

Mapping Research Agendas with Government: Surveys, Priorities and Future Needs

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The articles presented in this special issue of the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* are based on invited presentations to the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) Future Research Agenda Workshop. It was held in Canberra at the Australian National University on the 17-18 February 2004. The Australian Research Council funded the workshop, enabling key researchers from the relevant disciplines and from across Australia to participate. Keynote presentations were invited from both senior practitioners and academics with a strong research background in a specific area. The articles included here do not cover every area discussed at the workshop but contain the best surveys of priorities and future needs revised to engage with a wider readership.

At the workshop, papers were presented to a mixed audience of up to 50 academics and public service executives. Papers ranged from academic papers and detailed reviews of the field, to brief listings of key points for consideration. Often, they represent notes for improvement and enlargement, rather than a sustained analysis of the field. A full set of papers can be found on the ANZSOG research website at www.anzsog.edu.au




The purpose of the workshop was to develop a common understanding of the research imperatives and interests for the public service and academic members of the ANZSOG consortium. Commonwealth, state and New Zealand public services were represented at the workshop, with key members of central and line agencies in government. Around 30 senior academics were invited from across the ANZSOG network of universities. The academics covered many disciplines and field of inquiry, including political science, management, economics, law, industrial relations, regulation studies and demography.

This introduction provides a summary of the future agendas for research offered by the

participants, organized under the major topics of inquiry. Often, the priorities for future research combined an assessment of future directions and needs with an analysis of gaps and weakness in our existing knowledge. Significantly, there was strong correlation between the research priorities identified by the public service participants and those contributed by the academics. There was also a shared commitment to collaborate and engage more constructively in setting research priorities and creating opportunities for working together. While public services are important end-users of research, there is also strong interest in developing research capacity, building research networks and teams able to provide high quality research across the multiple disciplinary fields of public administration, management and policy. ANZSOG is committed to developing an active link between its research work and outputs with its masters degree teaching and executive fellows programs.

The workshop included discussions of the following seven topics.

1. Government research agendas, especially central agency research priorities (as expressed by public service commissions and offices of the public service), including the views of the Commonwealth, New Zealand, New South Wales and Victoria.
2. Surveys of existing research on institutions, key processes and relationships, including: parliament and parliamentary oversight of the public sector; the executive (political and administrative); public management and departments; administrative history; governance and civil society (including service delivery modes and performance); intergovernmental and trans-Tasman relations; engagement strategies with the community and community consultation; information technology in the public sector; regulation and regulatory reform; quantitative research feeding into evidence-based policy.

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3. Research infrastructures, including: information technology, databases and grid technologies; data-sharing and collaborative sharing of primary data.
 4. Strategic policy making, including: new policy approaches, new ways of formulating and analyzing policy, and predictive and evidence-based public policy.
 5. Types of research, covering commissioned research, collaborative research, partnerships, project-based research and blue skies or curiosity-driven research.
 6. The links between theoretical and applied research.
 7. Funding opportunities and the implications for the types of research that could be undertaken.
4. To facilitate comparative research into the practices of public management, placing Australian and New Zealand experience in broader frames.
 5. To improve understanding of policy instruments and policy management, policy effectiveness, notably by analyzing the consequences of delivery options and of improvements in policy and program performance.
 6. To inform scholarly and community debate on key issues in public administration.
 7. To inject new insights and research findings into the current practices of government – especially through links with ANZSOG’s extensive teaching and training initiatives.

ANZSOG’s Proposed Research Role and Contribution

ANZSOG believes it can best add value by focusing its energies on research directed towards governance, public policy, public administration and management. It also believes we can make our main contribution through generic research on the changing nature of government. Indeed, these issues are increasingly seen by governments as the area of greatest need in government. The network is less interested in developing specialist policy sector expertise (for example, health, social, demographics), although research on governance and policy delivery will involve some intersection with sectoral fields.

