

# AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT STATISTICAL FORUM

13 October 2004

## Summary of Discussion

- Chair: Dennis Trewin (Australian Bureau of Statistics)
- Host: Dr Brian Fisher (ABARE)
- Present: Susan Linacre, Peter Harper, Geoff Lee (Australian Bureau of Statistics), Greg Griffiths (Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economic), Dr Richard Madden, Dr Annie Stuer (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare), Dr Tom Karmel (National Centre for Vocational Education and Research), John Ryan, Jane Young (Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs), Carol Ey (Centrelink), Dr Judith Winternitz (Department of Transport and Regional Services), Robert Knapp (Family and Community Services), Jessie Borthwick (Department of Education, Science and Training), Jennifer Taylor (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations), Dr Don Brunker (Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources), Tracey Tiller (Department of Health and Ageing), Peter Thomson (Health Insurance Commission)
- Presenters: Arthur Witherall (HIC), Greg Goodsell (Centrelink), Jonathan Palmer, Denis Farrell (Australian Bureau of Statistics)
- Secretariat: Michael Meagher, Mark Lound (Australian Bureau of Statistics)
- Apologies: Mark Jackson (Australian Taxation Office), Peter Woods (Department of the Environment and Heritage)

### **1. Minutes from previous meeting**

Dennis Trewin thanked those attending and ABARE for hosting the meeting.

Minutes accepted from previous meeting.

### **2. National Statistical Service**

#### **(i) National Data Network Update**

Presentation by Jonathan Palmer, ABS, see Attachment 1.

Jonathan Palmer provided an update on the NDN. The main points from his presentation were:

- The demonstration phase of the NDN is being established to examine the feasibility of a networked approach project;
- Invitations have been sent to the first meeting of the Interim Governing Board (IGB);
- The IGB will look into issues such as the NDN Guiding Principles and a general strategy;
- Work has been continuing on the development of system architecture;
- Custodians are being enlisted to join the project. To spread information about the initiative, an Overview has been produced and distributed and a regular newsletter is being released
- Metadata Workshop will be held on 8 November;
- Response to the NDN proposal has been positive. However, there have been concerns raised about the cost, how it will integrate with existing systems and what standards will be used.
- A Statement of Intent is being produced so that agencies will understand their responsibilities, timeframes, liabilities and resources.

Carol Ey pointed out that at Centrelink there are some issues to be resolved concerning ownership of data. However, she noted her agency's interest given their current work on systems redesign.

Jonathan Palmer added that there had been strong interest from a number of agencies including:

- Queensland Office of Economic and Social Research (as part of the Information QLD initiative);
- Transport Sector (who have produced a report suggesting the need for a system for sharing data across the sector);
- AIHW (integrating their new METEOR product);
- CSIRO;
- DEST (although Ms Borthwick recognised that their agency is in a similar position to Centrelink);
- ARACY; and
- NSW Department of Health (particularly the Remote Access Data Laboratory service).

Jonathan Palmer added that the demonstration NDN will be available in April next year.

Tom Karmel asked about the purpose of the NDN, whether it automates access to data or provides a directory. Jonathan Palmer replied that the NDN provides custodians with different ways to control access to their data, as well as providing a spectrum of approaches for data users. Tom Karmel asked how it will cut across existing services. Jonathan Palmer replied that the NDN would form an alternate suite of pathways to existing data or metadata, and is not intended to replace services such as AIHW's METEOR.

Richard Madden commented that some of the language in the Exposure Draft Document was unclear. For example, what is meant by 'expose' and 'loading' data to the network? He noted the need for clear communication about concepts and objectives, and raised the example of a recent ARACY request for submissions for data linkage through the NDN. Jonathan Palmer said that he has already provided feedback about the submission request to ARACY. Dennis Trewin agreed that communication need to be clear and noted that initially linkage would only use aggregate data. The project will need to take gradual steps in the developmental stage.

### **(ii) Finding Information: NSS Search Portal**

Geoff Lee presented this item noting that while the NDN is being developed, there has been a basic search facility developed on the NSS web site for users to find statistical metadata across a range of government web sites. He noted that the search portal already covered several agencies data. Other agencies may need to incorporate AGLS tags into the statistical components of their web sites to be included in the search facility. The ABS is willing to assist agencies in meta-tagging the statistical components of their sites.

Robert Knapp and Tom Karmel commented that both FaCS and NCVER were interested in having their web sites covered by the portal.

### **3. ABS Strategic review**

Dennis Trewin said that this review was commissioned because the environment is changing and we wanted to receive independent advice on how the ABS should respond to this and how our key clients would like us to respond.

A draft report has been provided to the ABS which sees the ABS in two roles as a:

- Producer of statistics; and
- Statistical leader.

This aligns well with the NSS initiative we have been developing over the last few years.

The report notes that the ABS is highly respected for the quality of its work and outputs and our clients want us to succeed. With the increasing demand for information, the report identifies an increased statistical leadership role. However, the ABS was not seen as responsive to the changing external data environment and our clients would like us to engage them more effectively.

Dennis Trewin noted that when the final report is received, the ABS intends to respond to it positively. There are around twenty recommendations in the report. Resulting actions will include:

- improving interactions with clients;
- involving policy developers on information needs;
- improving the setting of national statistical priorities

- responding more flexibility to external needs;
- making better use of ABS' store of existing data;
- changing legislation to allow for the running of joint collections;
- developing and obtaining government endorsement of a statistical program; and
- continuing work on NSS and NDN initiatives.

