

AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT STATISTICAL FORUM

9 November 2005

Summary of Discussion

- Chair: Dennis Trewin (Australian Bureau of Statistics)
- Present: Denis Farrell, Geoff Lee, Susan Linacre, Jonathan Palmer (Australian Bureau of Statistics), Colin Mues (Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics), Dr Anny Stuer (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare), Dr Tom Karmel (National Centre for Vocational Education and Research), John Ryan (Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs), Carol Ey (Centrelink), Leanne Johnson ([Bureau of Transport and Regional Economics](#)), David Kalisch (Family and Community Services), Chris Foster (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations), Dr Don Brunker (Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources), Sean Sullivan (Department of Environment and Heritage), Peter Thomson ([Medicare Australia](#)), John Body (Australian Taxation Office)
- Apologies: Julie Roediger (Department of Health and Ageing), Dr Evan Arthur (Department of Education, Science and Technology), [Dr Richard Madden \(Australian Institute of Health and Welfare\)](#), [Jenny Benjamin \(Medicare Australia\)](#)
- Presenters: Dennis Trewin, Jonathan Palmer, Steve Crabb (Australian Bureau of Statistics), Dr Don Brunker (Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources)
- Observers: Steve Crabb (Australian Bureau of Statistics)
- Secretariat: Michael Meagher, Eric Morris (Australian Bureau of Statistics)

1. Minutes from previous meeting

Dennis Trewin welcomed those attending.

Minutes accepted from previous meeting.

2. NDN progress summary (Jonathan Palmer, ABS) - for information and discussion

Key Agencies engaged and nature of involvement
Development directions and priorities
Summary of strategic issues

Mr Palmer gave a presentation of the current state of the NDN covering progress made since the last AGFS in May 2005. Slides are provided as Attachment A.

Milestones reached include:

- launch of the demonstration NDN with the ABS and the AIHW releasing foundation nodes. These nodes provide data and a gateway to NDN services (ABS Address coder, and eventually, AIHW's METeOR);
- release of Version 1 of the NDN software for users to test searching and downloading.

Impending milestones include:

- release of an enhanced website within a few weeks;
- next meeting of The NDN Interim Governing Board on November 23rd;
- anticipated release of nodes for OESR, NSW Health and Tas Government. A Child and Youth Node is also being established.

Agreement has been reached to adopt the AGLS schema for discovery metadata. A range of other Metadata schema is being developed, including Quality, Structure, Meaning, and Access conditions. Current systems work will see the construction of additional functionality to link between networks, ability to set access and use conditions to data and services and support for Light Nodes. We are also currently liaising with the US Census bureau about their data ferret project to collaborate on the developing our networks.

Mr Palmer displayed the enhanced NDN website due to be released soon. This included displaying search and download capability. He also displayed a version of the NDN Rich Client and Address Coder. He noted that the Address coder will currently only code individual addresses, though a bulk load facility is being developed.

The board discussed the collection of data on users to understand user characteristics, the facilities and information they access. Mr Palmer summarised the information recorded about usage by the NDN will vary depending on the method of access and resource used. Where resources are available openly to users it is only possible to assess total number of downloads. However, where people access the NDN through the Rich Client, their usage will be able to be tracked due to the logging of activity. Dr Stuer and Mr Trewin noted that from experience with AIHW and ABS web sites it would be useful but difficult to be able to distinguish when users were referred to the web site from the NDN or another source. It was suggested that the need for information of this type be considered and a paper prepared providing options for capturing this data if required.

Mr Trewin noted that it would be useful and timely to develop a standard set of terms for describing metadata.

The term "fitness for purpose" was discussed as a reference to end users using metadata to judge whether a dataset met their needs as a data source. It was clarified that the term was not used for describing statistical quality or providing a quality bar to NDN participation. An example illustrating this activity was given as an ABS, ATO collaboration using metadata to describe some ATO data sets.

