decisions. Both client and business partner interviewees overwhelmingly emphasised the importance of relationships and trust in maintaining an effective partnership, but felt that measuring this could be difficult:

…so for me success is all about that relationship and developing and maintaining the relationship, [for example] a Deputy Commissioner will pick up the phone and contact me or email me and ask me for advice on a particular matter, which is fine, but how that actually translates into the effective operation of their business and how they achieve their business outcomes, which then flow on through to the ATO achieving its goals, it's not really quantifiable.

Despite the difficulty of measurement, some clients felt that an improvement of relationships and trust over time (in one example, from "not a great relationship" to "a really strong relationship now") had really added to the value of the function:

And one of the things absolutely within that [improvement] is, there is that element of trust. Like at the moment, I might question, but more so from a strategic perspective. I don't ignore advice. Whereas previously I would get advice and I really would probably question it.

Implications for demonstrating value

So, according to our analysis, a business partner creates value through influencing agentic decisions, for which they span boundaries, create relationships and trust, prioritise business line knowledge, and build a consistent brand. The kind of people who perform well in this role can be described as operating with political astuteness. Since the value they create can't easily be captured through traditional HR metrics or project management outcomes, we started thinking about alternative techniques.

We felt that business partners' value could be demonstrated partly through understanding the quality of the relationships formed, perhaps through developing a tool to administer to both business partners and clients about relationships and trust. Relatedly, the ATO's HR area could systematically collect stakeholders' feedback on their feelings about the value and operation of the function.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, we thought the business partner function could consider how to identify and measure changes in behaviour rather than relying on final outcomes to demonstrate the value of the function. This could involve recording baseline measures (e.g. attitudes to particular ways of working) to enable later measurement of desired shifts. Then as the work progresses, it will be possible to consider whether stakeholders are talking and thinking about things differently now than they were before business partner staff started to intervene and influence.

We think these insights will have applicability to other 'hidden value' type roles within complex public service systems, and we hope to draw these out through further case studies.

Explainer: what is a 'positive duty' to prevent workplace sexual harassment and why is it so important?

By **Sue Williamson.**
Published online September 8, 2021 by **The Conversation.**

This week's national women's safety summit has been roundly criticised by community and women's groups as being little more than a talkfest.

It was intended to inform the development of a national plan to prevent violence against women and their children. But the government's recent steps on this issue show how it is more committed to rhetoric and spin than taking real action.

Last week, the parliament passed six amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act out of the 12 recommended in Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins's Respect@Work report. The report contained a total of 55 recommendations, not all of which require legislative amendments to be implemented.

The government was heavily criticised for not implementing all of the recommendations. One of the most important was Jenkins's call to introduce a positive duty on employers to prevent sexual harassment.

Sam Mostyn, the president of Chief Executive Women, said on ABC Radio National today,

Once you make it a duty, employers pay attention and know that there is a consequence for failing to provide that environment. […] The amendment is simple, it's well-supported and it's one of the clearest ways to say, 'when women feel safe at work, they want to keep working'.

So, what is a positive duty?

A positive duty requires organisations to be proactive in addressing the disadvantages and discrimination women experience at the workplace in order to promote equality.

The federal government has been hesitant to enact this, saying it believes existing workplace health and safety laws already provide a positive duty to prevent sexual harassment.

According to the Respect@Work report, a positive duty does exist in workplace health and safety laws to

eliminate or manage hazards and risks to a worker's health, which includes psychological health and therefore sexual harassment.

However, this duty does not go far enough and is not explicit enough in referring to sexual harassment.

Affirmative action legislation also does not go far enough to ensure gender equality. The Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 requires employers with more than 100 staff to implement measures to advance gender equality and report on progress.

But affirmative action only requires employers to undertake the minimum amount of effort on this front. Researchers have noted that fulfilling the reporting requirements is seen by many employers to be a bureaucratic and compliance exercise, which does not necessarily translate into action.

A positive duty, by contrast, imposes a higher obligation. It requires employers to actively promote gender equality, and can include going beyond the workplace to take action in the community. This is why Jenkins recommended a new positive duty specifically focused on gender equality.

It would build on our existing workplace health and safety laws by requiring agencies to do more than just meet benchmarks.

It would also complement the existing Sex Discrimination Act by taking a proactive and collective approach to ensure gender equality, rather than relying on individual remedies to prevent discrimination.

What does this look like in practice?

One of the main ways a positive duty on gender equality can be implemented is through "gender mainstreaming".

This means casting a gender lens over all organisational policies and practices to determine how they treat women. This might reveal, for example, that some human resource recruitment and selection processes are disadvantaging women. By being proactive, organisations can take steps to change these processes.

Arguably, a positive duty would extend to advancing gender equality in the workplace more broadly and creating the type of workplace environment that is incompatible with sexual harassment and discrimination.

This could include, for example, an assessment of workplace culture to identify barriers preventing the full participation of all genders in formal and informal workplace practices, and then taking actions to remove those barriers.

Jenkins's report also recommends strengthening enforcement powers to assess employers' compliance with this positive duty.

Are there good models to follow elsewhere?

This is not a new phenomenon in Australia; in fact, a positive duty to prevent sex discrimination already exists in Victoria.

In 2020, the state government passed the Gender Equality Act, which requires employers to take positive measures to progress gender equality.

The law has robust compliance mechanisms. Public sector agencies are required to develop, implement and report on their gender equality plans. Sanctions range from a light touch (being "named and shamed") to a heavier hand (taking appropriate action against non-compliant organisations).

Victoria's act is based on laws from overseas. Positive duties on gender equality were initially implemented in the UK public service in 2011. These duties have had an impact beyond the public sector, as well, with ideas and strategies on equality now being incorporated by many employers in the private sector.

However, some researchers argue the impact of the UK gender equality duty has been tempered due to weak enforcement measures and a focus on process rather than outcomes.

These researchers have recommended strengthening the UK positive duty by collecting better data on women's workforce participation, improving workplace education and leadership on gender equality issues, and bringing in stronger enforcement mechanisms for non-compliant employers.

The positive duty put forward in the Respect@Work report would have incorporated these elements.

Jenkins sounded a warning back in April that not implementing a positive duty would be a "missed opportunity". This warning, however, went unheeded by the government with its reforms.
Prime Minister Scott Morrison has said

the only way we end violence is to focus our efforts to prevent it from happening in the first place.

Not reforming the law to introduce a positive duty signals a failure and lack of political will to prevent violence against women and advance gender equality.

Opening up when 80% of eligible adults are vaccinated won't be 'safe' for all Australians

By **Helen Dickinson**, Anne Kavanagh & Nancy Baxter.
Published online August 31, 2021 by **The Conversation**.

We've all grown tired of lockdowns, border closures and other restrictions. So the promise of a freer life, when 70% and then 80% of Australians aged 16 and older are vaccinated, feels like a beacon on the horizon.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison, some premiers, and leading public servants have promised us at 80% we can live "safely" with COVID-19, or come out of our "caves" in the PM's parlance.

The narrative is one of Team Australia and we are "all in this together". But are we really?

Risks of COVID-19 infection, serious disease and death are not equitably distributed. They disproportionally cluster among the most disadvantaged. Vaccine access and uptake is also lower in many disadvantaged groups.

Opening the country at 80% without ensuring these groups have met or exceeded those targets will result in substantial avoidable illness and death.

Who is most vulnerable to serious disease?

The risk of serious COVID-19 and death is related to "clinical vulnerability", such as whether the person has underlying health conditions like diabetes or respiratory disease.

First Nations Australians, disabled Australians, prisoners and people living in rural and remote Australia have much higher levels of chronic conditions, which have their roots in social and economic disadvantage.

On top of their clinical vulnerability, these groups face multiple barriers to accessing quality health care, including intensive care. These barriers might include lack of physical access, discrimination, an inability to access culturally competent care, and/or geographical distance.

What have we learnt from other countries?

Across the world, COVID-19 infection rates have occurred at higher rates in aged-care facilities, disability group homes and institutions and jails.

Besides aged-care residents, Australia hasn't yet seen the high death rates in clinically vulnerable groups that other countries have witnessed.

In the United States, Indigenous Americans have had the highest rate of COVID-19 deaths – dying at three times the rate of white Americans (when adjusting for the fact that Indigenous Americans are younger than non-Indigenous Americans).

High rates of death have also been seen among:

- Black and Hispanic Americans
- those in rural areas
- prisoners, who were three times as likely than the rest of the population to die of COVID-19 (after taking into account the differences in age and sex between the prison and general populations).

In the United Kingdom, people with intellectual disability were eight times more likely than the rest of the population to die of COVID and disabled people made up 60% of the deaths.

Intellectual disability was second only to age as a risk factor for death from COVID-19 in the US.

What's happening in Australia?

COVID-19 infections are more common in disadvantaged areas, both in Australia and internationally.

Residents in disadvantaged communities are more mobile, live and work in close proximity to other people, and are more likely to be essential workers who can't work from home. These areas also tend to have high concentrations of ethnic minority and migrant communities.

Victoria's second wave included outbreaks among residents and workers in aged-care facilities, along with outbreaks in health care, meatworks, and disability group homes.

In NSW's current wave, outbreaks are spreading rapidly in First Nations communities in western NSW and in prisons.

Who is getting vaccinated?

Australia's vaccine rollout strategy prioritised people at most risk of serious disease and death from COVID-19.

Phase 1A included aged-care and disability group home residents and the workers who support them.

In Phase 1B, First Nations Australians over 55 years and people with disability with chronic conditions were eligible.

People prioritised in these phases were meant to be vaccinated by April.

More recently, all participants in the National Disability Insurance Scheme and Indigenous Australians 12 years and older became eligible.

Prisoners are not explicitly included as a priority population.

But the strategy came without an implementation plan and vaccination levels are appallingly low in many groups.

Vaccination rates are substantially lower among Indigenous Australians than the population rates in every state and territory, except Victoria where Indigenous vaccination rates are much higher.

In western NSW, where COVID-19 is rapidly spreading through First Nations communities, 11.6% if Indigenous Australians are fully vaccinated compared with 28.9% of non-Indigenous Australians.

Information about vaccination rates among disabled people and workers are not routinely shared and tend to be leaked to the media. On August 22, for example, the Sunday Age revealed just 27% of NDIS participants were fully vaccinated, lagging behind the national rate.

Vaccination of prisoners and prison staff has also been slow. Many states only started their prison vaccination rollout in the last couple of months and data on vaccination coverage in correctional services have not been released (or perhaps even collected).

No targets yet for vaccinating vulnerable groups

The Doherty-led COVID-19 vaccination modelling is cited as justifying the federal government's 80% target. The modelling report acknowledges:

particular attention should be paid to groups in whom socioeconomic, cultural and other determinants are anticipated to result in higher transmission and/or disease outcomes.

The Doherty Institute's director, Professor Sharon Lewin, emphasised that we need to achieve 80% targets for all Australians including our most disadvantaged citizens.

However, the model itself did not specifically evaluate the potential impact on high-risk groups. Nor does the Commonwealth National Transition Plan focus on equity.

Disadvantaged Australians face triple jeopardy – low vaccination rates, greater likelihood of being infected with COVID-19, and higher risks of serious disease and death from COVID-19.

These risk factors are significant individually. But some individuals face intersectional disadvantage. Indigenous people, for example, experience disability at a higher level than the general population. And people with mental health issues are over-represented in prisons.

Until now, we have relied on public health measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. If we relax these and move quickly to rely mainly on vaccination without ensuring equitable delivery, those most at risk will face a disproportionately greater burden of serious illness and death.

What can be done?

Thankfully, vaccine supply is improving. Australians are being vaccinated at unprecedented levels, particularly in NSW.

However, unless we explicitly move to an equity-based strategy for vaccination, "at risk" populations will be left even further behind.

Equitable allocation of vaccines requires:

1. defining priority groups and geographical areas
2. allocating an increased share of vaccines or vaccination appointments
3. tailoring outreach and communication
4. offering vaccinations close to or in workplaces and places where people live including private homes, aged-care facilities, and prisons
5. monitoring vaccination uptake
6. inclusion of vaccine targets for priority groups in the national plan.

Continuing our current strategy will mean that when we decide the time is right to "live with COVID", many people who should have been the highest priority for vaccination could die.

We demand a rethink of our vaccine strategy to have an explicit focus on equitable vaccine allocation. Otherwise, it's simply not "safe" for many Australians to come out of Morrison's proverbial cave.

Reflecting on the features of 'successful' public inquiries

By Alastair Stark and **Sophie Yates.**
Published online August 18, 2021 by **Croakey.**

Introduction by Croakey: Public inquiries are a frequent response to policy and systems failures, and the media and community concern that accompanies them.

Sometimes inquiries can uncover systemic problems undermining civil society and result in lasting legislative and policy changes.

At other times, inquiries appear to go nowhere and leave stakeholder groups and advocates frustrated at the waste of time and resources that participation in these processes requires.

The reasons why some inquiries are effective while others sink into oblivion are discussed in the post below by Dr Alastair Stark, Senior Lecturer in Public Policy at the University of Queensland, and Dr Sophie Yates, Postdoctoral Fellow at the Public Service Research Group, UNSW Canberra.

Stark and Yates identify the key factors which influence the effectiveness of inquiries and provide some practical suggestions for setting up and running inquiries to maximise their chance of success.

Alastair Stark and Sophie Yates write:
Public inquiries are more popular than ever, and yet we often hear complaints that they don't have much effect on policy or practice.

Of course, all inquiries are different. Some vanish with barely a ripple, some make headlines for how little their recommendations are implemented, and some produce genuinely new learning and change the policy landscape for decades to come.

Despite the cynical rhetoric about public inquiries being used as political tools, history proves that governments can't always control the outcome of inquiries – and may not always want to.

In fact, in our new article about what makes 'successful' public inquiries we spend a lot of time thinking about the issue of control: who has it, who loses it, what effects it has, and how inquiry staff can ensure their reports can still have an impact when its gone.

From a policy design point of view, the key message is that those who run public inquiries need to think about a future in which they publish their report, switch off the lights in the inquiry room and return to their day jobs. How can they create a publication that speaks for itself and drives reform when they are no longer in control of the process?

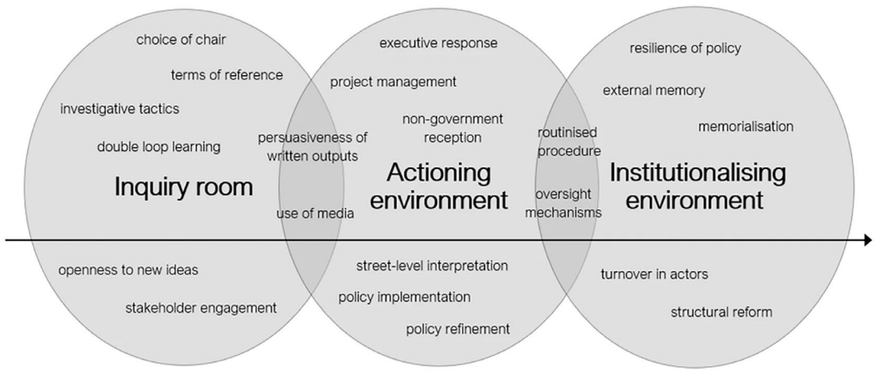
Successful inquiries are those that consider this strategic challenge well in advance of report publication.

