This paper explores possibilities for improved efficiency, lower cost, higher quality and broader usage in
departmental-level, federal government data-gathering initiatives. The paper asks: could a framework be developed
which would harmonise data collection efforts within and across departments?

Key points

> There is significant potential for improving coordination and making more efficient and effective use of data.

> To achieve the best outcome, and to ensure the benefits outweigh the costs, it would require a partnership between
government departments and academic researchers. This partnership approach could ensure the policy-related research
needs of government, the publication requirements of academic jobs and the confidentiality of survey recipients are all met.

> Some momentum for change exists with the recent publication of a National Government Information Sharing Strategy
and the setting up of a Cross Portfolio Statistical Integration Committee, as well as other initiatives. These all share the
aspiration of research information being a strategic asset.

> Progress could be made in three key areas:
  • improve research practice - by including a common battery of questions in all surveys and ensuring appropriate data
collection methods are being used
  • make the data available to others - through the compulsory provision of a ‘unit record file’ and ensuring
    confidentiality is maintained
  • make the most of the data - by integrating academics into the process as research partners and by raising
    awareness of existing data sources.

> To implement the proposals, a body to oversee the commissioning of data collection and a separate but linked data
repository would be required.

For further information

The Visioning Australia’s Future initiative is a program of work examining major challenges facing Australia. The full set of
summaries, papers and a synthesis report can be found at crawford.anu.edu.au/hc-coombs/
Background

A wide range of federal departments run small-scale surveys relating to topics such as income support, health and education. These surveys are often run on an ad-hoc basis to answer a small set of questions or to gather data to measure one specific policy-relevant variable. Once the particular purpose of the data has been served, the data is neither conserved nor used for additional purposes. At present, there is also little coordination of such activities within or across departments. There is significant potential for lowering costs, improving efficiency and making more extensive use of the data.

A range of recent publications and initiatives illustrates grounds for optimism. The Commonwealth Government already has in place an agreement between agencies which governs the sharing of administrative data. The ‘National Government Information Sharing Strategy’ includes a goal to ‘manage government information as a strategic asset, providing more efficient and effective use of it.’ The Australian Government Portfolio Secretaries have also recently established a Cross Portfolio Statistical Integration Committee (CPSIC), which has published high level principles relating to the importance of data as a strategic resource, accountability, public interest in research and statistical analysis, transparency and preserving confidentiality. The Office of the Australian Information Commissioner has issued a discussion paper, ‘Towards an Australian Government Information Policy’ which highlights the importance of research information to the wider community, not just government.

Summary of findings

The paper sets out how progress could be made in three key issues:

- improving research practice
- making the data available to others
- making the most of the data.

Improving research practice

A common battery of questions could be contained in all surveys. This would ensure:

- information is gathered about recipients using current best practice
- there is comparability across different surveys
- the survey sample could be compared to national benchmarks
- each survey is more usable for alternative purposes.

Questions would have to be asked in an identical way. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has already developed, tested, and implemented standard questions, relating to recipients’ characteristics, which could be adopted.

When small-scale surveys are run by commercial survey research firms, a variety of sampling strategies and survey modes are often employed. This can lead to a lack of representativeness, for example, when use of internet surveys favours those with higher computer literacy skills.

In addition to gathering data on a common set of questions that can be used for benchmarking, efforts should also be taken to ensure appropriate data collection methods are used to ensure the survey is as representative as possible. This will help the data to be suitable for other purposes.
Making the most of the data

One clear problem in achieving an efficient use of data and recouping the investment made on data collection is the limited research capacity of most government departments. Academics do have the capacity to do research, but often do not have access to government administrative or survey data. Making the most of the data could involve integrating academics into government commissioned survey projects as research partners.

Government departments who are seeking to address a particular question with data may not be aware of what data sources are available that could achieve the purpose without a new data collection. There is also a lack of familiarity with the large-scale data gathering initiatives that have been funded by the Australian government. Making sure government researchers are aware of existing data, rather than re-inventing the wheel, is important.

Implementation

Two separate structures would be needed to implement these proposals. The first structure is a committee or organisation which would provide commissioning oversight. It would vet proposals and check whether data collection by different departments could be combined. The second structure would serve as a data repository and would facilitate the use of the data by other users.

The second structure should be linked to the first and should have an over-sight committee composed of representatives from the ABS, other key government agencies, and academia.

Policy implications and avenues for future work

It may be that the gains from this proposal are smaller than the associated costs, those being money, time and bureaucracy. Given the limited internal research capacity of Government departments, the paper suggests the major benefits of the proposal will only be realised if academics are given access to the data. The benefits in terms of new policy-relevant research will outweigh the costs, as witnessed by the explosion of applied research in the social sciences in Australia since the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) data has been available. The author is optimistic that Government departments and academic researchers could come to together in a way that meets the policy-related research needs for government, the publication requirements of academic jobs and the confidentiality of survey recipients.

This paper is intended to be the beginning of a conversation about what better data sharing arrangements might look like and how data can be most efficiently and effectively used.
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