



Decadal Plan for Social Science Research Infrastructure 2023-32

University of Tasmania submission

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UNIVERSITY of
TASMANIA 

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Acknowledgment of Country

The University of Tasmania pays its respects to elders past and present and to the many Aboriginal people that did not make elder status and to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community that continues to care for Country. We acknowledge the profound effect of climate change on this Country and seek to work alongside Tasmanian Aboriginal communities, with their deep wisdom and knowledge, to address climate change and its impacts.

The Palawa people belong to one of the world's oldest living cultures, continually resident on this Country for over 65,000 years. They have survived and adapted to significant climate changes over this time, such as sea-level rise and extreme rainfall variability, and as such embody thousands of generations of intimate place-based knowledge.

We acknowledge with deep respect that this knowledge represents a range of cultural practices, wisdom, traditions, and ways of knowing the world that provide accurate and useful climate change information, observations, and solutions.

The University of Tasmania likewise recognises a history of truth that acknowledges the impacts of invasion and colonisation upon Aboriginal people, resulting in forcible removal from their lands.

Our island is deeply unique, with cities and towns surrounded by spectacular landscapes of bushland, waterways, mountain ranges, and beaches.

The University of Tasmania stands for a future that profoundly respects and acknowledges Aboriginal perspectives, culture, language, and history, and a continued effort to fight for Aboriginal justice and rights paving the way for a strong future.

Introduction

The University of Tasmania acknowledges the significant work undertaken by the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia and partners in preparing [the Decadal Plan Discussion Paper](#), drawing on widespread and diverse resources.

Like in many other higher education institutions, social science research at the University of Tasmania is spread across the organisation. The School of Social Sciences (sociology and criminology, social work, police studies and emergency management, politics and international relations) is housed within the College of Arts, Law and Education along with the Schools of Education and Law, with social science research also embedded in the College of Business and Economics (economics and marketing), the College of Health and Medicine and the College of Sciences and Engineering (human geography, marine socio economy, architecture and design).

In HASS disciplines, research infrastructure is often understood by the researchers to mean more than physical structures and hardware. Rather, research infrastructure includes the resources, as that relates to personnel, buildings or equipment, and big data sets required to enable researchers to undertake and deliver excellent and impactful research.

The Decadal Plan's focus on a broad spectrum of infrastructure to support research that addresses inequality, the ageing population, digital transitions, climate change and democracy is well placed. There is strong support from our researcher community for the development of a Decadal Plan in Social Sciences. Feedback from individual researchers in response to the Paper bears out the 'enormous hurdles' that we must collectively overcome so that human data from our social sciences research can inform our understanding of human experience, behaviour and attitudes in relation to these issues. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the charting of research infrastructure priorities and look forward to the shared findings and future outcomes.

Producing data in Social Sciences

Individual feedback highlighted some hurdles to safe and ethical production of sensitive human research data.

We support the paper's strong position that Indigenous researchers and research communities should have control over access and use of research data. We would also welcome discussion of quality measures to ensure Indigenous researchers and research communities have a leading role in the design and production of data, as well as its use and analysis.

Research that addresses inequality needs evolving and nuanced guidance for risk management and mitigation. For example, research addressing child safety needs practical research infrastructure to help researchers manage fieldwork risks, ethics, and legal and mandatory reporting obligations. There is a role for national shared resources providing guidance and best practice training for students and postgraduate staff in this area. This would help mitigate any risk that researchers can become reluctant to undertake work in this area or avoid higher risk research, which would contribute to ongoing invisibility of abuse, neglect and fundamentally work against purported interests in addressing inequality. National resources and opportunities for

training in data storage/archiving and navigating ethics of data sharing for sensitive qualitative data would also be useful, to mitigate risks of qualitative researchers not wanting to lodge data for fear it will be released. Guidance and training for data administrators is also needed help them engage with qualitative researchers' fears and better understand the nature of high-risk data being collected.

A further issue is how large-scale data collections, e.g., ABS Census or AIHW data, can more adequately engage with 'invisible' populations. Ethnographic research focuses on highly vulnerable populations who do not appear, or appear in limited ways, in big data. From the perspective of an UTAS ethnographer, the Decadal Plan should include discussion about infrastructure for qualitative data collection to support work with highly vulnerable and invisible populations.

Sharing and accessing data through fragmented data platforms

The University of Tasmania supports the vision of improving discoverability of and access to available datasets for all researchers. We agree with the idea of a coordinated repository for social science data if it is sustainable, if researchers have input into its continued development and if access is equitable for all researchers regardless of institution.

The data world is highly fragmented and uncoordinated, and researchers will often find themselves navigating multiple repositories and associated standards/formats to manage the data they produce. As simple examples, data from The Tasmania Project open access data is hosted in two places (UTAS's Research Data Management Portal and Research Data Australia). Similarly, someone working on an AHURI project is usually contractually obligated to upload de-identified primary data to the Australian Data Archive, as well as needing to adhere to local data management requirements. This complexity increases the challenge of trying to access other researchers' open access/administrative data.

A single, coordinated repository of social sciences data with high quality documentation would make research significantly more straightforward. The first step of many projects is mapping existing data sources, which would be much quicker and easier if there was a 'one stop shop'. A consensus on how and where data should be managed would enhance opportunities for training. Without a best or even standard practice, it is hard for researchers to know they are doing the right thing with their data. This single platform would also enable collective attention to be given to how the acceleration evident in relation to generation AI intersects with data collection, validation, and management and with researcher training.

Data visualisation provides important ways for researchers to disseminate their work to broad audiences. There is high public and partner demand for data visualisation, but it is a specialised, multi-faceted skillset (e.g., involves database design and management, web and graphic design, user interface and experience) that makes it expensive to deliver. National resources for data visualisation could address this. The widespread nature of this challenge means that there are constantly new tools being marketed (PowerBI, Tableau, SEER), ostensibly to make data

visualisation easier, but ends up falling into the same traps that the discussion paper outlines with data in general – too many platforms, all with different requirements.

The Discussion Paper could usefully include infrastructure and associated support for the storage, maintenance, and accessibility of non-traditional research outputs, extending some of the concepts beyond the traditional and research data. Research outputs are mentioned fleetingly; research data is the focus which is shortsighted given the scope the title presents. The format of knowledge generation in the social sciences may be impacted by the multidisciplinary nature of the research, or by the use of emerging technologies, and could include outputs such as databases or websites. National guidance which provides structure for organisations to encourage creativity in the presentation of research outputs will enhance social sciences research.

Focus on lived experience

Discussion of infrastructure to support research with lived experience is currently missing in the Discussion Paper. National research infrastructure and training would enable and enhance delivery of lived experience engagement and collaboration in research design, conduct, publication and impact activities. We know that lived experience participation leads to the inclusion of critically important knowledges, design principles and innovation, and community connections and participation. We also know it is complex work and resource heavy. The Discussion Paper overly focuses on science and technology studies and does not yet speak to basic rights principles of voice and participation and the infrastructure needed to adequately, safely support and encourage data sharing by vulnerable groups on their own terms. Fundamentally, from the perspective of social science research, the Discussion Paper needs also to ask what national research infrastructure is needed to support research with communities and community members experiencing high vulnerability and high inequality.

Conclusion

We once again thank the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia for the opportunity to respond to the discussion paper for a national plan for an improved, collective social science infrastructure to better address the critical challenges of the next decade for Australians and Australia.