Future thinking

If an inquiry is to be successful in lesson learning terms it needs to produce legitimate policy lessons that can subsequently compel policy reform. To do this an inquiry's proceedings and the style and content of its written reports both need to be perceived as legitimate by sponsors, implementing agencies and stakeholders.

Inquiry personnel involved in creating and communicating knowledge therefore need to think about the external parties that will be crucial to future policy implementation. We argue that it's useful to think about the future in terms of three interlinked policy environments: the 'inquiry room', the 'actioning environment' and the 'institutionalising environment'.

Figure 1: Factors affecting inquiry effectiveness across three policy environments



The inquiry room

The 'inquiry room' includes those in the spotlight of public proceedings, the multitudes who operate in the backrooms of an inquiry and the stakeholders who give evidence. In this environment future legitimacy can be produced through reassuring stakeholders that the inquiry has been established in an appropriate manner, that it has the appropriate personnel and that it is generating data and developing knowledge in appropriate ways.

Some factors to consider here include:

- *The chair and panel members:* A crucial early choice to get right. The chair and other inquiry members must be sufficiently expert for their leadership to have weight and authority without being so close to the subject that stakeholders will question their objectivity.
- *The terms of reference set by government:* Too limited and there can be accusations of political stage management; too broad and complaints can be made about a lack of attention to specific issues. A willingness to change terms of reference in response to evidence can enhance the standing of an inquiry by promoting an air of independence.
- *Inquiry processes:* Typically, we think of public inquiries as putting powerful actors into the witness box and questioning them under the heat of the public spotlight. This formal judicial style might work for inquiries seeking to uncover wrongdoing, but it can also mean that stakeholders dismiss an inquiry as a blame-seeking exercise. If an inquiry does not require adversarial proceedings, it can increase its legitimacy by using a collaborative approach to its work, being open to new ways of developing evidence, and via sensitivity to perceptions of bias.
- *Framing the debate:* A truly transformative inquiry shapes official discourse and public debate on an issue, reframing a problem in its own terms. One way of doing this is through effective media engagement to publicise processes, evidence and interim findings. These features also assist with the public education function of an inquiry.
- *Knowing your audience.* When an inquiry knows its audience or 'public' it can generate evidence from them and produce reports that speak to them. This enhances legitimacy. For example, if the audience includes victims who have been harmed by failures or crises, and the goal is redress, it is appropriate to mainly draw evidence from theme, such as during the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Alternatively, if an inquiry is speaking to more technocratic audiences then the use of scientific experts as rapporteurs, the establishment of expert panels the appointment of chairs who have credibility in specialist subject matter should be considered. Legitimacy for public servants, however, is likely to come via evidence taking and report writing that has the hallmarks of public managerial practice.

Future-proofing

A lack of concern about how knowledge transfers from an inquiry to implementing agencies has been used to explain the ineffectiveness of some inquiries. However, politically astute inquiry personnel can take measures to close future excuses that might shelve their recommendations. For example, implementation blueprints and provisional costings make it difficult for future implementors to dismiss recommendations as unfeasible. Reports can explain the relative urgency of various recommendations and suggest appropriate timelines for each.

Perhaps most importantly, the creation of oversight mechanisms can help. Several Australian inquiries at the state level have recommended the creation of statutory agencies to monitor implementation, while performance management tools linked to parliamentary oversight have been discussed in the UK in relation to the inquiry that will investigate COVID-19.

The actioning environment

Inquiry personnel also need to think about the 'actioning environment' which begins after a final report is published and involves stakeholders making judgements about whether recommendations ought to be implemented. At this point the legitimacy an inquiry has generated through its inquiry room behaviour becomes pivotal.

But just as important is the credibility generated through the persuasiveness of reports and recommendations. These are crucial because at this point the inquiry gives away control and must hope that its work will encourage action.

In this environment executives and government departments reassert the control they lost when the inquiry was convened. If an inquiry produces recommendations perceived as problematic, ministers will use rhetoric to accept them publicly (for example, "accepted in principle") when they have little intention to implement them.

The government department responsible for responding to the inquiry will typically keep the recommendations it sees as valuable and parcel out the rest to agencies who will shelve or implement them away from the public spotlight at a later date. These are the first moves in the politics of policy implementation, and whether they are effective will be influenced by the kinds of inquiry room decisions mentioned above.

Two other groups are important here. First, non-government advocates and interests can play a crucial role lobbying for an inquiry's reform agenda if they see it as legitimate. This can be very important for policy areas such as family violence where much of the service delivery is done by non-government organisations.

Second, 'policy refiners' can be given contentious or difficult-to-implement recommendations and asked to conduct subsequent policy analyses.Even though they tend to be convened with a veneer of independence, these refiners can give the executive the chance to shape the implementation process and reassert some degree of control.

Taskforces, policy reviews and capacity assessments that follow inquiries can dilute, change and even lead to the abandonment of inquiry lessons. Inquiries need to think about this prospectively if they wish their big-ticket recommendations to make it.

The institutionalising environment

Finally, inquiries need to think about the 'institutionalising environment', which exists for some time after a report is produced. Here recommendations which have encouraged some action can either succumb to institutional amnesia and get forgotten or get hard-wired into policy processes in ways that ensure their future survival.

The passage of time can mean that even the most legitimate recommendations will have a shelf-life simply because policy environments are inherently dynamic: turnover in actors, political obsession with change, structure of government reforms, and outsourcing of service delivery are all amnesia-inducing dynamics. These can mean that history repeats despite good efforts being made in the previous two environments.
One method of thinking about effective institutionalisation is to consider the management of lesson learning rather than simply the generation of lessons. Frameworks for managing lessons see inquiry learning as a more holistic affair that uses auditing, performance measurement and ongoing forms of collaboration as a means of keeping inquiry lessons front of mind.

Implementation monitors have also been used to keep recommendations alive and, at times, they have handed oversight to other actors, such as inspector-general offices, who have ensured lesson retention. However, inquiries themselves need to ensure that their lessons aren't merely of interest to future historians. They need to think about how to keep them alive so that they can be used by tomorrow's policy actors, and include those measures in their reports.

Summing up

The history of inquiry scholarship suggests that when inquiry staff think proactively about the loss of control over their recommendations and prepare for the politics of implementation that follow, they are likely to have success.

Our central point is that effective inquiries are those that can see beyond the inquiry room and reflect upon the challenges of the actioning and institutionalising environments.

Those that can prepare recommendations for the battle for control in the actioning environment, and the amnesia-inducing dynamics that occur in the institutionalising environment, will certainly have more of an impact.

This article was first published by Croakey Health Media, a non-profit public interest journalism organisation.

NDIS independent assessments are off the table for now. That's a good thing — the evidence wasn't there

By **Helen Dickinson** and Anne Kavanagh.
Published online July 10, 2021 by **The Conversation.**

Federal, state and territory disability ministers met on Friday to debate a proposal to introduce independent assessments into the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

In the face of sustained opposition, the federal government agreed not to make any legislative changes to the scheme and committed to consult on any future amendments.

Remind me, what are independent assessments?

Independent assessments were proposed as a new way of determining the functional level of an individual with disability, which would then be then used to inform what level of funding that person would receive.

Under the current system, people demonstrate this by gathering evidence from their own specialists.

The government has argued this is not fair, because those with greater means can bypass waiting lists in the public system and see private specialists. They also believe professionals known to an individual may be affected by "empathy bias", resulting in their clients ultimately being awarded larger funding packages.

Independent assessments would instead have seen people assessed by a government-contracted allied health professional unknown to them in a three-hour interview. This short assessment would have been used to determine what level of funding that person was entitled to.

While the government argued independent assessments were not about cost-cutting, leaked government documents suggested this system would lead to smaller funding packages "on average".

Discussions about the introduction of independent assessments started under the previous NDIS minister, Stuart Robert.

The proposal attracted strong backlash from the disability community who argued the assessments were dehumanising and would lead to inappropriate plans, with a significant risk of traumatising participants.

The NDIS Joint Standing Committee received more than 320 submissions on the issue from a range individuals, advocacy organisations, academics and more – the vast majority of which were highly critical of the proposed assessments.

On taking over the NDIS portfolio in April, Linda Reynolds announced she intended to pause the rollout of independent assessments until further piloting was completed and evaluated, and she had an opportunity to consult with stakeholders across the country.

Trialling independent assessments

The National Disability Insurance Agency has recently been piloting independent assessments (the NDIA is the independent agency responsible for implementing the NDIS).

It asked for volunteers to undertake an assessment, offering to compensate participants with a A$150 payment.

The NDIA Research and Evaluation Branch this week released its interim report on the independent assessment pilot.

The evaluation sought to understand the experience of participants through the independent assessment process, including whether the report accurately reflected both what they told their assessor and their functional capacity.

A second aim was to get feedback on the independent assessment tools used in the process, and whether these tools were collecting the right information.

Depending on the age group and disability type there are eight tools which can be used in various combinations. An example of one these tools is the WHODAS (World Health Organisation Disability Assessment Schedule), which explores how well an individual has been able to do certain activities with or without support (such as self-care and mobility).

While there are just under 450,000 NDIS participants, the pilot included a very small number of these.

Some 3,759 people across Australia took part in the pilot assessments, but of those, only 948 participants and support people provided survey responses which were analysed in the report.

More than 100 pilot participants were interviewed. And the evaluation also included surveys and interviews with assessors.

When we drilled down into the figures from the survey, we found some concerning results. Less than half of respondents reported:

- their experience of independent assessments was excellent or very good (46%)
- their assessor seemed to know a lot about the participant's disability (49%)
- the independent assessment report they received was an excellent or very good reflection of their meeting (48%)
- the results of the independent assessment were a very good or excellent reflection of their functional capacity (42%).

Assessors were not overly positive about the experience either. Only 39% rated their training as very good or excellent and some wanted more practical training.

Many rated the assessment tools poorly including concerns about accuracy and relevance of the selected tools, echoing the concerns of Occupational Therapy Australia in its submission to the Joint Standing Committee.

None of this makes a compelling case for such a significant reform. But the most serious problem is this does not constitute a full and rigorous evaluation of independent assessments.

Are independent assessments fit for purpose? We don't really know

The NDIA has attempted to be more transparent with its evaluation and commissioned a University of Sydney team to provide independent validation of their findings.

On the surface, this looked like a step forward for transparency. But this "validation" largely involved checking the way the NDIA analysed the data – they were not asked to critique the design of the evaluation.

The key question the disability community needed answering was whether independent assessments could be used to deliver funding packages that enabled participants to purchase reasonable and necessary services and supports that enabled them to live "ordinary" lives.

But this evaluation merely explored the experience of taking part in independent assessments; it didn't answer this question. No participant was given a budget based on their results. No participant outcomes were measured.

If we did want to know whether independent assessments created fairer funding decisions, we would need to compare funding allocations and participant outcomes between a group who received independent assessments and a control group who did not. Without that, we simply don't know if independent assessments are fit for purpose.

So it's a good thing they're off the table.

What's next for flexible working arrangements in the public sector?

By **Sue Williamson** and Alicia Pearce.
Published online July 7, 2021 by **The Mandarin**

As organisations consider new ways of working, developments in the private sector might provide some inspiration for public sector organisations.

Telstra was a pioneer in expanding flexibility for employees, introducing 'all roles flex' in 2013. This policy made flexibility the default position, putting the onus on managers to explain why a job role could not be performed flexibly if requested by an employee. Public sector organisations followed suit, and in 2016, the NSW government made all roles flexible. An evaluation conducted last year found that flexible working has become embedded in the NSW public service, improving employee wellbeing and increasing productivity.

Now Telstra has gone even further, adopting a 'location-agnostic' approach for all office and call centre roles. Positions will be advertised without a location to attract the best employees. Telstra's new policy enables employees to choose where, and when they work, responding to employee preference.

The Victorian government has also updated its 'all roles flex' policy, to embed flexible working. The new policy details that flexible working is now the default position, with every role having some form of flexibility. Significantly, flexibility is being embedded into the employment life-cycle. Employees will be consulted about flexible working throughout the recruitment process and while working in the job, and asked for feedback when they leave the organisation.

Similarly, Deloitte has reassessed its flexible working policies in the aftermath of COVID-19. The company has increased working hours flexibility with the removal of core hours. Deloitte has also introduced a paid wellbeing day each year for employees.

While organisations are reviewing and updating their flexible working arrangements, researchers have been reviewing the right to request flexible working arrangements provisions in the Fair Work Act. While any employee can informally request to work flexibly, this legislation specifically provides those with caring responsibilities, those with a disability, older employees, those experiencing family or domestic violence, or supporting someone experiencing domestic violence, with a formal right to request flexible working arrangements.

This is quite a narrow list and excludes many employees, and may now be outdated. Researchers have called for the eligibility criteria to be expanded in the wake of the pandemic, due to the proven advantages associated with flexible working.

A hybrid working arrangement, with some time in the office and some days worked at home, benefits employers and is increasingly a preference for employees. Organisations benefit through cost savings associated with having fewer employees in the office, which can reduce the office footprint, and potential productivity improvements.

Some organisations have even gone fully remote. Many employees, however, do not want to work at home all the time. Economists suggest that this may lead to a move to amend the right to request provisions to enable employees to request to work on their employers' premises.

With remote work blurring the boundaries between work and home, Australian public sector workplaces are seeing an emerging push from unions to protect employees' personal time. New enterprise bargaining clauses seek to place limits on employer expectations around digital availability.

This momentum arose following the 2020 enterprise agreement covering Victorian Police workers, which provides certain employees with the right to disconnect outside of working hours. Employees are not required to read or respond to emails or phone calls from supervisors other than for genuine emergencies. This enterprise agreement clause may flow on, with public sector unions predicted to negotiate for a similar right.

The "right to disconnect" originated in Europe, particularly in France and Germany, in response to growth in remote work and work intensification. In France every organisation with 50 employees or more is required to negotiate with employees about the use of ICT, with a view to enabling employees to have time off to rest and recuperate.

In the wake of the pandemic, creative options to regulate flexible working are being developed, and the public sector has an opportunity to be at the forefront of new developments.

Connecting theory to public sector practice

By David Threlfall and **Catherine Althaus.**
Published online June 28, 2021 by **The Mandarin.**

The relationship between theory and practice is often seen as unidirectional – with theory driving practice. This undervalues the two-way connection between the two domains, and the need for deeper engagement between theorists and practitioners to improve policymaking processes.

For policy professionals, a policy theory often becomes valuable knowledge only through the experience — in practice — of how to apply it. Likewise, practice should inform theory development through the insights offered by reflection on the experience of practice.