Mr Trewin invited any members who were interested in participating in work in this area or finding further information should contact Mr Palmer.

3. Accessing ABS Microdata for enhanced policy development (Don Brunker, DITR; Steve Crabb, ABS) - for information and discussion

Summary of DITR project

Discussion of experiences accessing ABS Microdata under Clause 7A of the Census & Statistics Act and impact on policy

Mr Trewin introduced the item by noting that the ABS is looking for methods to make microdata more available to users. One method is under Clause 7A where the ABS is currently trialling 5 projects that allow access to ABS microdata on ABS premises where the research will assist the Statistician in performing his functions.

Mr Crabb gave a presentation covering a project being conducted under this clause as a collaboration between DITR and the ABS. Slides are provided as Attachment B.

- The ABS is conservative when releasing microdata. The value of microdata is acknowledged, but the ABS also has to consider the trust of providers and policy constraints.

- The ABS seeks innovative methods to provide restricted access to data.
- There is very limited business data available as CURF's, primarily CURFs have been released on person or household datasets, where it is easier to confidentialise the data.
- Analytical collaborations of this type allow data to be accessed on site (ABS) and output confidentialised before release.
- Collaboration is permissible under the ABS Act and under a restricted set of conditions. These include that projects of this type are only permitted when assisting the Statistician in undertaking his role, the initial output produced should be a joint publication and that costs are generally recovered.
- This project has produced positive outcomes for each side in developing an understanding of the issues facing the other collaborator and has led to the exploration of further issues such as metadata descriptors.

Some interest was indicated by other agencies in accessing data under these arrangements.

Dr Brunner then gave a presentation discussing this project from the perspective of DITR. (Slides Attachment C).

- DITR sees high value in research collaborations of this type
- Innovation is critical to economic growth and productivity. While a range of innovation surveys have been conducted during the 90s, only limited research was undertaken on the data.
- This project is valuable for informing policy development and strongly enhances the value of Innovation survey data for users and for the ABS (through feedback of statistical quality).
- A joint paper will be released in the near future with detailed descriptive analysis of the data.
- A further paper will be provided to the Australian Statistician on feedback about this project and feedback on the collection as a whole.

Dr Brunner also described some of the analysis carried out to date. In summary, he noted that the project was a very good experience with a high level of technical and computational advice being provided by the ABS. It was also a great opportunity for DITR to input into the design of the next Innovation collection and strengthen the relationship between statistics and the policy they inform.

Mr Trewin noted the effective collaboration resulting from this project. He reinforced that what the ABS does in this area is limited by the Census and Statistics Act. His two key issues of interest with projects of this type were to ensure that the project assists the ABS and the Statistician in performing legislated roles and look at the value for money of these projects given their support cost is significant.

Ms [Johnson](#) commented on the experiences of the Bureau of Transport and Regional Economics with regard to a similar collaboration being undertaken which had added tremendous value to research. On the negative side, the process did prove somewhat restrictive and time consuming, and tied up researchers away from contact, though the value the project strongly outweighed these concerns.

Several members noted the major value that this service could add to surveys and CURFs that were released by the ABS and asked about the process to access this service. Mr Trewin noted that agencies should initiate discussion through their regular contacts in the ABS.

Further discussion covered the key learnings from this project and whether refinements to this process would result from these learnings. Some cultural differences were apparent at the beginning, but ultimately staff from both agencies realised the importance of the output and collaborated strongly. Mr Trewin noted that there will be a workshop in December to review ABS experiences. This would include discussions with the business community to get their perceptions. The ABS will then use this information to establish processes for future projects of this type

Dr Stuer reflected on similar collaborations between AIHW and Universities and commented that the issues that arose from these projects were similar to those already mentioned. She asked if the success of these collaborations could see in future a very large body of research being carried out within the ABS. Mr Trewin and Mr Lee suggested that under the current legislation they would not expect that a large number of projects of this type would be running concurrently. Other existing methods of collaboration such as joint publications would continue where they provide effective solutions.

