



ABS Submission to the Government 2.0 Issues Paper

Executive Summary

As Australia's national statistical organisation, the ABS aims to assist and encourage informed decision making through the provision of a high quality, objective and responsive national statistics service. The ABS is supportive of Government 2.0 initiatives that enable the community to better access government information, make informed decisions and encourage innovation. The ABS will continually look for opportunities to understand the statistical information needs of government, business and the community whilst collaborating with others to improve government services, particularly regarding increasing the range of government information made available to the public.

Key recommendations

The ABS proposes the following recommendations that align with Government 2.0 objectives.

Recommendation 1.

Support investigations into policies and actions to unlock public sector information (PSI) held by government departments.

Recommendation 2.

Support a framework that outlines the open standards for dissemination, sharing and interoperability of data and metadata.

Recommendation 3.

Support a whole of government approach to frameworks, policy and infrastructure for coordinating the collection, compilation and dissemination of data.

Recommendation 4.

Support investigations into best practice for discoverability of PSI.

Recommendation 5.

Support a simple, clear and unambiguous licensing framework for PSI.

Recommendation 6.

Maximise the use of the expertise of the ABS across governments in the areas most relevant to ABS mission, that is, the collection, compilation and dissemination of statistics.

Recommendation 7.

Enhance the guidelines for public service use of Web 2.0 tools, and support training to inform public service staff on these guidelines.

Recommendation 8.

Support inter-agency and international collaborations to encourage sharing of skills, ideas, best practice guidelines and infrastructure.

These recommendations are discussed in more detail in this paper.

Declaration of interests and affiliations: The ABS has a 'public good charter', and does not have private interests and affiliations.

Part A. Enabling an environment for Open Access to Government Information

Recommendation 1. Support investigations into policies and actions to unlock public sector information (PSI) held by government departments.

{Relates to OECD Principle 1 Openness and Questions 2-4 in the Issues Paper}

1 The Government 2.0 Issues paper defines public sector information (PSI) to exclude "personal information that would not be available for publication under Australian privacy laws, or other legislation". OECD Principle 1, as described in the Issues paper, refers to setting up the assumption that open access to PSI is a default rule wherever possible. This is consistent with existing ABS practice.

2 As Australia's independent central statistics authority, the ABS is responsible, under legislation [1], to publish statistics from every collection we undertake whilst maintaining the privacy and trust of providers. Open access to official statistics on the economic and social condition of a country and its population is an essential element of a democracy.

3 There is wealth of information held or 'locked' within individual agencies that could be shared or used more effectively. The ABS believes there are three important scenarios for sharing of PSI. These include:

- To provide or improve services in the public sector;
- To improve strategic decision making and better inform Australians; and
- To assist with law enforcement and public protection (without compromising the collection of information).

4 There are commonalities in the treatment across these approaches as well as individual treatments depending on the individual scenarios. These scenarios could be used to look at each set of government information, including administrative data, to decide which data can and can't be shared.

5 The ABS would also support an evaluation of information gaps in governments' existing resource base. This would require listening to the community, business and government regarding existing sources of information that could be shared for community benefit and the new sources of information that would be beneficial for decision making into the future. Some of the current subjects of interest to Australia that are likely to require new collections to a greater detail and access levels include: environment, water, technology and local community data. However, expanding collections or developing new information sources would require greater government investment.

Recommendation 2. Support a framework that outlines the open standards for dissemination, sharing and interoperability of data and metadata.

{Relates to OECD Principle 2 Access and Transparent Conditions for re-use and Question 5 in the Issues Paper}

6 The ABS made all information freely available on the ABS website in 2005 to mark the centenary for the establishment of the ABS. This and the implementation of Creative Commons in 2008 ensured that all Australians can access ABS information without pricing or licensing restrictions. The ABS supports looking at the actions required to make other government information freely available.

7 Government agencies can do so much more to make data easier for the public to compare, reuse and combine. The ABS supports a whole of government approach to defining the open standards to facilitate reuse and interoperability of government information. Formats may include XML, CSV, KML, SDMX, DDI, XBRL, RDF and ODT but either way we need to listen to what the public want and adapt our existing formats to suit their requirements.

8 The ABS supports defining a common metadata framework to maximise interoperability and discoverability of information. Metadata comes in many forms, and includes elements as diverse as tags for web pages, survey questions, table structures, data quality statements, data definitions and classifications. The National Statistical Service (NSS) data fitness project is an example of a project that is already in place to improve understanding of good data and metadata practices [2].