Theorists and practitioners should engage with each other as equals through mutually reinforcing reflective practice. In public policy and public administration, as in many other fields, this has not always been the case, and the professional division of labour between academia and policymaking should not hinder mutually reinforcing knowledge advancement in this way.

Many academics argue that the link between theory and practice in public administration has fundamentally broken down. We remain more optimistic, and believe that, while a disconnect exists, more can and should be done to unite scholarship and practice.

The reasons cited for the disconnect vary and include: academic incentives not valuing practical impact, practitioners not having the time to search out and read theory, academia being unplugged from the reality of practice, and practitioners not understanding academic language or the importance of academic rigour in research.

Every single one of these contains a grain of truth, but they do not constitute an unbridgeable gulf, rather a set of discrete, solvable problems.

There is, and should be, a fundamental link between knowing and doing, from action to reflection and back again. Creating a hierarchy of knowledge — with theory seen as higher than practice — is a hindrance to what should be a shared endeavour of advancing knowledge.

To argue practice is free from theory is either to divorce critical thinking from action, or to overlook the ideological sleight of hand in laying claim to theory-free practice. We all hold some theories or assumptions about the relationship between theory and practice, whether implicit or explicit — even if we do not consciously recognise them.

Academic Wilfred Carr sought to understand this relationship between theory and practice by categorising four major competing approaches in educational theory and their differing views of practice

- Common sense: generalisations are acquired through 'observation and analysis of practice and tested pragmatically in practical situations'. Any notion that theory could be developed independently or objectively is rejected; practice establishes the accuracy of theory rather than theory establishing soundness of practice.
- Practical: practice does not serve fixed ends but is a fluid activity in which choice of both means and ends is guided by values and criteria immanent in the process itself. Public administration and policy practice relies on 'practical wisdom' and the informed, committed action and moral judgement of practitioners.
- Applied science: with its focus on behaviourism and scientific standards, this approach sees practice as essentially a technical endeavour designed to bring about particular, specifiable ends that adhere to higher-order scientific principles.

- Critical: theory is meant to help practitioners become self-conscious about the causal determinants of their beliefs and practices, often expressed as ideology, in order to increase their rational autonomy within a social endeavour. The stress is on using 'critical self-reflection' to move not between theory and practice but between irrationality and rationality, and from ignorance and habit to knowledge and reflection.

The 'common sense' and 'practical' models articulate a model familiar to public sector practitioners — learning on-the-job through experience of the policymaking process guided by traditional practical and moral principles. 'Applied science' sits well outside that experience, where practice has little to offer.

We find the 'critical' approach more promising for encouraging deeper understanding and assisting the shifts back-and-forth between knowing what (theory) and knowing how (practice). A focus on using existing theories to make sense of our policy experiences, and to supplement our own reflections on practice, means we should be able to make clearer the interconnection between theory and practice, and use both to enrich our understanding.

While this sounds complex, it amounts to taking a more conscious approach to learning that values reflection in theory and practice. The daily grind can make this difficult but, if we are going to make progress, both practitioners and theorists need to pursue engagement with each other.

There is one further element to add to this discussion of knowledge creation about practice: the concept of emergence, or what we might term the 'Harry Potter maze effect'. In the fourth instalment of this now famous book and movie series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* the by-now teenage wizard Harry is selected to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. The final challenge is to find the centre of a magical maze on the Hogwarts grounds to secure the goal of the Triwizard Cup. When the wizards enter the maze it actually shifts around them as they move through it, simultaneously challenging them by revealing their fears and drawing out their courage to confront negative aspects of themselves. As they wade into the maze, not only does the maze change, but also the wizards themselves change in different ways.

The maze metaphor captures an important point about theory and practice — as you are engaging in different ways of looking at policymaking and public administration, you are simultaneously changing yourself and policymaking as you perform this policy work. The processes of thinking and doing policy are unavoidably intertwined and reflexive.

No single tool or theory captures the true operation of policy processes or political systems. Rather, the intent and benefit is to cut through a perfect description or an accurate prediction in order to assist in the task of learning and doing that policy practitioners face on a daily basis.

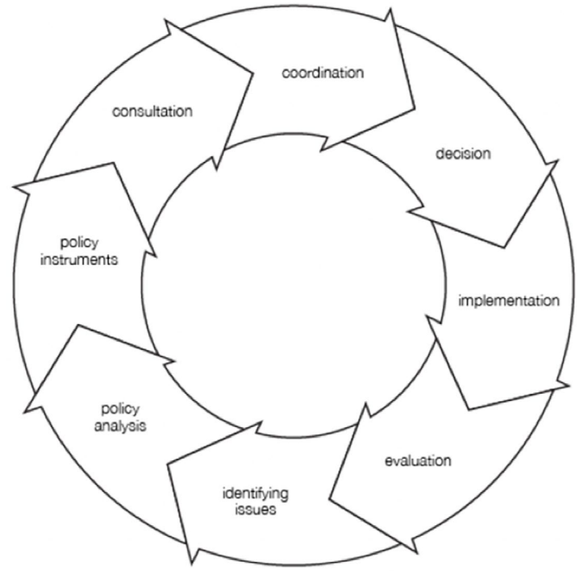
It is impossible for one grand theory or synthesis to usefully incorporate the varied structural, resource and political challenges of the policy world. We need an approach that uses a diverse range of different theories to gain breadth of insight, and which allows us to use a combination of the array of models, frameworks and theories on offer.

We are deeply engaged with the concept of a policy cycle — a staged process through which policy issues progress, and a means to analyse each stage. We believe that this provides a useful learning tool which articulates an approach to solving public policy 'puzzles' on both systemic and process levels.

We promote the policy cycle approach in the full knowledge that it does not explain or describe the realities of policymaking. Criticisms that it oversimplifies, and that policymaking in the real world is always more complex, miss the point. The value of the concept lies in the fact that it is easily taught and understood. It serves to prompt reflection on prior practice and offers a framework for learning about future experience. It allows practitioners to step back from the complicated work of the day-to-day policy world with the aid of a framework that they can internalise, learn from and then work with.

Seen in this light, one of the greatest contributions of the policy cycle is as a heuristic. It is focused on the teaching, learning and reflection process. It provides a tool to make sense of experience as well as a tool to inspire creativity as policymakers navigate the policy maze. Its flexibility means it can combine with other theoretical and practice approaches to derive a richer analysis, with a clearer view of the actors and forces at play in the policymaking process.

Figure 2.1. The Australian policy cycle



Source: Althaus, Bridgman and Davis (2018)

We argue strongly against the existence of a theory-practice divide in public administration and policymaking. Rather, we should pursue the interconnection of theory and practice in order to advance knowledge and improve practice for those working in either domain. This interconnection must not perpetuate a hierarchy between theory and practice.

Those working in both fields must possess a shared language and desire to critique, learn and reflect together with a view to improving the policymaking process and outcomes. This two-way task of translation and knowledge creation is vital. Theory building and practice improvement are a shared enterprise. The more we can promote this joint enterprise, and the more we encourage both parties to exercise their agency, the better for policy processes and outcomes.

This article is a summary of a chapter in the new book 'Learning Policy, Doing Policy', published by the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) and ANU Press.

Why should market stewardship draw on lived experience evidence?

By Ariella Meltzer, **Helen Dickinson**, Eleanor Malbon and Gemma Carey.
Published online June 23, 2021 by **Evidence and Policy blog.**

This blog post is part of a series linked to the Evidence & Policy Special Issue (Volume 17, Issue 2): The many faces of disability in evidence for policy and practice. Guest Edited by Carol Rivas, Ikuko Tomomatsu and David Gough. This post is based on the Special Issue article, 'Why is lived experience important for market stewardship? A proposed framework for why and how lived experience should be included in stewarding disability markets'.

Many countries are moving towards market-based provision of human services, with 'quasi-markets' in place. Quasi-markets are different to the conventional markets we are used to within our daily lives, as they require governments to play a role in helping to steer them to success. This is known as 'market stewardship'. In our *Evidence & Policy* article, we explore the types of evidence that government uses to make decisions about how quasi-markets should run.

Our case study

We considered this question of evidence use and decision-making in a quasi-market currently operating for people with disability within Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The NDIS is an individualised funding scheme for people with disability, where they purchase supports from a government-run marketplace using their personal budget. The Scheme was designed to increase the choice and control of people with disability over their services.

The government has a key role in stewarding solutions to perceived problems in the NDIS market, such as by introducing new providers into the market in areas where they judge there may not be enough to meet demand. So far, it makes these decisions using economic models and actuarial calculations based on information about inputs and outputs. What is missing are decisions based on a real evaluation of outcomes for the people with disability who are using the Scheme – for example, whether people with disability are using a particular service (such as personal care) because they have no choice or because it is high quality and meets their needs. Given the Scheme is designed to increase the choice and control of people with disability, this seems a critical oversight.

Stewarding through different evidence

To consider how to use experiential evidence to inform the NDIS quasi-market, we looked towards a long history of how lived experience has been used in other policy processes and decisions. In policy, co-design and co-production have been common ways of drawing on the authentic perspectives of people using services. More broadly in the disability community, inclusive, participatory and action research approaches have been used to make sure people with disability are guiding the knowledge and decisions that affect them.

Based on precedents from these areas, we identified three principles that can be used to better incorporate lived experience information from people with disability. Incorporating these principles into future structures for market stewardship is critical to the ongoing running of the NDIS and to ensuring it delivers quality for people with disability.

1. **Invite meaningful and flexible participation from people with disability**

   Provide options for how people with disability can contribute, including co-design-style roles for people with disability on a team of market stewards, or providing a way for policymakers to draw on the lived experience of people with disability as part of an evidence-informed process.

2. **Make market stewardship information accessible to people with disability**

   Produce relevant information about the market in accessible formats (e.g. sign language, large print, Braille, Easy Read) and allow communication/accessibility supporters to assist people with disability who are in co-design-style roles. Understand that people with disability are unlikely to want to talk about their lives in economic terms ('the language of the market'). Amplify the voices of people with disability

3. **Put structures in place to amplify the voices of people with disability, using their perspectives**

   as evidence and not that of people who have historically talked over them. Such structures can \include appointments to policymaking and/or co-design-style roles based on lived experience, training in leadership and policy for people with disability, and appropriate accessibility supports. With these principles in place, we argue that the NDIS quasi-market can better reflect the nuances of the lives of people with disability, beyond what the usual input and output information can show. With mechanisms for including lived experience as a form of evidence for market stewardship decision-making, we suggest that there will ultimately be better capacity to truly meet and foster choice and control for people with disability.

Dr Ariella Meltzer is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Social Impact, UNSW. Ariella specialises in complex qualitative research. Her research is based in disability studies, youth studies and social policy, and centres on the themes of relationships and social change.

Helen Dickinson is Professor of Public Service Research and Director of the Public Research Group at the University of New South Wales, Canberra. Much of her research involves investigating ways to design and deliver more effective public services and she has a particular interest in engaging service users in these processes.

Eleanor Malbon is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Social Impact, UNSW, where she is part of an interdisciplinary team of researchers committed to addressing inequality. She is an expert in systems-based research methods and uses these along with community contributions to help find solutions to complex problems.

Professor Gemma Carey is the Academic Director of the Centre for Social Impact UNSW. Gemma undertakes primary research in governance and policy implementation. Drawing on this work, she also contributes to emerging debates in public health regarding the social determinants of health.

You can read the original research in Evidence & Policy:
Meltzer, A. Dickinson, H. Malbon, E. and Carey, G. (2021). Why is lived experience important for market stewardship? A proposed framework for why and how lived experience should be included in stewarding disability markets. Evidence & Policy, DOI: 10.1332/174426421X16142714946996.

Luve ni yali: Lost son of a seasonal worker

By **Satish Chand.**
Published online May 31, 2021 by **Islands Business**

Luve ni yali, a newborn, was issued a fresh certificate of identity by a Pacific diplomatic mission in Canberra so that he could be repatriated home with his mother, a temporary migrant worker who fell pregnant while in Australia. Mary, the mother, is now a battered divorcee. The biological father is not even aware of the repatriation, and in any case does not care as 'Luve-ni-yali' is now 'out of his sight and therefore out of his mind'. Mary has two other children from her only husband, and they are both living at home. Mary is dark but '*Luve ni yali*' has blond hair and light skin.

Mary was recruited as a seasonal worker and issued a six month-visa to work on an apple orchard in Tasmania. This 'International Relations' visa (Subclass 403) is issued by the Australian government to strengthen people-to-people links with Pacific islanders. The COVID-19 outbreak with lockdowns on international travel extended Mary's stay to three years. Excellent news for Mary as she would now be able to earn more, and good for her employer given the surety of an employee during the pandemic. For Mary, the seasonal work visa was an opportunity of a lifetime to travel abroad, earn income, and learn new skills.

Mary was accommodated in a group house on the farm, given multiple shifts – including overtime work – and paid on time. No one knows if she was raped, coerced, or induced – but the outcome is clearly consequential. Mary could not continue working following the birth of the child. The visa does not allow workers to bring in family, and women go through medical examination prior to departure to ensure that they are not already pregnant. Pita, her husband, knew of these conditions. *Luve ni yali*, which translates from Indigenous Fijian to 'child of the missing' dad, will remain unhinged from his home.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced flights to the Pacific islands. All arrivals are quarantined away from family for 14 days. Mary was helped by her diplomatic mission in Canberra to return home, and by her government complete quarantine. But Pita was furious on being informed of Mary's early arrival. He threw her out of their house and family. Destitution beckoned but for the Women's Crisis Centre.

Luve ni yali will grow up a lost child in his new home. He will face ridicule, given the pejorative connotations of him being without a dad.

He will not have access to land held under customary title. While the mother of every child is easily identified, a child's father provides the cultural connectivity within patrilineal societies. *Luve ni yali* is an innocent victim of a temporary migrant labour scheme that has failed him.

The Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) was launched in July 2012 with noble intentions. It was to meet the demand for low and semi-skilled workers in rural and regional Australia while providing employment and income to many within the neighbouring islands. The visa is for a maximum of nine months to allow workers to circulate through Australia, returning to their families with savings to invest in homes, healthcare, and education of their kin. Prospective employers are required to demonstrate the need for overseas workers and the capacity to host them. Participants in the SWP must pass health and character checks and pay for travel to, and health insurance while in, Australia.

The concept of a seasonal worker program to allow Pacific islanders to work in Australia and New Zealand was first mooted in 2005 at the Pacific Islands Forum. New Zealand took lead by launching the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme in April 2007 with Australia following soon after. Both schemes have ameliorated some of the shortfall of workers in select sectors during peak demand while providing jobs and income to the recruits from the islands.

The void in local labour markets is the result of locals shunning the difficult, dirty, and sometimes dangerous nature of agricultural work. Further, the seasonal nature of the work in rural and remote regions are not rewarding enough given the prevailing rates of remuneration. But Australia, as a major producer of food, needs workers that to date have been imported in the form of backpackers, students, and citizens from New Zealand and the Pacific islands plus Timor Leste.