Dennis Trewin noted that he would like to use this group to discuss issues from the report.

#### **4 Disseminating data**

##### ABARE

Presentation from Greg Griffiths, ABARE, see Attachment 2.

Brian Fisher noted that previously ABARE applied a cost recovery policy to data disseminated via the web. However, an analysis of the cost of maintaining the charging infrastructure showed that this was costing more than they were recovering. As a result the philosophy has now changed and web products (publications and data cubes) are free. Clients are happy and it has cut down the organisation's infrastructure costs.

Peter Harper asked if there was any concern about people who don't have web access. Brian Fisher replied that they are very concerned about this issue as people in regional Australia made up a large part of their client base and paper copies are distributed to those that request them.

Peter Thomson asked if clients can request non-standard data. Brian Fisher answered this was still possible, however cost recovery was applied to larger projects.

##### Centrelink

Presentation from Greg Goodsell, Centrelink, see Attachment 3.

Carol Ey added that Centrelink face similar issues to ABARE, and like farmers, Centrelink's regional offices can face problems in accessing the web.

##### Health Insurance Commission (HIC)

Arthur Witherall presented a live demonstration of the HIC web site. They cater for a large number of reports (17,000 last year), most of which are free. Statistics are presented on all of the programs that the HIC run. It was noted that tables also are available on a raw number and per capita basis. It was noted that confidentiality procedures have been implemented into the reports. Future directions may include spatial representation of their data.

Peter Thomson commented that they consider there is considerable unmet demand, but they are limited by the number of available staff, even though they try to recover costs. He note that there are problems producing information on a spatial basis because of problems with address information. Dennis Trewin commented that on the geocoding front, the ABS are hoping to introduce software that links name and address information to geocoding facilities.

## **5. Why Statistical Classifications and Standards make a difference?**

Presentation from Susan Linacre, ABS, see Attachment 4.

Susan Linacre's presentation covered general issues relating to the use and development of statistical standards and classifications. The development of the Australian Standard Classification of Education (ASCED), which is now the standard for education statistics, was used as a case study.

Don Bruncker commented that this type of presentation could be extremely useful and asked if there are courses which cover this information. Dennis Trewin agreed that this would be a useful half day course.

There was some discussion about the use of an indigenous standard as an example in the presentation, although Susan Linacre said that it is a good example of where standards are not perfect and a compromise has been used. Tom Karmel commented that it may be useful to have the issues debated during the development publicly available so that all users understood the compromises made.

Richard Madden added that the area of standards and classifications is not given the priority it deserves and some projects don't use standards appropriately.

## **6. Expanding Australia's Census**

Susan Linacre explained that the ABS was looking at expanding the census products via linkage if it was shown that it had strong support. To do this the ABS will need to maintain identifiers on the census records so linkage will only be applied to future censuses. There is a range of data which can be linked including longitudinal data, but no identifiable data will be released. The ABS will only undertake this work if there is no risk to the census and the funds are provided by the government.

There have been four streams of work on this issue:

- User consultation: discussing the issues with other agencies and users to see how this package may be used. The closing date for submissions is the end of October.
- Community attitude: looking at community reactions (using focus groups) at different linkage levels. This showed that there is some concern about the use of name and address information.
- Feasibility: indentifying the costings and resources to get the project underway

- Communication strategy: looking at how they will demonstrate to the community the benefits of data linking.

Jessie Borthwick asked if there were any other particular concerns for certain subgroups. Susan Linacre replied that in general they were not but certain individuals expressed strong contrary opinions. She added that we need to have come to a decision by April/May 2005 so that it can be implemented for the next census.

Dennis Trewin noted that the Privacy Commission is supportive as long as there are significant benefits. Richard Madden commented that the AIHW uses specific approval processes for their linkage projects and queried whether an ethics committees would be developed to assist in managing public perception. Susan Linacre said that it may be something that should be considered, although the focus groups did not suggest that ethics committees would provide significant benefits. Dennis Trewin added that there maybe benefits to the ABS in having an independent group look at proposals from an ethical perspective.

## **7. Information Development Plans**

Paper provided for information but not discussed.

## **8. International Statistical Activities**

A range of international statistical activities were discussed including:

- OECD publication 'Education at a Glance' was released in September and the 'Program of International Student Assessment' will be released in December 2004.
- IMF is undertaking work on updating core macro economic standards for SNA, BOP and Government Finance Statistics.
- International Comparison Program to compare the purchasing power across countries will commence on 1 January. One hundred and seventy countries are participating and first results are expected in 2006.
- A recent bilateral meeting between the ABS and Statistics Canada (with Richard Madden) looked at running a social survey across countries with common elements. Statistics NZ has also expressed interest in the project and the ABS intends to hold discussions with the US as well.
- OECD is currently undertaking a quality review of it's statistical activities.
- OECD international migration project. Key area of interest is the brain drain and there is some data already available from the OECD web site.
- OECD Task force on Confidentiality and Microdata is getting close to agreement on the basic principles.

Richard Madden asked to be kept informed on the activities of the Confidentiality and Microdata Task Force. Geoff Lee added that work is underway to include a section on international activities on the NSS web site.

## **9. Statistical Training and Consultancy**

Paper provided for information but not discussed.

### **Close**

Dennis Trewin thanked everyone for attending and ABARE for hosting the meeting. He commented that this meeting probably focussed too much on information sharing rather than debating issues and we will try and get the mix better for the next meeting, which will probably be in March next year.