9 Australian government standards need to be compatible with international standards, as described in OECD principle 12 and the Issue paper, to ensure comparability of data across countries. The ABS supports looking at international standards when defining Australian frameworks for open data access. For example, the ABS has been collaborating with various international statistical organisations to investigate the use of Statistical Data and Metadata eXchange (SDMX) [3] and Data Description Initiative (DDI) as possible standards.

Recommendation 3. Support a whole of government approach to frameworks, policy and infrastructure for coordinating the collection, compilation, dissemination and archiving of data. This includes: strong governance arrangements to maximise consistent use and maintenance of frameworks and policy within and across governments and jurisdictions.

{Relates to OECD Principle 6 New Technologies and Long term Preservation and Questions 7 and 9 in the Issues Paper}

10 There are a myriad of different frameworks and policies for information collection, compilation, dissemination and archiving across different government agencies and jurisdictions. The ABS supports a whole of government approach to ensure we make best use of investments, reduce duplicated effort, improve resource management and develop infrastructure that can be shared across government.

11 There will be the need for investment in infrastructure renewal throughout various agencies to achieve open data access objectives, for example, to expand the range and detail of data available; and implement open, common data and metadata standards. This calls for a government approach that is collaborative, working towards the common good and a sharing culture to ensure information and resources are used to achieve the best possible outcomes overall.

Recommendation 4. Support investigations into best practice for discoverability of government information.

{Relates to OECD Principle 3 Asset lists and Questions 6 in the Issues Paper}

12 The ABS supports investigations and pooling of existing resources into the formation of a best practice strategy for discoverability of government information. Investigations would include:

- Open and consistent use of data and metadata to facilitate discoverability, as described in Recommendation 2;
- Understanding the behaviours and expectations of users online;
- Proactively working with external search providers to ensure online resources are developed using search engine optimisation techniques; and
- Reviewing international methods of combining and simplifying access to a range of government data sources.

Recommendation 5. Support a simple, clear and unambiguous licensing framework for government information.

{Relates to OECD Principle 7 Copyright and Question 17 in the Issues Paper}

13 The ABS implemented Creative Commons licensing in December 2008 which meant the public are free to re-use, build upon and distribute our data, even commercially, as long as the ABS is acknowledged as the source of the data. Some of the key reasons for the implementation of this framework are available from the ABS' paper presented to the United Nation's Economic Commission for Europe paper 'Informing the Nation - Open Access to Statistical Information in Australia [4]. The ABS would be happy to share experiences in this area and supports the implementation of a simple, clear and unambiguous licensing framework that draws on existing frameworks.

Part B. Support Government 2.0 Initiatives through ABS Expertise

Recommendation 6. Maximise the use of the expertise of the ABS across governments in the areas most relevant to ABS mission, that is, the collection, compilation and dissemination of statistics.

{Relates to OECD Principle 6 New Technologies and Long term Preservation (Question 9); OECD Principles 4 and 5 Quality and Integrity (Question 14 and 15); OECD Principle 7 (Question 16)}

14 The strategy to move the Government 2.0 objectives forward can maximise use of existing expertise within government agencies such as the ABS. The ABS is supportive of sharing our expertise to improve informed decision making and encourage innovation. Some of the key areas related to the Taskforce objectives where the ABS can share expertise, techniques and experience includes the:

- Production of high quality statistics;
- Application of confidentiality techniques;
- Implementation of a robust Quality Framework;
- Creative commons implementation;
- Alignment with International data and metadata standards; and
- Use of web 2.0 tools to improve data communication and access.

Some of the relevant ABS expertise are described briefly below.

15 **Statistical Expertise:** The ABS works in partnership with other organisations to expand and improve the quality and awareness of statistical services available, see training [5]. The ABS has a legislated role to further support greater availability of information from publicly funded research and surveys, to ensure data is of a high quality, comparable and represents an efficient allocation of resources in information collection and dissemination.

16 Several questions in the Issues Paper really depend on the specific data situations and intended use of the data, for example in Question 15 where the trade-offs between data quality and timeliness are questioned. The ABS supports using our statistical expertise where possible and appropriate to help achieve Government 2.0 objectives.

17 **Confidentiality Expertise:** The ABS has a strong track record of effectively confidentialising statistical tables. The Issues paper raises various questions relating to the risks associated with maintaining confidentiality and the ABS can assist with providing advice to the Taskforce and other organisations on these matters.

18 **Quality Frameworks:** The ABS Data Quality Framework [6] is designed for use by a range of data users and providers in different settings, including government agencies, statistical agencies and independent research agencies. Quality statements are used to help individuals to understand the fitness for purpose of the specific data. Quality is a multidimensional concept which includes seven dimensions: Institutional Environment,

Relevance, Timeliness, Accuracy, Coherence, Interpretability and Accessibility.