The SWP was designed with good intentions, but it desperately needs improved implementation. For a start, couples must be encouraged to come for work under SWP to reduce the risks of having more '*luve ni yalis*'. The restrictions on work solely for their sponsor must be lifted if the workers are to maximise their income. Most importantly, close oversight of the SWP by the responsible governments is required if exploitation is to be avoided. A comprehensive review of SWP is both urgent and overdue.

SWP has noble intentions, but *Luve ni yali* is not one of them. This is not an isolated incident either. '*Luve ni yalis*' may be able to claim their rights. Fathers can now be traced through their genes, so the missing dad will be discovered. What obligations does the biological father have towards his child (i.e. luvena) – even if they reside apart/abroad? Can a '*Luve ni yali*' claim Australian citizenship? Does his mother qualify for maintenance while raising the child abroad?

This article was first published in the May 2021 issue of Islands Business magazine.

Why the government's proposed reforms won't make the NDIS fairer

By **Helen Dickinson** (Opinion piece).
Published online May 21, 2021 by **The Canberra Times.**

The National Disability Insurance Scheme is unique in the world and is something that Australia should be proud of. It signals a firm commitment to support people with significant and permanent disability in fulfilling their human rights.

For some, the NDIS is absolutely transformative and truly changes lives.

However, not everyone's experience of the NDIS is positive and there are many inequities within the system.

The government has stated its intention to reform the NDIS through the introduction of independent assessments on the basis that these will make the scheme fairer.

Advertising

Rather than assessing an individual's abilities via medical and clinical professionals, everyone accessing or seeking to access the NDIS would be assessed by a stranger using a range of tools.

The government argues this will reduce the potential for "empathy bias" by professionals who know the individual. The result of this assessment will determine the amount of funding allocated.

Minister Linda Reynolds put a pause on the introduction of independent assessments in response to widespread opposition from the disability community.

Our research with Children and Young People with Disability Australia found just six per cent of children and young people with disability and their families support these reforms.

But in this week's Joint Standing Committee hearing, the minister confirmed independent assessments would be going ahead in some form.

The government has been vocal in past weeks about the financial sustainability of the scheme, despite it remaining in line with the Productivity Commission's projections in its 2017 review of scheme costs.

One concern is this reform will be used to cut budgets.

Several individuals who have gone through the pilot process have found the reports produced inaccurate, which could have serious implications.

If the government did want to address issues of fairness, there are many other places they might intervene.

A significant proportion of individuals currently face what are known as "thin markets", where they are unable to buy the services they want and need as they are not available in their locality.

Utilisation rates vary around the country, but there are some significant disparities.

People accessing the NDIS from East Arnhem spend on average only 33 per cent of their allocated budgets.

Independent assessments will not address these pressing inequities and could lead to care budgets being cut.

We should be proud of the NDIS and not seeking to dismantle the important progress we have made.

Professor Helen Dickinson is director ofUNSW Canberra's Public Service Research Group.

Embedding Evaluation in the Australian Public Service: Can Secretaries make it so?

By **Peter Graves** (Opinion piece).
Published online March 4, 2021 by **The Canberra Times.**

Once again program evaluation is a priority for the Australian Public Service, but can those at the top embed it this time?

In his December 2019 response to the Thodey review of the Australian Public Service, the Prime Minister committed the government to "building the capability of the APS to evaluate how policies and programs are going and embedding evaluation into everyday practice of the APS".

My recent research found systemic differences in the APS between "implemented" and "embedded", because of four factors: initiating agents; devolution to secretaries; extended time; geography.

In APS reforms over the past 40 years, program evaluation has a history of being implemented but not becoming embedded. This article sets out reasons why and suggests alternative methods to achieve the prime minister's commitment - once and for all.

The APS is required to be "efficient and effective in serving the government, the parliament and the Australian public" under its Public Service Act. Demonstrating that has concerned governments and APS management over decades, but it has been more a requirement than an embedded practice.

When I was a member of the APS, many management reforms were started and some did become embedded, like the Senior Executive Service (SES) and accrual accounting.

However, my research looked at the reform of program evaluation. Why evaluation was once required of all APS departments during the *Managing for Results* (MfR) era (1980s-1996) and then died away, but began reappearing in 2013 through the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act* (PGPA) and its requirements for annual performance statements.

When considered over nearly 40 years, there were similar and repeated objectives: focusing on program outcomes and showing results through evaluation. This performance reform cycle contained many similarities.

A common factor was they were started by particular governments and their senior secretaries such as Prime Minister's and Finance departments.

Equally changes in those same significant change agents led to evaluation reforms lapsing, as shown in the following two examples. The Hawke government was a keen implementer of the MfR reforms between the 1980s and 1996, but afterwards the Howard government dropped the requirement for Portfolio Evaluation Plans.

In 2010, the Rudd government introduced "Ahead of the Game", but this did not proceed under his successor. One of my interviewees was explicit: "The reason we stopped using the phrase 'Ahead of the Game' is because the government of the day didn't use the phrase."

When those senior initiators of management change moved on, this resulted in APS managers losing interest in maintaining that reform. A further key factor was a result of that earlier MfR: the devolution of centralised management responsibilities to individual secretaries.

That devolution lessened the practical impact of central reforms on the "One APS" through secretaries' individual discretion.

Despite the earlier MfR findings, there was also only limited awareness of middle managers as the consolidators of change in the regions.

The span of effective management impact does not always stretch that far nationally, but can be found in both the PGPA Act and recent US legislation.

The *Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act 2018* requires every US agency to have both a senior evaluation officer and an evaluation plan, in addition to a performance plan. By contrast, Australia's PGPA Act only requires an annual performance statement, although Section 38 does mean that "the accountable authority of a Commonwealth entity must measure and assess the performance of the entity in achieving its purposes". This suggests formal evaluation is a desirable APS capability and is relevant to a current review by the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee of: The current capability of the Australian Public Service.

However, few of the submissions have identified the importance of APS evaluation skills and practice. One adjunct to these may be an Independent Evaluator-General long advocated by Nicholas Gruen, where professional and independent evaluators advise APS staff on conducting agency evaluations. This takes evaluation out of the much-criticised short-term daily issues occupying the priorities of APS management.

Resistance to management reforms from middle managers and employees can be more evident in geographically dispersed APS offices. Implementation needs to occur consistently over an extended time throughout the regions.

Dr Peter Graves, Public Service Research Group, University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

Royal Commission into Aged Care shows the difficulty of systemic change must be overcome

By **Jenny Stewart** (Opinion piece).
Published online May 4, 2021 by **The Canberra Times.**

I am almost (although not quite) beginning to feel sorry for Scott Morrison.

Since his unlikely victory at the polls in 2019, his prime ministership has been one damn thing after another - bushfires, Covid, predatory ministerial staffers and compromised ministers, vaccine issues - and underlying it all, and exacerbated by the pandemic, the continuing problems in aged care. The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, which reported in March this year, did not tell us much that was new, but it gave his government plenty to work with.

While the PM's ear for personal values sometimes lets him down, he knows a political issue when he sees one. There are votes in them thar old folks, and their families, too. The government has already announced a funding package of $452 million to address priority issues, and is widely expected to do more when the budget is delivered next week.

Whether that 'more' will actually make a difference to the quality of life of older Australians is, however, a moot point. The Royal Commission made 148 recommendations, each containing multiple components, covering every aspect of a system widely considered to be failing. At the heart of the recommendations, though, lies a commitment to institutional reform based on top-down bureaucratic control and monitoring. The system, the implicit argument goes, will work better if there is more pressure on providers to perform. There are real dangers in this approach.

Part of the difficulty results from a stereotyping of the policy process. While Royal Commissions are excellent at focusing attention on issues that have become in some respects intolerable, building the solution around what everyone thinks is the problem is, from a policy point of view, unlikely to prove satisfactory. This is because Royal Commissions rarely have the time or the analytical horsepower to move beyond the outrage that led to their establishment in the first place, and to understand why and how the system is falling short.

The Royal Commission into Aged Care is no exception to this general tendency. Its job was made even more difficult by the fact that the two Royal Commissioners found it difficult to agree on the extent to which care really was substandard. Commissioner Briggs thought the extent of the problem had been clearly established. Commissioner Pagone was not so sure. There were further disagreements about the style and substance of reform. Commissioner Briggs clearly thought the providers needed the firm hand of the Commonwealth to ensure that the right things were done. Commissioner Pagone called for a more evolutionary approach.

What seems to be missing from the recommendations as a whole is in any real focus on what older Australians told the Commission is the key issue: they want to be able to retain their independence as we age. This has implications for the policy response. It is possible to retain one's independence in one's own home and in a retirement village. It becomes much more difficult when you are institutionalised. Residential aged care is clearly needed for those who can no longer manage on their own, even with help. But for all of us, the context within which care is provided is as important as the care itself.

Research commissioned by the Royal Commission reports one rather surprising statistic. Australia has one of the highest rates of institutionalisation of its citizens over the age of 80 of any country in the world. Even allowing for differing measurement techniques, there is no denying it. For a variety of reasons, more older Australians are placed in residential aged care than their counterparts in other comparable countries.

Given this predominance, the Commission's focus on managing residential aged care is understandable. Some providers and some facilities are clearly substandard. But if, as a society we are relying more on residential aged care than should be the case, even improved facilities of this kind will not lead to better outcomes. The underlying problem appears to be much broader: there are not enough ways for older Australians to receive services while also engaging meaningfully with the society around them.

The language of rights is not helpful here. It is good to know I have a right to be treated with respect as I age. But being well-treated does not necessarily help me to be heard. And as we age we all want to be part of something meaningful. Heaven forbid that we end up in an ABC documentary with four-year-olds or (even worse) subjected to a wellness regime based on prescribed pets. But it is the opportunity for connection that counts.

The Royal Commission focused on improving the quality of what is done for and to older Australians. In the next phase of the debate, we should be talking about local areas and communities, and how, through them, we can maintain both independence and connection as we age.

If the goal is independent living, more choices are needed. An obvious priority would be the provision of more affordable alternatives between the family home and the nursing home. Well-serviced retirement villages have considerable potential in this regard, but may not be available or accessible to consumers.

As for connection, let's hear from those who know ageing from the inside - those who are going though it, and organisations with a long history in the field - as to how this might best be achieved.

Professor Jenny Stewart is a visiting fellow in the School of Business, UNSW Canberra.

Vaccinating the highest-risk groups first was the plan. But people with disability are being left behind

By **Helen Dickinson** and Anne Kavanagh.
Published online April 26, 2021 by **The Conversation.**

With Australia's COVID vaccination campaign set to open up to over 50s on May 3, many at-risk Australians eligible under phase 1A are still waiting.

Last week we learned only 6.5% of residents in disability care homes had received the vaccine.

Aged care is faring slightly better, with roughly 30% of aged-care facilities having received both vaccine doses. But that's still some way to go.

Also worrying, an estimated 15% of aged-care workers and only 1% of disability-care workers have so far been vaccinated.

Federal health department officials have conceded the vaccine rollout in the disability sector is progressing more slowly than they would have liked.

But critics like shadow minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Bill Shorten have described the situation as reflecting a "pathology of dangerous incompetence" in the government's treatment of vulnerable Australians.

After failing to address the needs of people with disability at the height of the pandemic last year, the poorly executed rollout in disability care does little to reassure this group the government has their best interests at heart.

A high-risk group

Australians with disability are at heightened risk during the COVID pandemic because many have other health conditions (for example, respiratory problems, heart disease, and diabetes). This makes them more likely to get sicker or die if they become infected.

People with disability are also more likely to be poorer, unemployed and socially isolated, making them more likely to experience poor health outcomes.

Many people with disability, particularly those with complex needs, require personal support, which puts them in close contact with other people. Different workers will come through residential disability-care settings, sometimes moving between multiple homes and services, just as in aged care.

Should there be an outbreak of COVID-19 in residential disability care, there's high potential for it to spread because some residents may have difficulties with physical distancing, personal hygiene, and other public health recommendations.

In Victoria's second wave we saw outbreaks linked to at least 50 residential disability settings among workers and residents.

In other countries we've seen people with disability die from COVID-19 at higher rates than their non-disabled peers. In England, nearly six out of every ten people who died with COVID in 2020 were disabled, and this risk increases with level of disability.

While Australia has not seen these levels of deaths, the longer this group goes without being vaccinated, the longer they're contending with this risk. Discussions about reopening international borders only serve to heighten fears.

Given the unique risks this group faces, the disability community fought hard to ensure disabled people living in residential care and their support workers were included in phase 1A of the vaccine rollout.

Repeating previous mistakes

Last year the disability royal commission was presented with extensive evidence to show the Australian government had not developed policies addressing the needs of people with disability in their initial emergency response plans.

For example, while others on welfare payments received the COVID supplement, people with disability and their carers were denied this.

Many schools didn't make appropriate adjustments so children with disability could engage with remote learning. And families with a child with disability struggled to secure the basics.

Advocates did significant work before governments started to consider people with disability in their COVID response plans. But this was often made more challenging because no data were collected about disability in the case numbers, reflecting an endemic problem of lack of recognition of people with disability in the health system.

We're seeing this again in the vaccine rollout, where daily updates on vaccination numbers group aged and disability care together, rather than breaking these figures down across the sectors.

Without this sort of data, we can't effectively plan for people with disability.

Meanwhile, the government's announcement that the Pfizer vaccine is recommended for under 50s because of the very rare but serious side effect of low platelet count (thrombocytopenia) and blood clots (thrombosis) will see further pressure on Australia's limited Pfizer supplies.

It may be some time before people with disability under 50 living in residential care are vaccinated. Yet the government continues to roll out Pfizer in residential aged care where AstraZeneca could be used, further demonstrating the low priority of the disability sector.

It appears little has been learned from the government's earlier pandemic response (or lack thereof) concerning people with a disability. This group is being forgotten once again.

Getting back on track

In the Senate's recent COVID-19 committee we heard confirmation aged-care residents had been prioritised over disability-care residents as they're perceived to be at higher risk. This has angered many in the disability community who were not told the phase 1a group would be broken into sub-groups.

The government has some way to go in mending its relationship with the disability community. In addition to bungling the vaccine rollout, at the moment there's significant concern over proposed reforms to the NDIS.

What we need now is a clear plan to roll out vaccinations, not only to people with disability in residential care settings, but also those in the wider community and their support workers. The government needs to set a clear timeframe for vaccinating disability-care residents and staff — and stick to this.

The World Health Organization argues community engagement is key to a successful vaccination rollout. In this light, commonwealth and state governments need to do some substantial work to engage people with disability and the broader sector to turn this situation around.

The public sector to report on gender equality

By **Sue Williamson** and Lind Colley.
Published online April 9, 2021 by **The Mandarin.**

Amidst all the fanfare accompanying the release of the Australian government's response to the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Respect@Work* report, one important aspect has been overlooked.

The government's response contains some good initiatives, including that the Sex Discrimination Act will be amended to cover politicians, judges and public servants. Sexual harassment will also be expressly prohibited.