4. *AIHW - collaborative arrangements to share, expose and manage information*
(Anny Stuer - Business and Information Management Division AIHW)

Dr Stuer introduced her presentation by outlining some of the functions performed and products produced by AIHW. She noted that most AIHW data is sourced from administrative collections. In accessing this information, the AIHW have to address accessibility constraints set by its legislation. In some cases, approval via ethics committee is also required from the source agency to access data. A catalogue of data holdings has recently been produced to disseminate on AIHW's website. Using this metadata also simplified the process of participating in the National Data Network. AIHW makes all its data available free of charge.

Dr Stuer then provided an overview of the METeOR system. METeOR is a registry of national metadata standards composed by practitioners and accessible through the AIHW website. AIHW consulted extensively during METeOR development with a range of technical, working and information management groups which resulted in the adoption of the revised 11179 ISO standard for metadata. The site has seen the registration of more than 160 developers with a doubling of the metadata content since launch. The site attracts around 1500 unique visitors per month. The developers are able to create and discuss standards on line, with an aim to reduce the time taken to develop a standard when compared to the previous paper based approach and to better harmonise metadata created. AIHW sees potential for the NDN to expand METeOR into other states and sectors.

Dr Stuer reflected on the AIHWs participation of the NDN. They see the NDN as a tool for exposing best practice and hope it will lead to increased access to their web site and METeOR.

The Building Ageing Research Capacity Project was also discussed as a collaboration with DoHA, DVA and the Australian Association of Gerontology to build capacity in on-line research on ageing using the ageing online site, which continues to grow in content.

The issue of porting METeOR to other agencies was discussed. AIHW feel that it can be adapted for other agencies needs as it is based on a content management system and AIHW has developed expertise on both the content side and the technical side which could support introduction to another environment.

Dr Stuer addressed a few further questions over metadata. Regarding utilisation of the 11179 standard in METeOR and whether all metadata fields were completed, Dr Stuer noted that there was some flexibility in how one could implement the standard and that the AIHW implementation is [based on](#) the standard. Dr Stuer also explained AIHW is looking at linking data available on the AIHW website with the 11179 repository so that data [users can explore underlying data definitions](#). Mr Palmer noted that this was an area ripe for future collaboration with a range of agencies with interest in this area. [The AIHW is also investigating options for easy access to machine readable XML code](#).

Dr Stuer noted that she was happy to discuss further with interested parties.

5. *Statistical Leadership* (Dennis Trewin, ABS) - for information and discussion

Strategic positioning of the ABS - update of progress

Mr Trewin provided a summary of Statistical leadership activity within the ABS (Slides at Attachment D). He noted that the ABS is seeking feedback on our proposed directions. He summarised these actions which included the creating 2 new Assistant Statistician positions, establishing a centre on immigration statistics (which would bring together data from a range of existing sources), launching Mesh Blocks and coder and augmenting the National Statistical Training Institute. Mr Trewin noted that in the next 12 months, the ABS will be implementing recommendations from the Allens' consulting report, including National Statistical Policy and Priorities, further developing the NDN, extending the NSTI and developing a statistical community.

Mr Trewin reflected on the objectives and content of a National Statistical Policy. He envisaged a policy based on principles which would recognise the importance of good quality, objective statistics. The policy would be supported by protocols to elaborate the principles. Development of this policy would be conducted on a collaborative basis with other government agencies. Guidance would also be sought from other resources such as the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the UK Code of Statistical Practice.

Examining National Statistical Priorities could lead to an NPP for the 2007 Budget Round. Priorities would be assessed through examining major information gaps within key clusters, potentially with assistance of IDPs, ASAC and workshops. It was agreed in general discussion that the establishment of agency clusters would be difficult where areas where logical clusters, such as indigenous clusters; could cut across other clusters and that some work was needed to consider effective approaches.