ANZSOG’s research has seven aims:

1. To contribute to our knowledge and understanding of government, and continued public sector reform, by providing critical and constructive assessments of current practices.
2. To help governments and the community in developing policy ideas and thinking through policy options, and in solving or managing policy problems.
3. To broaden and challenge our intellectual horizons and the ways we conceptualise and construct ideas, policies, problems and solutions, by imagining alternative approaches, promoting strategic, and indulging in longer-term thinking to manage future challenges.

ANZSOG’s Future Research Agendas

The workshop identified several key research agendas. These topics, subject areas and themes were seen as a way of starting the debate over which research agendas could and should be pursued. These agendas, and their associated theories and methods, were neither exclusive nor exhaustive. They were the starting point for continuing debate, which would allow us to refine, redefine, adapt or challenge these themes and priorities over time. The workshop identified 12 topics:

1. *Changing practices, understandings, roles and responsibilities of government.*
What does it mean for governments and citizens when government becomes involved in expanding areas of delivery? What are community expectations? What are the key trends: the emerging knowledge society, declining trust, managing political risk? How can we increase ministerial ability to meet the challenges they face? What are the training needs of politicians? How do we improve the interaction between senior officials and ministerial staff?
2. *Changing the governance capabilities of governments.*
How do we know, measure and anticipate governance capabilities? How do we implement whole of government coordination? What conditions sustain innovation? How do we renew our organizations? How does Australia compare to other parliamentary democracies?

3. *Leadership and improved management capacities.*

How do we enhance ministerial discretion and accountability? How do we improve central strategic steering? How do we augment central agency responsibilities? What are the pros and cons of the various approaches to leadership development?

4. *Innovative approaches to policy development and service delivery.*

Are there new ways of deciding? How do we improve learning across agency jurisdictions? What is the scope for using scenarios, futures work and environmental scanning in longer-term strategic thinking?

5. *Policy design.*

How do we improve policy design in public administration both in and across jurisdictions? What are the impacts of treaties and international obligations on domestic policy design?

6. *Contestability, policy advice, and information.*

How do we coordinate and evaluate diverse sources and producers? How do we manage competition in government? How do we implement evidence-based policy making? Have departments lost their capacity for policy innovation? If so, how do we repair the loss?

7. *Effective implementation of policy initiatives.*

How do we shift the focus of policy implementation from vertical to horizontal delivery, from individual agency to cross-agency programs? What is the relationship between, for example, budget framework and performance evaluation and implementation? How is fiscal federalism working in post-GST era? How do we improve intergovernmental management and modes of service delivery? What should replace COAG? Is devolution real and working? What is the role and effectiveness of the PMC Implementation Unit?: Have contacting out and outsourcing improved policy implementation?

8. *Networked and collaborative forms of delivery and policy formulation.*

How do we improve cooperation between public sector, NGOs and other third-party delivery agents? How do we manage networks? How do we build trust and reciprocity in networks?

9. *The foundations of public service administration.*

What values, ethics, and standards of conduct continue to underpin public service? Is there still a public service ethos? What are the community's expectations of the public service? Has the public service been politicized and with what consequences? What is the impact of the *Public Service Act 1999* with its emphasis on values not rules?

10. *Transparency and legitimacy of government.*

How do we increase and improve the scrutiny and accountability of the executive? What are the strengths and weaknesses of existing mechanisms of scrutiny and accountability? Are Westminster rules of accountability still relevant and, if not, how do we devise new forms of accountability? How have the roles of senate committees, parliamentary committees, the independent officers of parliament and the auditor changed and do they need to change more?

11. *Innovative management systems.*

How do we improve workplace and organisational design? How do we make effective use of e-government? How do we improve financial management?

12. *Performance regimes .*

How can we report effectively to the community on outcomes? Should we provide a progress report on whole of government priorities? How relevant is the new 'public value' discourse to government? How do we agree and implement a system of cross-jurisdictional performance auditing?

If faint heart never won the day—then a modest research program never attracted funding. As ever, there is so much to do and so little time (and money) to do it.