Less attention, however, has been given to another important initiative, probably because it's focused on the public sector. The Australian government has agreed to Respect@Work's recommendation that the *Workplace Gender Equality Act* 2012 be amended to cover the public sector.

This is an historic moment. All private sector organisations with more than 100 employees are required to report annually to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) on progress against defined gender equality indicators. The public sector has always been exempt from this reporting requirement.

Although the reasons for this exemption have been lost in the mists of time, it may have been because the public sector has traditionally been seen as a model employer, and performance on gender equality better than some private sector organisations. Governments may have believed they did not need to report externally, although with the benefit of hindsight it is clear this was a false belief.

The APS does have internal drivers for gender equality, but these often fall short. *The Public Service Act 1999* requires APS agencies to establish a diversity plan; however, there are no reporting requirements. The Australian Public Service Commission's annual report on the APS contains useful statistics and reveals that gender equality is progressing. However, this report does not comprehensively detail the state of gender equality in the APS, or how individual agencies are faring.

The APS Gender Equality Strategy encourages agencies to develop and implement gender equality plans. We analysed the gender equality action plans of all APS agencies shortly after they were developed. Several agencies committed to becoming a WGEA Employer of Choice for Gender Equality, and meeting the requisite benchmarks.

However, our examination of all annual reports shows that none appear to have met this commitment. A lack of public reporting across the APS means that good intent does not necessarily translate to good practices, or outcomes.

External reporting and monitoring provides all-important accountability. WGEA collects a wealth of data on how organisations are tracking on gender equality. It has found that progress is being made, but equality is still some way off. A level of apathy – or gender fatigue – has set in. This is also the case in the public sector. Research has also shown that reporting can be seen as a compliance exercise.

One way to prevent reporting becoming a "tick and flick" exercise is through imposing a positive duty on agencies to progress gender equality. Victoria has recently adopted such an approach. The Australian Human Rights Commission recommended the introduction of a positive duty on organisations to eliminate sex discrimination, sexual harassment and victimisation, as far as possible. The government has "noted" this recommendation contained in the *Respect@Work* report – but not agreed to it.

Requiring the public sector to report is a necessary and valuable way of tracking progress towards gender equality, provided that APS does not relax on its current strategies. Going one step further, and imposing a positive duty would reinforce and strengthen these reporting requirements.

Multilateral Development Banks: A system of Debt or Development?

By Susan Engel and **Adrian Bazbauers.**
Published online March 26, 2021 by **Developing Economics.**

Most people interested in development know about the World Bank and probably some of the bigger regional development banks, like the Asian Development Bank. But few people realise there is a system of 30 functioning multilateral development banks (MDBs). Indeed, we did not initially realise there were quite so many because there was no comprehensive tally or an academic study analysing them all. We set out to explore whether the MDBs work as a system and what role they play in promoting both debt and development so here is a short summary of some of our key finding on these three issues.

The MDBs as a System

The idea for the MDBs evolved out of the increasing complexity of the international finance system and the emergence of international monetary and financial cooperation well over a century ago. Key factors were inter-American financial cooperation from the 1880s onwards, international financial cooperation in the years between the two World Wars, and financial chaos during the 1930s. While most accounts of the World Bank attribute the idea of MDBs to proposals from American, Harry Dexter White, and Briton, John Maynard Keynes, we argue that the direct predecessors were, first, the establishment of export-import banks or export credit agencies beginning with America in 1934 and, second, a Mexican addition to a long-discussed proposal for an inter-American financial institution in 1939. Eduardo Villaseñor, then Mexico's Undersecretary of the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit, proposed that the inter-American financial institution also be used to invest funds for economic development in the Americas.

Still, the first MDB only came to fruition with the 1944 Bretton Woods negotiations and the agreement to create an International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which became known as the World Bank. And, remarkably, the 30 subsequent MDBs – of which only 29 are still functional – have followed the mandate, structures, and governance it laid out. Even the most recent additions to the MDB system – the BRICS-led New Development Bank (2014) and the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (2015) – conform to the original blueprint. This supports the arguments that the BRICS and the new MDBs do not fundamentally challenge the neoliberal system of global governance and finance. See table 1 below for an overview of all MDBs.

The bulk of the MDBs were created during the post-Second World War Keynesian-modernisation-welfare era (circa 1946 to 1979) and followed the Keynesian formula of promoting balanced investment and economic development. But they expanded that agenda to include regional, sub-regional, and specialised development programs as with the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (1974) and the OPEC Fund for International Development (1976). We use this framework of regional, sub-regional, and specialised banks to broadly categorise the MDBs.

Following the rise of neoliberalism during the 1980s, the first neoliberal MDB emerged in 1991: the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. While the other nine MDBs that emerged since the 1980s were not overtly neoliberal in their design, we know that the World Bank and other leading banks became partners in the neoliberal paradigm. Less is known about the smaller MDBs, but many had to admit new shareholders to accommodate the changing exigencies of the neoliberal global financial system. Overall, we think that the MDBs can be usefully understood as a system, though there are some differences and quirks between them.

The MDBs and Debt

The MDBs came out of expanding international financial cooperation that followed a series of crises in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries culminating in the 1929 Great Depression. They were designed to ensure that states received sufficient investment flows to promote employment and development. Still, in setting up the World Bank as a bank, White and Keynes created an organisation that was beholden to private capital and hence could not overcome 'the somewhat violent and not too enlightened motives of capital,' as White once said. Further, the MDBs operate in a global system that lacks an orderly default mechanism for nation-states and they provide loans directly – and facilitate private lending for – what the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debts calls illegitimate, odious, and unsustainable debts. That is to say, the MDBs lend to regimes simply because they control a territory; they loan regardless of a regime's legitimacy, respect for human rights, or whether the loan benefits the local population.

The MDBs facilitated financialisation in the 1970s thanks to their promotion of lending to the Global South and, once the 1982 Debt Crisis hit, the World Bank became a major debt collector for the Global North. Notably, financialised capitalism has not proved particularly efficient, and it is prone to crisis, with major debt crises in 1997 and 2008. As a World Bank paper recently detailed, 2010 to 2020 saw the 'largest, fastest and most broad-based increase' in emerging market and developing economy debt of the past fifty years (Kose et al. 2020, 111). This has occurred along with low interest rates and the growth of new financial 'innovations', which were present in the previous three debt crises. As the saying goes, we have seen this film before, and we know how it ends – with another debt crisis.

The development banks are entwined with debt networks and they play a pivotal role in this system as direct lenders, signallers, facilitators, creators of 'common sense' policy frameworks, financial innovators, de-riskers, and more. Contemporary development discourse from the World Bank and major donors has been about getting 'Beyond Aid' and increasing the level of debt for development. Many Majority World countries are again in dangerous territory when it comes to debt levels.

The MDBs and Development Discourse

While most of the MDBs reached their majority during the Keynesian-modernisation-welfare era, their banking DNA meant that they tended to focus on modernisation, or, more specifically, on bankable projects that demonstrated returns to the market. This drive did not disappear even with greater lending for basic needs during the 1970s or with the emergence of the Washington Consensus in the 1980s. When the human cost of neoliberalism became too high, the post-Washington Consensus arrived circa 1998 to renew the palatability of market austerity.

There was a brief and somewhat progressive interlude to the neoliberal agenda during the 2000s and early-2010s with the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals targeting poverty alleviation and human development. But the penny-pinching returned with the Beyond Aid agenda. Murray and Overton (2016) coined the term retroliberal to describe current directions; an old-school focus on infrastructure as facilitating economic growth, increased emphasis on state sovereignty, and the concurrent dismantling of human rights-based approaches to development.

The two new MDBs led by the BRICS and China not only replicated the MDB model, but they also opted for a donor-recipient blueprint, which is less development-friendly than the member-owned, financial cooperation agenda envisaged by some of the World Bank's founders. Still, member-led MDBs remain and there are examples of innovative, growing banks in the Global South, most notably the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF). Whether these innovators can reframe development discourse and practice towards a more progressive agenda remains to be seen.

You can get a copy of our book here and a 20% discount if you enter the code FLY21 at the checkout.

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Photo: World Bank / Grant Ellis

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Table 1: Overview of Multilateral Development Banks

YEAR	NAME	REGION	CATEGORY
1944	World Bank	Global	N/A
1956	Council of Europe Development Bank	Europe	Specialised
1958	European Investment Bank	Europe +	Regional
1959	Inter-American Development Bank	Latin America and the Caribbean	Regional
1960	Central American Bank for Economic Integration	Central America	Sub-Regional
1963	International Bank for Economic Cooperation	Soviet States	Sub-Regional
1964	African Development Bank	Africa	Regional
1966	Asian Development Bank	Asia and the Pacific	Regional
1967	East African Development Bank	East Africa	Sub-Regional
1968	Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development	Arabic States	Specialised
1970	Caribbean aDevelopment Bank	Carribean	Sub-Regional
1970	Development Bank of Latin America	Latin America	Sub-Regional
1970	International Investment Bank	Soviet States	Sub-Regional
1973	West African Development Bank	West Africa	Sub-Regional
1974	Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa	Africa	Specialised
1974	Islamic Development Bank	Islamic States	Specialised
1974	FONPLATA Development Bank	River Plate Basin	Sub-Regional
1975	ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development	West Africa	Sub-Regional
1975	Development Bank of Central African States	Central Africa	Sub-Regional
1975	Nordic Investment Bank	Nordic and Baltic States +	Specialised
1976	OPEC Fund for International Development	Global	Specialised
1977	International Fund for Agricultural Development	Global	Specialised
1985	Eastern and Southern African Trade and Development Bank	Eastern and Southern Africa	Sub-Regional
1989	Pacific Islands Development Bank	Pacific Islands	Sub-Regional
1991	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development	Europe +	Regional
1997	Black Sea Trade and Development Bank	Black Sea Region	Sub-Regional
2005	ECO Trade and Development Bank	ECO Member States	Sub-Regional
2006	Eurasian Development Bank	Eurasia	Sub-Regional
2014	New Development Bank	BRICS	Specialised
2015	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank	Asia and Oceania	Specialised

How should we prioritise care? COVID-19 research raises concerns on disability discrimination

By Richard Norman and **Helen Dickinson.**
Published online March 24, 2021 by **Croakey Health Media.**

Introduction by Croakey: Many countries have faced agonising decisions about who should access scarce health resources during the COVID-19 pandemic, but to date and due mostly to low case numbers, Australia has largely escaped such conflicts.

But that doesn't mean these difficult decisions won't have to be made in the future, or are not being made in other contexts.

In the article below, Associate Professor Richard Norman from the School of Population Health at Curtin University and Helen Dickinson, Professor of Public Service Research at the University of New South Wales, Canberra, report on research examining how Australians would prioritise access to health resources in the event they should run short.

Their findings confirm the discrimination that people with disability often face and highlight the need for inclusive, informed and ethical decisions and decision-making processes.

Richard Norman and Helen Dickinson write:
So far, the practical challenge of allocating limited resources to care for those with COVID-19 has been achievable in Australia.

For a range of reasons, including some combination of geographical isolation, strong border controls and a generally high rate of acceptance of public health messaging, as a community we have been able to maintain (by international standards) a relatively low number of cases per capita, and our hospital system has been able to provide high-quality care to those who have needed it.

But it didn't always look like this might be the case.

As we started to see the pandemic unfold in China, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States, among others in the early months of 2020, and we saw debates about access to health resources begin to take place, there was good reason to think this might be an issue we could face in Australia.

Against this background a research team from Curtin University, the University of New South Wales, the University of Technology Sydney, the University of Birmingham, and Charles Gairdner Hospital in Perth came together to explore how the community would want resources allocated if the number of people needing care in an Intensive Care Unit setting exceeded the unit's capacity.

Our project surveyed 1,050 Australian adults with the aim of understanding two things.

Firstly, who should make decisions over how resources should be allocated? Is it the community? Or would we rather have medical experts decide?

Secondly, if we do have to make such a decision, how would we allocate ICU resources between people who would have the potential to benefit from them?

The survey posed a series of hypothetical thought experiments (called discrete choice experiments), asking respondents to choose between two people who need ventilation when there is only capacity to treat one. Through this process we aimed to see how individuals would prioritise individuals with a range of characteristics (e.g. likelihood of response, age, smoking status, presence of a disability, whether they were a health care worker).

Who should be prioritised? Who should decide?

To some extent our findings were relatively predictable in terms of how ethicists think about these debates. Largely our respondents wanted to prioritise care to where it would be more effective – respondents were concerned whether the person had a good or poor chance of improvement through care. This represents what ethicists would see as a utilitarian view, where resources are used for as much gain as possible.

The average person also felt strongly that spillover effects to others should be considered. This prioritised individuals who were health care workers, with the capacity to assist in future, or if they have dependents.

Interestingly, when respondents were asked about who should make such resource allocation decisions in practice, their strong preference was for the decision to made by senior doctors or department of health experts, in preference to the general population, or based on ability to pay.

We also asked respondents how they would prioritise individuals with a range of physical and/or intellectual disabilities with mild and moderate impact.

A significant subset of the respondent group deprioritised people with disability (65 per cent for intellectual disability, 54 per cent for physical disability) in accessing health resources regardless of their ability to benefit from treatment or whether they are healthcare workers or have dependents.

The percentage of people willing to discriminate on disability was large, though the strength of that preference was small compared to age.

Disproportionate impact

In many countries we have seen people with disability die from COVID-19 at higher rates than their non-disabled peers. In England, nearly six out of every 10 people who died with coronavirus in 2020 were disabled and this risk significantly increases with level of disability.

Some of this terrifying figure relates to the fact that people with disability may have pre-existing health conditions that puts them at greater risk of serious illness or death in the event of infection. However, this does not explain all of this.

We know that people with disability are less likely to be employed and are more likely to be underemployed than those without disability. People with disability are more likely to live in poverty and more likely to feel socially isolated. Many of these factors are driven by the high levels of discrimination that people with disability face and that was found in our study.

While we in Australia have not seen levels of deaths of people with disability anywhere near those experienced in other countries, we do know that people with disability did report finding it difficult to access appropriate information and resources during the pandemic and felt like they had been forgotten by governments.

Without addressing issues of discrimination, people with disability will continue to achieve poorer outcomes and be at greater risk in future emergency situations – not only from the emergency itself but also community unwillingness to invest resources in people with disability.

Where next?

The urgency of such difficult decisions on COVID-19 related prioritisation has, for now, receded in most instances in Australia. However, having such discussions more generally is important in informing the debate about how we spend money in the health care system.

A broader conversation remains about allocating money between parts of the system, and by implication, between different patient groups. This is something that is a complex mix of medicine, healthcare more generally, economics, and ethics, and won't provide easy solutions.

Much of the existing work in developing such frameworks has focused on normative appeals based on concepts such as bio-ethical reasoning, medical ethics and trust. These approaches to grounding decision making are essential, but can and should be augmented with evidence on what the public feel to be appropriate resource allocation in times of high demand and constrained healthcare supply.