In response to a query about the ABS taking responsibility for establishing a national statistical policy, Mr Trewin noted that the ABS had a broad role to provide Statistical leadership which could include a top down system for driving national statistical priority. The UK system was noted, where National Statistics were defined across all Agencies and encompassed a very broad range of information (like hospital waiting lists). Resulting funding proposals can cover both service delivery and information needs. Other approaches toward establishing national priority were mentioned. These included agencies putting forward their own proposals directly or taking a whole of Government approach through statistical need being influenced by and deriving from cabinet discussions.

Discussion turned to considering the ABS role and intent with respect to data linkage. Mr Trewin suggested that the ABS is still exploring the benefits of being involved in linkage and would only play a role in this space if the ABS could add value [given that key players such as AIHW and the WA Data Linkage Unit have significant expertise in this area](#). Work conducted in this area would, in addition, need to be assessed against the impact on privacy. The role of brokering data linkage (for example, as performed by the WA Data Linkage Unit) was highlighted by several members as a valuable service. Examples were given illustrating the value this service can provide. These included enhanced analysis of immigrants social progress through linking immigration and taxation data and (from Statistics NZ) bringing together tax and employment data where legislation is used to protect confidentiality. It was noted that there was a lack of national leadership in the linkage area and that the demand for richer data on which to base research could trigger a national debate about the balance between research and privacy.

It was generally agreed that effective leadership will occur when other Agencies also take on a statistical leadership role within their specialist areas. This prompted suggestions of the value of a policy which promotes "other agencies providing leadership to other agencies."

6. Establishing a Professional Statistical Community (Geoff Lee, ABS)

Paper for information and discussion

Mr Lee introduced the paper by highlighting the drive from the APSC to establish professional communities in several areas including statistics. The ABS has taken on the responsibility to establish a community and is seeking feedback on how it could progress the community and what other Agencies would like to get from such a community.

[Members suggested a broad reach is needed for a professional community with several groups that should be targetted.](#)

1. Those engaged in primary statistical roles.
2. Researchers and policy officers who utilise statistical information on an occasional basis.
3. Agencies with small sections dedicated to statistical activities and analysis where staff usually had some formal background or training in statistics and analysis, without necessarily being expert in every aspect of statistics.

Several people noted that positions that required high levels of statistical literacy have sometimes been filled by people without statistical backgrounds. The lack of statistical knowledge impairs their ability to give effective advice. Hence the provision of training and support networks for practitioners and analysts were cited as being beneficial to help develop competence. As discussion progressed, the provision of the Statistical Training Institute and using researchers as a help desk service were generally considered to be the best value services that could assist in professional development. The value provided by trained ABS staff who subsequently move agencies was also mentioned. Mr Body highlighted how ATO are working to create cells of statistical professionals and reduce the number of non-statisticians in statistical position, to ensure the provision of sound advice to senior management.

Mr Trewin ran through ABS training options available through NSTI including in house, on site and train the trainer. In summarising, he noted that there seems to be a large demand for training for both statisticians and para-statisticians. Mr Lee added to this the need for support networks for these groups. It was suggested that other agencies can contribute training in areas where they have specialist knowledge, [this was supported by Mr Kalisch who noted a gap in the provision of training in effective use of longitudinal data](#). ACSPRI was also mentioned as another network with useful courses. It was also highlighted that it is a major battle to get people to understand what they need to know and this problem should also be considered.

7. International Statistical Activities Update

no report

8. Arrangements for next meeting

Next two meetings flagged for May 3rd 2006 and November 2nd 2006. No offers to host these meetings were received.

Attachments

Attachment A: National Data Network progress report



National Data Network - AGSF Update Nov 2005.ppt

Attachment B: Accessing Microdata under clause 7A: ABS experience



AGSF 9 nov 05.PRZ

Attachment C: Accessing Microdata under clause 7A: DITR experience



AGSF 9 Nov 2005.ppt

Attachment D: Statistical leadership Presentation



AGSF05.ppt