19 **Web 2.0 Expertise:** The ABS has also been exploring the possibilities of using Web 2.0 tools to communicate ABS information for several years and would be willing to work with others to create and encourage innovative displays of data. The ABS' Customer Insights and Strategies team have developed the BetaWorks [7] site that showcases new functionality and design enhancements for the ABS website. BetaWorks includes a range of Web 2.0 applications such as mashups of ABS data with Google Maps and incorporates blog style functionality to allow the public to comment and provide feedback to designers.

Part C. Increasing visibility and use of government information through innovation

20 The ABS has a range of interactive tools available from the ABS website including: the animated population pyramids; social bookmarking tools; and dynamic tables, graphs and maps to display 2006 Census data. However, there are so many more possibilities for improving online communication of ABS data. New ideas will continue to be developed and posted on the ABS BetaWorks site and partnerships with individuals, private organisations, government departments and international organisations can lead to increased innovation.

21 The Issues paper calls for discussion around the barriers to innovation in Question 29. Some of these include:

- An ageing infrastructure with high levels of legacy systems and insufficient funds to replace these systems;
- The continual balance between maintaining the existing infrastructure whilst adequately resourcing innovation;
- A culture where web development is generally not considered as a core business in government;
- Challenges to attract and retain skilled staff (e.g. staff with usability, accessibility, web development and technical skills);
- Reluctance to adopt a test and learn mentality so staff feel free to shut down pilots that are not meeting expectations;
- Government restrictions on accessing relevant websites or multimedia content;
- Insufficient experimentation environments that do not offer sophisticated infrastructure to allow for open innovation whilst effectively mitigating security risks. This includes the lack of adequate environments for collaborating with private companies; and
- Limited resources to support customer intelligence including web analytics, focus groups, usability testing and the application of customer intelligence to improve services throughout an organisation.

22 Some of these barriers can be addressed by increasing strategic use of government investments, embracing collaborations with others and cultural change.

Recommendation 7. Enhance the guidelines for public service use of Web 2.0 tools, and support training to inform public service staff on these guidelines.

{Relates to Maximising the potential of Government 2.0 and Question 27}

23 As discussed in the Issues paper, the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) has released protocols for online media participation by public servants, for example, the APSC Blogging guidelines [8]. However, these protocols need to be reviewed in light of the increasing availability of Web 2.0 tools, their potential for use, and community expectations around how governments should use these tools. The revised guidelines then need to be followed up with training for public servants about what the rules and legislation mean for the use of these tools. Guidance on how and in which situations government should respond to real time feedback by the community in open forums should also be covered in training.

Part D. The Benefits of Inter-Agency and International Collaborations

Recommendation 8. Support inter-agency and international collaborations to encourage sharing of skills, ideas, best practice guidelines and infrastructure (or components of infrastructure).

{Relates to OECD Principle 6 New Technologies and Long term Preservation (Questions 9) and OECD Principle 12 International Access and Use (Question 20 and 21)}

24 For several online projects, it is likely that something similar has been completed previously by staff within another government agency, international organisation, private companies or individuals in the community. The ABS supports working with others to share skills, ideas, best practice and infrastructure where possible. There are several benefits including:

- Reduced costs of online projects;
- Reduced duplication of effort across agencies;
- Improved skills across agencies; and
- Improved productivity.

25 Simple strategies can improve collaboration. For example, the development of a dynamic and well-maintained register of Web 2.0 projects, staff skills and resources. This online listing may include:

- Current and upcoming Government 2.0 projects being conducted by different government agencies;
- Skills profiles within agencies, for example, the ABS is developing skills in the use of Adobe Flex technology and Google Urchin for Web Analytics;
- Best practice guidelines and case studies associated with online initiatives;
- Prototypes or trials of online applications;
- Research and development reports; and
- Contact details for the initiatives listed above e.g. a group email address.

26 There are several benefits and opportunities offered by working collaboratively with international organisations. For example, the ABS is leading an initiative to develop a set of principles to manage the protection of individual confidentiality and privacy in data linkage projects for statistical or associated research purposes. The ABS is also gaining advice from national statistical organisations that are leaders in terms of interactive data visualisation such as Statistics Netherlands [9].

Conclusions

27 The ABS is already committed to and has legislation to ensure ABS data is made available to the public. The ABS is supportive of Government 2.0 initiatives that aim to improve the range and detail of data available to the community, increase informed decision making and encourage innovation. The ABS looks forward to work collaborating with others to achieve the Government 2.0 goals that directly relate to the ABS mission, particularly in regards to improving access, usability and quality of statistics to support informed decision making.

References

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