However, our view is that these population preferences should not be used in isolation from ethical frameworks and expertise, a point that is apparent in the preferences reported in our work for these decisions to be managed by expert groups such as senior doctors or health departments.

There are of course also risks in medical professionals making these decisions because the data clearly shows that people with disability face significant discrimination in accessing health services — including from health professionals.

Our advice is that frameworks should be developed by a group of people with different insights to provide guidance at a local level in terms of how these should be realised. This group should include healthcare providers, patient representatives, and ethicists, and be designed to reflect the community in which such decisions are being made.

While there remain significant challenges in these broader conversations, the last year has demonstrated repeatedly how having these frameworks ready for use is needed.

This article was first published by Croakey Health Media, a non-profit public interest journalism organisation.

Assessing the effects of COVID on work and gender equality

By **Sue Williamson** (Opinion piece).
Published online March 18, 2021 by **The Canberra Times.**

The impacts of the pandemic on both paid and domestic work were extensive.

During the pandemic, Associate Professor Linda Colley and I surveyed Australian Public Service employees who worked from home.

Other research reinforces these findings, but also shows that women still undertook more domestic work than men.

Of our respondents, slightly more women than men stated that they completed more complex work while working from home, which can aid career development.

Part-time employees are often given lower priority work, so being available to work more hours may lead to being provided with more prestigious work, leading to career development.

Consequently, almost two-thirds of managers are more supportive of employees working from home in the future.

It seems that working some days a week at home, and some in the usual workplace - hybrid working - may become the new normal.

Early market research shows that men are keener to return to their pre-pandemic workplace than women.

Being visible in the office leads to networking opportunities and being provided with plum projects which can advance careers.

It is important for managers to be aware of the downsides of hybrid working as we emerge from thepandemic.

Dr Sue Williamson is a senior lecturer in human resource management at UNSW Canberra.

'Dehumanising' and 'a nightmare': why disability groups want NDIS independent assessments scrapped

By **Helen Dickinson.**
Published online March 12, 2021 by **The Conversation.**

A coalition of more than 20 disability organisations released a statement yesterday setting out significant concerns over the federal government's plans to introduce independent assessments to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

The government says this new approach is aimed at making the NDIS fairer. But many people with disability think it is about cost-cutting. They also say an independent assessment is a "nightmare" process that doesn't produce an accurate picture of people's lives.

If the government is trying to make the NDIS fairer, there are better ways.

What are independent assessments?

To meet criteria for NDIS funding, you need to demonstrate you have a permanent and significant disability.

At the moment, applicants submit evidence from experts such as medical professionals and specialists. But this can be expensive, and the government argues this has led to inconsistencies in how individuals are funded.

For instance, NDIS minister Stuart Robert recently shared Tasmanian data showing a 53% difference in the average value of NDIS plans between more and less wealthy towns. So he argues independent assessments would make the process "simpler, fairer and more consistent for participants, and their families and carers".

Some current NDIS participants have volunteered to have independent assessments as part of a pilot process. However, from the middle of this year, all people over seven years old who meet the initial access requirements will be referred for an independent assessment.

Those currently in the scheme will progressively be required to undergo the same assessment before they receive their next plan, with new legislation to facilitate this process.

One of several organisations privately contracted to the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) will conduct these independent assessments. They will send an allied health professional, who is unknown to the person with disability, to assess the level of support they need.

The assessment will be done using standardised tools (such as a questionnaire the health worker completes). The outcome determines whether the person is eligible for NDIS funding and how much they should receive.

What's the problem?

The assessment process takes a maximum of three hours. In that time, the assessor needs to get to know an individual, understand how their disability impacts them, and gauge the types of support they have around them.

This isn't long enough to get to know the complex details of an individual's life. And people with disabilities that fluctuate (such as multiple sclerosis or mental illness, for example) may happen to be assessed on one of their better or worse days, skewing the picture.

The suite of assessment tools is focused on clinical issues, with different ones used for different age groups. For instance, they can measure medical conditions, mobility, or what people need assistance with. But they were not designed to decide appropriate funding. This is an untested application and no other disability system in the world uses this approach.

There are concerns this process will measure people simply on their medical diagnoses.

There are also concerns the process is not culturally safe for minority groups, such as those with a culturally or linguistically diverse background, LGBTIQA people with disability, and First Nations applicants. Disability advocates say these groups require assessors with specialised expertise.

Pilots so far show assessments are being undertaken by inexperienced health professionals who do not have much knowledge or experience of disability. Questions are asked without context, so the process doesn't always give good insight into people's lives and priorities.

Some of those who have been through the process describe it as "dehumanising". They say the short assessments can't capture all the context around an individual's life, and the focus on deficit and what individuals can't do can be traumatic.

The independent assessment decision cannot be appealed, and people with disability won't get a copy of the full assessment unless they apply to see it. If the process determines you are not eligible for the NDIS or that your plan should be substantially less than it currently is, there is no avenue to challenge this.

There have been concerns that NDIS costs might blow out and it is certainly true the original modelling behind the scheme underestimated demand.

However, many in the disability community are concerned this "tick-a-box" exercise is ultimately about cost-cutting through smaller plans and tighter eligibility criteria.

Lack of consultation and transparency

The NDIA says functional assessments were always central to implementing the NDIS.

The Productivity Commission originally recommended them in 2011. And in 2019, the independent Tune review suggested independent functional assessments could help solve some issues it identified with the NDIS.

However, disability advocates say independent assessments, as currently proposed, are significantly different to those outlined in the Tune review. They say:

- the assessments haven't been designed together with people with disability, which you'd expect with major changes of this nature
- any consultation was rushed (which contravenes the NDIS Act) and participants' concerns ignored
- there's no leeway for individual people's circumstances to ensure equity, consistent with the NDIS Act
- there are no protections, such as a participant's right to challenge assessment results.

Many in the disability community have also asked why the NDIA has not shared the results of any modelling or testing of the tools and the outcomes of the pilots.

What could we do instead?

Disability advocacy organisations are calling for an immediate halt to the planned rollout of compulsory assessments.

They are not against the idea of assessment processes that make the scheme fairer but believe this is the wrong solution.

Undertaking an independent evaluation of the proposed changes and one that is carefully designed in consultation with people with disability and their families would be a good start.

What's to celebrate on IWD 2021, with its 'he said/she said' backdrop to sexual harassment and assault?

By **Sue Williamson** and Linda Colley.
Published online March 8, 2021 by **The Mandarin.**

It is now up to the public sector to fulfil its potential of being an employer of choice for women, and act to prevent sexual harassment. Following Victoria's lead would be a good start, write ***Sue Williamson*** *and* ***Linda Colley****.*

The theme for International Women's Day this year is women in leadership during COVID-19. This is an admirable theme. There is no doubt that women's leadership strengths were evident during the pandemic crisis, with reports showing that countries led by women had lower mortality rates.

The Australian Public Service (APS) has a majority female workforce and has proved itself agile and flexible in responding to the pandemic challenges.

Now another crisis is upon us – the scourge of sexual assault and harassment.

The public service has long been considered an employer of choice for women, so surely women are safe in this industry sector? It seems that is far from true, according to a recent poll. Only half of respondents considered the public sector a safe workplace for women.

Just over two-in-five people stated they had little or no trust in the public service to provide a safe workplace for women. Since the public sector is considered a model employer, the low level of confidence that the public service is safe for women is surprising.

However, the public service rates favourably compared with other sectors. Other, more robust data gathered by the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2018 shows that the public sector ranked mid-range of all industries in terms of the incidences of sexual harassment. This category also includes the defence forces, where sexual harassment has been endemic. It also and seems to be ongoing, if judged by the Chief of the Defence Force's recent victim-blaming comments.

The APS also collects data on sexual harassment. Recent data shows rates of bullying and harassment have been declining in the APS. In 2012, more than 17% of APS employees reported being bullied or harassed. This declined to 13% in 2019 and, of the 500 complaints about bullying and harassment in 2019, just over 30 were about sexual harassment.

Before we take too much comfort from this low number, remember that sexual harassment is under-reported. One US study found that almost all workplace sexual harassment is not reported. So, the low incidence rate for the APS does not mean that public services can afford to be complacent.

Sexual harassment may still be prevalent in particular public sector organisations. A recent OECD report told of widespread sexual harassment in a rural fire service, and harassment in police forces has been rife, although leadership commitment to reform has resulted in some progress for Victoria Police.

To know the extent of under-reporting, regular, confidential assessments and surveys are needed to gauge the extent of sexual harassment. The Victorian government is leading the way on this – and gender equality obligations more broadly – and will conduct an audit across Victorian Public Sector organisations to gauge the extent of sexual harassment. Knowing the extent of the problem is the first step to addressing it.

Reporting is also key. The Workplace Gender Equality has recommended that the APS be the first jurisdiction to report on the provision and frequency of workplace training on sexual harassment and training. Training on sexual harassment is not always effective, however, with research showing that it can make men defensive and more likely to blame the victims. Paradoxically, men who are likely to harass are more likely to accept such behaviour after training.

Individual-level approaches are necessary, but also need to be accompanied by systemic reform. The Australian Human Rights Commission released a landmark report on sexual harassment last year, recommending a range of reforms and new approaches to reducing sexual harassment. So far, the government has agreed to implement only a few of the Commission's 55 recommendations.

Behavioural change to complement systemic change is also necessary. The poll referred to earlier also shows that almost three-in-five men believe that gender equality has largely been achieved. We have previously written about gender fatigue, which acts as a subtle form of resistance to gender equality initiatives.

A key means of overcoming gender fatigue is through problem ownership. Researchers have found that when men own the problem of gender inequality, they can become effective change agents. This needs to start from the top. As the Australian Human Rights Commission notes, high level leadership and political will is key to preventing sexual harassment.

In the absence of national leadership, and the poor example set in the Australian parliamentary circles in the past month, it will be left to organisations to take the lead. It is now up to the public sector to fulfil its potential of being an employer of choice for women, and act to prevent sexual harassment. Following Victoria's lead would be a good start.

Public Sector Informant: Growing disasters show world must turn a new leaf

By **Jenny Stewart** (Opinion piece).
Published online March 2, 2021 by **The Canberra Times.**

I was walking home from the shops the other day, when I encountered a man using a leaf blower to eject leaves from his driveway onto the road. The leaf blower was an electric one, so at least the noise was not as deafening as the petrol-driven ones produce.

He stopped, courteously enough, to allow me to pass. I don't quite know what made me speak to him, but speak I did. "You're just blowing the leaves onto the road," I said.

I was going to point out that, with the prevailing winds, the leaves would simply blow back onto his property. But something about his manner - somewhat belligerent - made me continue on my way.

Many of us have come to accept that climate change is real, and urgent. But climate change is just one symptom (the pandemic is another) of a fundamental mismatch between humanity's behaviour and the needs of the planet we inhabit. Regulatory solutions can go only so far. If we are to deal with causes rather than symptoms, as a global community we need to start thinking about moving beyond economic growth as the fundamental goal of our politics.

And then, for the most part, the concern went away. Rather than a new economic and social agenda, national and international policy transitioned towards rampant globalism, and an obsession with growth that has grown stronger rather than weaker over the years. Growth is invariably portrayed as an unmitigated good, and the only way to alleviate poverty on a global scale. Unfortunately, economic growth takes as much as it gives, both because of the environmental destruction it causes and the impoverishment of those, in both the developed and developing worlds, whose livelihoods and values must be sacrificed to it.

So, what to do? To see how far away we are politically from addressing this fundamental issue, try imagining one of the four major political parties in Australia - the Liberals, Nationals, Labor, or the Greens - putting forward a platform of true sustainability based on (ultimately) attaining a steady-state economy (i.e. one based on growth in quality rather than quantity).

A good example of this divergence is population growth, which (along with economic growth) is a massive contributor to environmental degradation. Those in power (usually men) are obsessed with the idea that bigger populations are essential for national prosperity. Yet when empowered to do so, women everywhere choose to limit the size of their families. Smaller families are part of a natural progression towards a more sustainable world, yet governments everywhere view stabilising populations with alarm.

Elite opinion on the desirability of growth will not change any time soon. There is too much power and money at stake for that. On the other hand, giving the lie to growth is not as difficult as it might appear. If GDP growth were corrected to account for environmental damage, we would see it for the illusion it is. Public policy would be much more effective if consistently focused on reduce, re-use, recycle, and repair rather than the latest industrial techno-fix. To return to the analogy I began with, if we were to take responsibility for the leaves and use them on the garden, rather than blowing them onto the road, we would be on the way to true sustainability.

Taking care of business: the private sector is waking up to nature's value

By **Megan C Evans.**
Published online February 2, 2021 by **The Conversation.**

For many businesses, climate change is an existential threat. Extreme weather can disrupt operations and supply chains, spelling disaster for both small vendors and global corporations. It also leaves investment firms dangerously exposed.

Businesses increasingly recognise climate change as a significant financial risk. Awareness of nature-related financial risks, such as biodiversity loss, is still emerging.

My work examines the growth of private sector investment in biodiversity and natural capital. I believe now is a good time to consider questions such as: what are businesses doing, and not doing, about climate change and environmental destruction? And what role should government play?

Research clearly shows humanity is severely damaging Earth's ability to support life. But there is hope, including a change in government in the United States, which has brought new momentum to tackling the world's environmental problems.

Poisoning the well

An expert report released last week warned Australia must cut emissions by 50% or more in the next decade if it's to meet the Paris Agreement goals. Meeting this challenge will require everyone to do their bit.

Climate change is a major threat to Australia's financial security, and businesses must be among those leading on emissions reduction. Unfortunately, that's often not the case.

The finance sector, for example, contributes substantially to climate change and biodiversity loss. It does this by providing loans, insurance or investment for business activities that produce greenhouse gas emissions or otherwise harm nature.

In fact, a report last year found Australia's big four banks loaned A$7 billion to 33 fossil fuel projects in the three years to 2019.

A pushback for nature

Promisingly, there's a growing push from some businesses, including in the finance sector, to protect the climate and nature.

Late last year, Australian banks and insurers published the nation's first comprehensive climate change reporting framework. And the recently launched Climate League 2030 initiative, representing 17 of Australia's institutional investors with A$890 billion in combined assets, aims to act on deeper emissions reductions.

Some companies are starting to put serious money on the table. In August last year, global financial services giant HSBC and climate change advisory firm Pollination announced a joint asset management venture focused on "natural capital". The venture aims to raise up to A$1 billion for its first fund.

Globally too, investors are starting to wake up to the cost of nature loss. Last month, investors representing US$2.4 trillion (A$3.14 trillion) in assets asked HSBC to set emissions reduction targets in line with the Paris Agreement. And in September last year, investor groups worth over $US103 trillion (A$135 trillion) issued a global call for companies to accurately disclose climate risks in financial reporting.

Climate change is not the only threat to global financial security. Nature loss – the destruction of plants, animals and ecosystems – poses another existential threat. Last year, the World Economic Forum reported more than half of the global economy relies on goods and services nature provides such as pollination, water and disease control.

Efforts by the finance sector to address the risks associated with biodiversity loss are in their infancy, but will benefit from work already done on understanding climate risk

Of course, acknowledging and disclosing climate- and nature-related financial risks is just one step. Substantial action is also needed.

Businesses can merely "greenwash" their image – presenting to the public as environmentally responsible while acting otherwise. For example, a report showed in 2019, many major global banks that pledged action on climate change and biodiversity loss were also investing in activities harmful to biodiversity.

Getting it right

In the financial sector and beyond, there are risks to consider as the private sector takes a larger role in environmental action.

Investors will increasingly seek to direct capital to projects that help to reduce their exposure to climate- and nature-related risks, such ecosystem restoration and sustainable agriculture.

Many of these projects can help to restore biodiversity, sequester carbon and deliver benefits for local communities. But it's crucial to remember that private sector investment is motivated, at least in part, by the expectation of a positive financial return.

Projects that are highly risky or slow to mature, such as restoring highly threatened species or ecosystems, might struggle to attract finance. For example, the federal government's Threatened Species prospectus reportedly attracted little private sector interest.

That means governments and philanthropic donors still have a crucial role in the funding of research and pilot projects.

Governments must also better align policies to improve business and investor confidence. It is nonsensical that various Australian governments send competing signals about whether, say, forests should be cleared or restored. And at the federal level, biodiversity loss and climate change come under separate portfolios, despite the issues being inextricably linked.

Private-sector investment could deliver huge benefits for the environment, but these outcomes must be real and clearly demonstrated. Investors want the benefits measured and reported, but good data is often lacking.

Too-simple metrics, such as the area of land protected, don't tell the whole story. They may not reflect harm to local and Indigenous communities, or whether the land is well managed.

Finally, as the private sector becomes more aware of nature and climate-related risks, a range of approaches to addressing this will proliferate. But efforts must be harmonised to minimise confusion and complexity in the marketplace. Governments must provide leadership to make this a smooth process.

The power to change

Last week, a major report was released highlighting grave failures in Australia's environmental laws. The government's response suggested it is not taking the threat seriously.

Businesses and governments hold disproportionate power that can be used to either delay or accelerate transformative change.

And although many businesses wield undue influence on government decisions, it doesn't have to be this way.

By working together and seizing the many opportunities that present, business and government can help arrest climate change and nature loss, and contribute to a safer, more liveable planet for all.

It's not too late to save them: 5 ways to improve the government's plan to protect threatened wildlife

By Euan Ritchie, Ayesha Tulloch, Don Driscoll, **Megan C Evans** and Tim Doherty
Published online January 21, 2021 by **The Conversation.**

Australia's Threatened Species Strategy — a five-year plan for protecting our imperilled species and ecosystems — fizzled to an end last year. A new 10-year plan is being developed to take its place, likely from March.

It comes as Australia's list of threatened species continues to grow. Relatively recent extinctions, such as the Christmas Island forest skink, Bramble Cay melomys and smooth handfish, add to an already heavy toll.

Now, more than ever, Australia's remarkable species and environments need strong and effective policies to strengthen their protection and boost their recovery.

So as we settle into the new year, let's reflect on what's worked and what must urgently be improved upon, to turn around Australia's extinction crisis.

How effective was the first Threatened Species Strategy?

The Threatened Species Strategy is a key guiding document for biodiversity conservation at the national level. It identifies 70 priority species for conservation, made up of 20 birds, 20 mammals and 30 plants, such as the plains-wanderer, malleefowl, eastern quoll, greater bilby, black grevillea and Kakadu hibiscus.

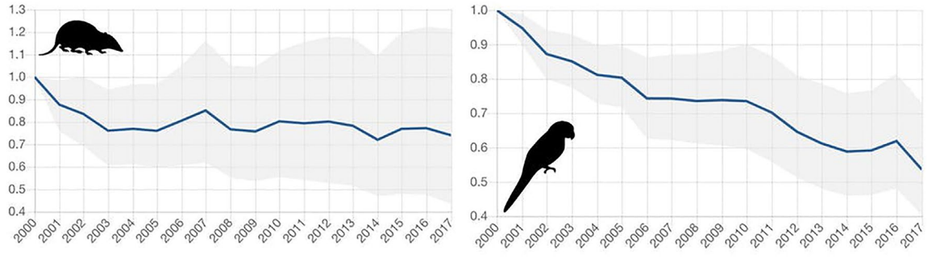
These were considered among the most urgent in need of assistance of the more than 1,800 threatened species in Australia.

The strategy also identifies targets such as numbers of feral cats to be culled, and partnerships across industry, academia and government key to making the strategy successful.

The original strategy (2015-20) was eagerly welcomed for putting the national spotlight on threatened species conservation. It has certainly helped raise awareness of its priority species.

However, there's little evidence the strategy has had a significant impact on threatened species conservation to date.

The midterm report in 2019 found only 35% of the priority species (14 in total) had improving trajectories compared to before the strategy (pre-2015). This number included six species — such as the brush-tailed rabbit-rat and western ringtail possum — that were still declining, but just at a slower rate.



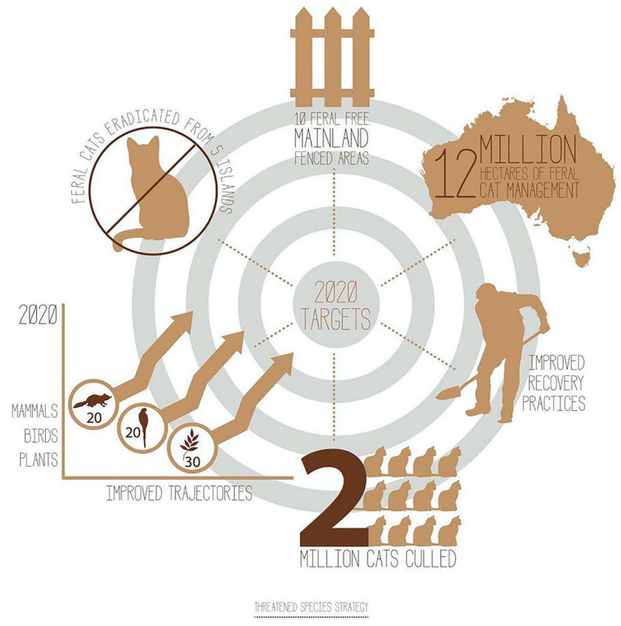
Threatened Species Index trends for mammals (left) and birds (right) from 2000 to 2017. The index and y axes show the average change in populations (not actual population numbers) through time. The Theatened Species Recovery Hub, Author provided

On average, the trends of threatened mammal and bird populations across Australia are not increasing.

Other targets, such as killing two million feral cats by 2020, were not explicitly linked to measurable conservation outcomes, such as an increase in populations of threatened native animals. Because of this, it's difficult to judge their success.

What needs to change?

The previous strategy focused very heavily on feral cats as a threat and less so on other important and potentially compounding threats, particularly habitat destruction and degradation.



Targets from the first Threatened Species Strategy. Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

For instance, land clearing has contributed to a similar number of extinctions in Australia (62 species) as introduced animals such as feral cats (64).

In fact, 2018 research found agricultural activities affect at least 73% of invertebrates, 82% of birds, 69% of amphibians and 73% of mammals listed as threatened in Australia. Urban development and climate change threaten up to 33% and 56% of threatened species, respectively.

Other important threats to native Australian species include pollution, feral herbivores (such as horses and goats), very frequent or hot bushfires and weeds. Buffel grass was recently identified as a major emerging threat to Australia's biodiversity, with the risk being as high as the threat posed by cats and foxes.

Five vital improvements

We made a submission to the Morrison government when the Threatened Species Strategy was under review. Below, we detail our key recommendations.

1. **A holistic and evidence-based approach encompassing the full range of threats**
   This includes reducing rates of land clearing — a major and ongoing issue, but largely overlooked in the previous strategy.

2. **Formal prioritisation of focal species, threats and actions**
   The previous strategy focused heavily on a small subset of the more than 1,800 threatened species and ecosystems in Australia. It mostly disregarded frog, reptile, fish and invertebrate species also threatened with extinction.

   To reduce bias towards primarily "charismatic" species, the federal government should use an evidence-based prioritisation approach, known as "decision science", like they do in New South Wales, New Zealand and Canada. This would ensure funds are spent on the most feasible and beneficial recovery efforts.

3. **Targets linked to clear and measurable conservation outcomes**
   Some targets in the first Threatened Species Strategy were difficult to measure, not explicitly linked to conservation outcomes, or weak. Targets need to be more specific.

   For example, a target to "improve the trajectory" of threatened species could be achieved if extinction is occurring at a slightly slower rate. Alternatively, a target to "improve the conservation status" of a species is achieved if new assessments rate it as "vulnerable" rather than "endangered".

4. **Significant financial investment from government**
   Investing in conservation reduces biodiversity loss. A 2019 study found Australia's listed threatened species could be recovered for about A$1.7 billion per year. This money could be raised by removing harmful subsidies that directly threaten biodiversity, such as those to industries emitting large volumes of greenhouse gases.

   The first strategy featured a call for co-investment from industry. But this failed to attract much private sector interest, meaning many important projects aimed at conserving species did not proceed.

5. **Government leadership, coordination and policy alignment**
   The Threatened Species Strategy should be aligned with Australia's international obligations such as the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals and the federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (which is also currently being reviewed). This will help foster a more coherent and efficient national approach to threatened species conservation.

There are also incredible opportunities to better align threatened species conservation with policies and investment in climate change mitigation and sustainable agriculture.

The benefits of investing heavily in wildlife reach beyond preventing extinctions. It would generate many jobs, including in regional and Indigenous communities.

Protecting our natural heritage is an investment, not a cost. Now is the time to seize this opportunity.

Australia and the World After Trump: a civil society perspective

By **Lisa Carson.**
Published online January 18, 2021 by **The Power to Persuade.**

*On 5 November 2020, at an event hosted by Conversation at the Crossroads, **Dr Lisa Carson** (@DrLisaCResearch) from the Young Women's International League for Peace and Freedom spoke about what the US election result may mean for Australia from a civil society perspective. In this week of the inauguration of Joe Biden as the 46th President of the United States, here is the text of Dr Carson's presentation at **Australia and the World After Trump**.*

I'd like to start by acknowledging the lands on which I'm on, those of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging, and note that sovereignty was never ceded.

I'd also like to thank Crossroads Conversations for the invitation to take part in today's event.

I'm an optimist at heart, whether the glass is half full or empty, I'm glad there's a glass and that there's water involved. But when I look at the state of US politics, regardless of the winner - and granted I understand the early jubilation with Biden - my reaction is tempered by the degree and extent to which the humanity of our politics and practice has been lost in the process.

The polarisation and echo chambers of both the emboldened left and the right, media concentration and opinions over facts, systemic race and institutional discrimination, governing for the next election rather than purpose, short term thinking over long term legacies, divisiveness over unity, fear over resilience, and individualism over the collective. Rather than despair and paralysis, this needs to be our fuel for change.

What we're seeing unfold in the US is cause for reflection here in Australia and abroad about how we can collectively guard against a similar path defined by entrenched inequity, rather build and deepen our own for the betterment of all, not just a few.

When it comes to our institutions of power, we need to continually question who they work for and why, and who they don't. Whilst some will rightfully point to increased diversity, significant structural change within white western institutions remains elusive beyond the surface, characterised by tinkering rather than tackling, when it's tackling that we need.

- We see this when we look at the representation of young people. People under the age of 25 make up almost half of the worlds population, yet their voices are largely missing, with only 1.65% of parliamentarians their 20's.
- We see this when we look at climate change. We only have 10 years left to prevent irreversible damage with at least 1 in 4 species at risk of extinction, and we know that 83% of young people here are wanting significant change.
- We see this when we look at traditional western foreign policy, instead of more transformative multidimensional feminist approaches that elevate marginalised groups' experiences and scrutinise the intersecting forces of patriarchy, racism, capitalism, colonisation, heteronormativity, imperialism, and militarism.

And so, what are we going to do about this?

We need to move beyond a 'West is best' mantra and genuinely embrace place-based perspectives. We have the oldest living Indigenous culture in the world whereby over 500 tribes co-existed for over 60,000 years, yet Indigenous and First Peoples diplomacy is rarely valued in our practice. Regionally, New Zealand has moved to a 'Wellbeing Budget' and has just appointed its first female Indigenous Foreign Minister.

Put simply, there are different ways of doing things and young people are hungry for this. Without change at all levels, we risk our institutions and practices becoming places and processes of irreversible intergenerational theft rather than long term sustainability, equity and justice for all.

Lamenting ‘toxic culture’ doesn’t change the fact that the SAS got away with murder

By **James Connor** (Opinion piece).
Published online November 20, 2020 by **Crikey.**

A toxic culture is an easy target, but culture does not exist as something separate; culture is what the soldiers and officers of the special forces did every day.

You’ve watched the films, read the books, and have an SAS poster on your wall. You finish school and join the army, desperate to become one of the best of the best. After years of exemplary service in the regular army, with hours spent doing extra training, you attempt to join the SAS.

The 21-day selection course is as demanding as you can possibly imagine — physically, emotionally and mentally shattering. Perhaps 20% get through. You’re one of the lucky ones.

You spend another 18 months training and then you get the call — deployment to Afghanistan. Finally, you can prove yourself.

The patrol commander is a decorated, charismatic senior NCO, you desperately need to impress him.

It is early on that you are “blooded” — the patrol commander tells you to shoot a prisoner. Get that first kill out of the way, don’t worry, we all do it.

Bang.

The Brereton report is as shocking as we were led to believe. A cadre of senior NCOs effectively led a murder racket, and were allowed to get away with it for years.

The report identifies the unique nature of the special forces, and a culture that became one of glorified warrior bloodlust, more akin to a gladiatorial arena then a professional military.

The overwhelming culture of the special forces meant that you either became one with the dominant group norm or were hounded out. Even now, despite everything, the report notes that some soldiers still can’t admit nor accept that there was wrongdoing, so encompassing is their misplaced loyalty.

While the report rightly focuses on the core group of wrongdoers (these are the ones who will be criminally investigated), it also clearly demonstrates a toxic culture that was condoned, enabled and recreated both at home and on deployment. The “us versus everyone else” belief led many soldiers and some officers to go along with activities that were designed to hide crimes.

In his address yesterday, defence chief Angus Campbell focused on culture, as if it were some sort of shield against the reality that our troops committed war crimes.

The idea that this was “all the fault of culture” is both a cop-out and correct. Culture frames actions, giving us a sense of what we should do and how. Yet culture does not exist as something separate; culture is what the soldiers and officers of the special forces did every day.

The report notes that unit and small-group loyalty, poor command, lack of oversight and a dearth of ways to report wrongdoing also contributed. It highlights a breakdown in command and respect between officers and corporals/sergeants (patrol commanders).

Farcically, it also suggests that there was a lack of education and knowledge around the laws of war, as if our most highly trained soldiers with in-theatre lawyers assisting them didn’t understand that shooting a prisoner is a crime.

What is most depressing is that we’ve seen these reasons for abuse and crimes before, identified by the defence force (ADF) itself. Since 1969 we’ve had numerous reports, inquiries and investigations. When they admit fault at all (and don’t fall back on the bad apples defence), they inevitably list the same causes: culture, followed by the same set of reasons spelled out in the Brereton report.

These same problems have also been identified by our allies. The US had My Lai, Abu Ghraib and their own crimes in Afghanistan. The Canadian Armed Forces has their experience in Somalia in 1993, where their elite airborne regiment was involved in a murder and subsequently disbanded.

The ADF knew what created the conditions for abuse and crimes, and have known for a long time. So why were the special forces allowed to get away with it? Where was the oversight? Why was there not sufficient due diligence to the set of risk factors that we know leads to crimes?

Creating a military fighting force always brings with it the risks of malfeasance. It’s about time the ADF took responsibility for not paying sufficient attention.

Dr James Connor is with UNSW at the Australian Defence Force Academy and is an expert on military culture, scandal and abuse.

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Military wrongdoing is nothing new. The question is, will the coming storm wash anything away?

By **James Connor** (Opinion piece).
Published online November 18, 2020 by **Crikey**.

The coming report into war crimes in Afghanistan won't be the first time the Australian Defence Force has been accused of wrongdoing.

We all know the story of Harry "Breaker" Morant, who exhorted the firing squad to "shoot straight, you bastards".

But while Morant might have been Australia's first recognised war criminal, he's far from unique in the annals of our nation's military history.

The imminent release of a redacted version of a report into alleged war crimes in Afghanistan is expected to detail how our venerated special forces killed civilians and prisoners during the ill-fated Afghanistan campaign.

It will also make apparent that their actions were covered up and accepted within the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

The truth is the ADF has a long, violent history, with crimes against the enemy, civilians and its own members regularly occurring. And it's the question of ADF culture — its pattern of cover-ups, obfuscation and avoidance of responsibility — that risks being hidden by the shock of the details about to be released.

Misconduct is part and parcel of the ADF. The first incident occurred in 1913, when hazing and bastardisation was reported by the media at the Royal Military College, Duntroon. It was then that the ADF's scandal doctrine was first enacted, a playbook we've seen utilised ever since.

First, deny, obfuscate, claim it was only a few "bad-apples" and point out that bad things happen also happen in the "civvie world". Then note that fighting wars is hard, which means you need to be toughened up (a trope we should expect to see often in the special forces case). If the tactics fail, call an inquiry, promise to take action, and let it all just quietly continue. Rinse, repeat.

Duntroon, in 1969, was bastardisation, then again in 1983. The Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) had its darkest days in the 1990s, resulting in the Grey Review, which reported on bullying, bastardisation and serious sexual assaults. But the changes enacted at ADFA were not enough to stop the Skype sex scandal in 2011.

That was the catalyst for the most wide-ranging suite of inquiries and reviews into ADF conduct ever, including the Orme (2011) and Broderick (2013) reviews into culture and behaviour. But them we got the "Jedi council" scandal in 2014.

Navy, not to be left behind, has HMAS Leeuwin (1960-80), Swan (1992) and Success (2009). In 2014, the Defence Abuse Response Taskforce found 2224 plausible cases of abuse.

Perhaps a key difference this time around is that the special forces scandal is about crimes committed against others, while on a war footing, that will implicate heroes in murder.

The other big difference is the magnitude. The slow drip of details and expectation management tells us the response is going to be severe.

Or is it? Will we see real change, or is this merely the same scandal management doctrine we've seen so many times before — inquiries, reviews, reports and promises that things will get better?

The test of how seriously the ADF takes this will be in the breadth of cultural change promised and enacted. If it's restricted to the "bad barrel" of special forces then we'll know it'll only be a matter of time until the next scandal erupts.

Dr James Connor is with UNSW at the Australian Defence Force Academy and is an expert on military culture, scandal and abuse.

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Bhutan's decisive response to COVID-19

By **Mark Turner.**
Published online November 6, 2020 by **East Asia Forum.**

Landlocked and inextricably linked to India (the country with the second most COVID-19 cases in the world), neighbouring Bhutan's chances of avoiding the ravages of the pandemic appeared slim. But on 6 November 2020, the government reported only 358 cases, 333 recovered and no deaths. The country's performance in dealing with COVID-19 has been hailed 'commendable' by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The leadership triumvirate of the Prime Minister, Health Minister and King played a major role in this success story. Prime Minister Lotay Tshering is a physician and Health Minister Dechen Wangmo has a long history in public health. They based their policy responses on science and both understand what is required for effective disease control. Their rapid and well-informed decision-making was strongly supported by the King, who has been highly visible and vocal in backing the messages from Tshering and Wangmo.

Leadership needs to be complemented by good management for COVID-19 measures to be effective and the government's speed of action is notable. When the first case — a US tourist — was identified on 6 March, government officials immediately restricted entry for foreign visitors. And when a woman who had been released from quarantine tested positive on 10 August, officials promptly initiated a national lockdown and contact tracing.

Bhutan exercised maximum effort to prevent community transmission. The country has recorded a high rate of testing. Tests and quarantine facilities are free, which encourages people to come forward for testing or present themselves for quarantine.

Other evidence of good management was the chartering of planes and the rapid establishment of quarantine facilities for returning Bhutanese citizens, and the quick announcement of loans and relief measures. The army was recruited to assist in the construction of living quarters for returning Bhutanese citizens who are normally residents across the border in the Indian town of Jaigaon.

Communication from the government is consistently clear, concise and authoritative. There are daily updates, contact numbers and other specific information for citizens, government agencies and would-be travellers. High levels of trust in government and a record of compliance with government directives aided efforts to contain the virus.

Preparedness was another important feature of Bhutan's COVID-19 response. The foundation was the country's universal health care system, which facilitated timely diagnosis and treatment. The system's logistics and supply chains also enabled greater security, efficiency and the dissemination of equipment needed for the prevention and containment of the virus. A National Preparedness and Response Plan, for instance, was drafted in February 2020. And in November 2019, with uncanny prescience, the WHO and Health Ministry conducted a simulation exercise at Paro Airport — the country's only international air gateway — to deal with the arrival of persons infected with a new strain of coronavirus.

Community strength is the final element in Bhutan's effective COVID-19 response, with the King, government and community acting in concert. The King demonstrated concern and fulfilled his traditional role as monarch by distributing kidu (wellbeing), a system involving the royal provision of resources to the needy. In the case of COVID-19, kidu came in the form of income support to 23,000 individuals. Members of parliament donated one month's salary, hoteliers offered premises for quarantine, businesses donated cash and farmers donated food.

Several thousand desuups (guardians of peace), members of a volunteer organisation established by the previous King in 2011, also played an important role. Easily identifiable by their orange uniform and trained in disaster relief, desuups could be seen patrolling the southern border, ensuring compliance with lockdown, helping medical staff, delivering essential supplies and more. They were representative of a national belief that managing COVID-19 is a civic responsibility.

But there is a downside — the economy. Bhutan has a strong record of sustained economic growth and welfare improvement but the pandemic measures are having a damaging impact. Compared to a respectable 4.4 per cent growth rate in 2019, the latest estimate from Bhutan's Finance Minister for 2020 is negative 2.1 per cent.

The industry most affected is tourism, the country's largest source of revenue after hydropower. Sealing the borders shut down the tourist industry overnight, affecting 50,000 workers. They comprise 16 per cent of the economically active population and their loss of livelihood is estimated to have adversely affected 150,000 people in a country of 750,000. The demise of the tourist industry is contributing to a steep decline in government revenue.

Some additional funds to plug the fiscal gap were raised through Bhutan's first government bond offering and the welcome rise in electricity export sales — up 14 per cent as of August 2020. But there are further hold-ups for the already delayed work on new hydropower projects as well as construction work more generally. Despite additional aid from donors, the government was forced to review and 'reprioritise' activities in the 12th Five Year Plan (2018–2023). There is also talk of diversifying the economy and increasing mineral exports. Such measures will take time. Meanwhile, unemployment — particularly for youth — continues to rise.

The general view is that there is 'a long way to recovery'. But it could have been much longer without effective COVID-19 containment measures.

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Markets in social care: outsourcing administrative burden to citizens and the third sector

By Ellie Malbon, Gemma Carey, **Helen Dickinson** and Megan Weier.
Published online November 3, 2020 by **The Power to Persuade.**

*We know that the NDIS is a lot of administrative work for scheme participants, but the administrative burden isn't just borne by people with disability. Today's post comes from **Ellie Malbon** (Centre for Social Impact), **Gemma Carey** (CSI), **Helen Dickinson** (Public Service Research Group), **Megan Weier** (CSI), and Gordon Duff (National Disability Services), who have done some research on the administrative burden of the NDIS for service providers.*

Administrative burden is the costs incurred from carrying out social service administration – the bureaucratic processes involved in applying for and maintaining access to social services. This includes things like the paperwork involved in proving evidence of citizenship or employment, or the complex process of qualifying for social housing. As the conversation about administrative burden progresses, we understand more and more that the marketisation of social care outsources administrative burden to citizens (Herd & Moynihan, 2019), but something less often highlighted is that marketisation can also outsource administrative burden to the third sector and industry. Administrative burdens have very real consequences, shaping the effectiveness and outcomes of public programs (Herd & Moynihan, 2019).

We looked at the way the marketisation of the disability sector through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) was impacting administrative burden in the sector. The disability sector is made of up not-for-profit providers as well as for-profit providers, and we saw increased administrative load across both types of providers. Our work shows that administrative burden was one of the most commented on challenge for NDIS disability service providers.

Many providers commented on the fact that the NDIS is a complex system that can be difficult to navigate for providers. We would expect that a new system of this size and scope would be complex in nature. In the shift from block contracting to individually purchased plans there are understandably some additional transactional costs. However, providers expressed concern at just how much additional administrative work is being generated:

Most of our work involves cumbersome administration. In fact admin work accounts for 80% of hours. (P349)

Another provider explained why this situation has arisen:

Administrative burden now enormous—transactional nature of business, requirements to have service agreements with every customer, data capture huge to provide evidence, back office increase dramatically to be able to get paid and manage transactional nature of scheme, quality and safeguarding has added another layer of burden and additional cost (no funding for external audit process). (P203)

As this quote demonstrates, it's not just transactions that cause the extra administrative burden, but also the work of providing feedback to the NDIA and a lack of coordination between government agencies. Also, the NDIS has had a challenge to support NDIS participants to keep up with the administrative burden of the program, and because of their close relationships with people with disability, many service providers often step in to meet this challenge, distributing the burdens to the provider rather than the government:

There is too much reliance on disability organisations to do the work of the NDIA in terms of upskilling the participants, the public and their families. There is too much reliance on the goodwill of disability organisations to support participants [administratively] when things go wrong with the planning process. (P349)

The implications of increased administrative burden mean that many service providers have exited the NDIS, and more are considering exiting:

Many of my colleagues have dropped out of providing services to NDIS customers because the system is administration heavy and services more complex . . . Many of us will probably drop out once our registration is up because the process of maintaining registration seems expensive and administratively heavy . . . When things are working well the system is good—payment is easy and quick. But when things go wrong it is a large, faceless organisation that is difficult to talk to (but is getting a bit better). (P230)

Herd and Moynihan's (2019) work suggests that redistribution of administrative burden is "policy making by other means" (p. 2). What this means is that this shift in administrative burden is not an accidental result of systems of government, but rather this work is purposely redistributed in ways that meet political and ideological goals.

Although Herd and Moynihan (2019) are primarily concerned with redistribution of administrative burden to individual citizens, and understandably so, this insight also affects the third sector and for-profit providers. It's clear from our research on the NDIS that these new administrative burdens, and also the time providers spend helping their clients to navigate their NDIS-related administrative burdens, have put unprecedented pressure on some service providers.

We know that quality and safeguarding practices are essential for safety and respect in the NDIS, but in order to address these issues, additional administration around payments, quoting and adjustment to bureaucratic processes should be reduced for providers and NDIS participants alike.

Herd, P., & Moynihan, D. (2019). *Administrative burden: Policymaking by other means*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Carey, G., Dickinson, H., Malbon, E., Weier, M., & Duff, G. (2020). Burdensome Administration and Its Risks: Competing Logics in Policy Implementation. *Administration & Society*, 52(9), 1362–1381. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399720908666

The importance of social supports for learning in COVID-19

By Helen Dickinson and **Catherine Smith.**
Published online October 16, 2020 by **Carework Network.**

One of the consequences of the types of lockdown that we have seen associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has been that many children have switched to remote learning. This has not been an easy process for most of us as we have attempted to balance work and home learning, but for children and young people with disability this has been even more of a challenge. This is not as a result of the impairments of these students, but instead because our education system fails to live up to principles of inclusive education and discriminates against this group on a daily basis.

Families of children and young people with disability often have complex service systems that operate around them to offer support with daily living activities. Our research explored the experiences of Australian students with disability and their families during the pandemic and found many experiencing cancellation of supports due to concerns around COVID-19. This put some families under significant stress, particularly when added to the fact that we saw extreme shortages of some supplies in shops and significant restrictions about who could leave their house and for what periods of time. Many respondents reported that taken together these different factors had a significantly detrimental impact on mental health and wellbeing.

Although many children and young people with disability are eligible for and receive additional supports and/or funding to access education, many reported that these also fell away during the switch to remote learning. While some of these are understandable, for example individual aides who were not able to come to family homes. Others are less comprehensible, such as not making adjustments to learning materials as agreed in individual learning plans, for example by providing a simplified text version of a teaching material or a captioned video clip. This left many students and their families feeling as though they had been forgotten. This also meant that parents needed to make adjustments to materials if their child was to engage in learning. For many this put them under stress as they juggled supporting home schooling, work and caring for siblings.

For many families this is not an entirely unfamiliar situation, but one that they face every day. Despite a range of policy frameworks and systems, children and young people with disability fare far more poorly within our education system than their peers without disability. Yet, the evidence suggests that inclusive education is better for all students and not just those with disability.

Our research also demonstrates the importance of social interaction to being part of a learning community and feeling engaged in learning. Using regression analysis we compared perceptions of different types of education interventions and the degree to which this made learners felt more engaged with their community and their learning. We find that social supports are the most effective of all types of interventions. Where educators had made efforts to bring together students with their peers in a meaningful way this had a positive impact on wellbeing and ability to engage in learning.

As we are coming to realise, the road out of this pandemic will be long and it is far from a straightforward path. Ultimately the only way to prevent these types of issues emerging again within an emergency situation is for schools to fully realise principles of inclusive education. But Australia is a long way from this happening, with the Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education suggesting this will take at least a decade to achieve. Should individual schools or local communities find they go back to periods of remote learning, one important lesson to take from this work is that paying attention to social supports and making students feel as though they are cared for can be beneficial in engaging in learning processes. If schools and educators wish to do one actionable thing that will deliver better outcomes then this is achievable in the short term.

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