

Dear Dr Hatherly,

Re: ASSA Decadal Plan for Social Science Research Infrastructure 2023-32

We are grateful for your invitation to share our feedback on ASSA's Decadal Plan for Social Science Research Infrastructure 2023-32. It is exciting to see the Academy taking the initiative to shape the future of social science research in Australia through this project.

We are delighted to contribute to this exciting initiative and provide feedback that aligns with the University of Adelaide's broader vision of enhancing our research infrastructure. As a global and national research community we are facing an unprecedented array of complex issues, and the social sciences are vital to understanding and responding to these socio-political, cultural and economic dynamics. We are confident that the consultation exercise is a valuable one that will generate the insights necessary to shape the future landscape of social science research.

Our responses to select questions are set out below.

Question 1: How would you modify or augment our description of the current state of assets, systems, rules and skills and training?

In comparison to the UK, Canada and US, Australia has excellent data archives in the form of the Australian Data Archive (ADA). The ADA, we believe, can be upgraded to perform a wider and more important role in the landscape of social research. First, awareness of the ADA, the types of data that it holds, and services offered by the Archive tends to be largely poor. There is much to be gained by better advertising and broadening awareness across the scholarly community of the availability of the ADA, and other data archives.

Relatedly, there is also potential for the ADA to broaden its disciplinary scope. There are adjacent disciplines, such as Marketing and Business, that could contribute to/learn from these datasets. Widening the disciplinary basis of the ADA may also achieve the benefit of enhancing interdisciplinary linkages through both datasets and collection methods. Finally, the ADA has an excellent existing search function for its archived data, but the interface is aging and reducing accessibility. Improving this function would also add to the appeal and access of researchers to its datasets.

Question 2: Can you provide specific examples of data-related challenges your research team faces, where shared infrastructure could significantly boost productivity or support your research aspirations?

Across Australia, there is an array of research tools and software available to social science researchers. Yet this abundance, while promising, is not always visible or accessible. One proposal is the establishment of an ASSA comprehensive inventory of research applications (tools and software), complete with illustrative examples. This inventory could provide researchers with:

- Tools that are currently being used (internationally) – ideally, with successful and worked-through examples;
- The value and effectiveness of these tools;
- What resources are needed to sustain the use of this rapidly changing field (ongoing training for researchers); and
- A national training centre for social scientists: for example, the Digital methods Initiative from Amsterdam: <https://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/SummerSchool2023>

This latter suggestion, a national training centre for social scientists, would not only offer training but also act as a repository of best practices, fostering a vibrant research community equipped to leverage evolving methodologies for social science research. One model for this approach could be the UK's ESRC/Nuffield 'Q-Step' National Training Centres. These are excellent centrally funded training centres that deliver advanced research methods training and from which all participating universities benefit. The Q-Step Training Centres create common research standards, and in doing so make it easier to maintain cutting-edge techniques and improve the supply of specifically-skilled researchers.

A specific example

With respect to a specific example of data-related challenges, researchers at the University of Adelaide focusing on migration have identified critical gaps in historical data availability. These gaps extend back two decades or more, hampering our ability to analyse migration patterns with confidence. Two dataset challenges serve as examples here.

First, the absence of national gender- and age-cohort-specific datasets significantly limits our understanding of the differential impacts of migration on varying demographics. In addition, there is an absence of data distinguishing individuals who migrate while remaining employed and those who relocate to pursue new job opportunities in different states. In this case, it seems, the availability of shared infrastructure dedicated to collecting, aggregating, and disseminating comprehensive migration data could significantly enhance the productivity of our research and empower us to make informed policy recommendations.

Second, the Commonwealth's Review of the Migration System – which was based on 2010-2014 data - has underscored the inadequacy of existing data sources. In particular, the reliance on Medicare addresses for tracking net interstate migration (NIM) movements, as provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), has significant shortcomings. Many researchers and key stakeholders, including state governments, have voiced concerns over the obsolescence and unreliability of such data. The evolving nature of migration patterns demands data that accurately reflects current trends, allowing researchers and policymakers to respond effectively

to emerging challenges. As a result, we would welcome shared infrastructure that encompasses accurate and up-to-date national and state-level migration data.

Question 3 Which needs can be met through improvements to existing assets, systems, rules or skills and training? Briefly describe the improvements required:

A critical aspect of improving data infrastructure involves recognizing the role of individuals and small groups in social science data stewardship. Often, these researchers shoulder the responsibility of data management and maintenance, underscoring the need for streamlining and support. Amidst the ambitions of the Decadal Plan, the consideration of centralized mechanisms for data stewardship could ease the burden on researchers, ensuring that data is managed effectively, shared appropriately, and preserved for future use. This strategic enhancement could elevate the productivity of researchers, enabling them to allocate more time to analysis and interpretation, thus enhancing the overall research process.

Relatedly, the broader context of research ethics is a paramount concern. The existing ethics process, across the university sector, has been criticised for being cumbersome and inflexible, especially when data collected under ethics agreements needs to be made publicly available. To address this, an innovation might be the establishment of a national automated procedure for low-risk ethics clearance. Such a procedure, accessible through a dedicated website or tool, could use risk assessment matrices to grant low-risk ethics clearance efficiently and transparently. By coupling this process with the requirement to adhere to FAIR principles and deposit data, the research community would gain a streamlined ethics process while ensuring responsible data management and sharing practices.

The dynamic landscape of research tools and analytics in social sciences demands a unique approach to skills and competencies. As researchers venture into the domains of AI/machine learning and digital social science methods, the need for upskilling becomes apparent. These advanced methodologies enable social scientists to engage with language processing, speech recognition, and network theory, offering novel avenues for exploration and analysis. However, interdisciplinary expertise is imperative, as researchers may lack computational skills necessary for programming and software development or expertise in social mapping. Given the transformative potential of these methodologies, a tailored approach to skills development is essential. Amidst the expansive ambitions of the Decadal Plan, provisions for interdisciplinary training and development could equip researchers with the tools required to navigate the intricacies of AI-driven research methods.

Question 4: Which needs require that the sector advocates for new assets, systems, rules or training?

The issue of commercial exploitation and unethical practices looms large. Mitigating these concerns will necessitate new measures that advocate for responsible research practices while ensuring equitable access to infrastructure. One first step lies in the recognition and visibility of social sciences in the hierarchy of research evidence. In alignment with the Decadal Plan's aspirations, national organizations such as ISA, AAS, and AWGSA could collaborate with institutions like ASSA to increase the influence and prominence of social sciences. A concerted effort to elevate the visibility of social sciences would facilitate engagement with policy, government, and NGOs, ultimately curbing the drive for unethical practices.

In terms of fostering future ethical research practices, collaborative initiatives with secondary schools can serve as a bridge to introduce younger audiences to the importance of social science research. By showcasing how research skills are pivotal in understanding and addressing complex societal problems such as inequality, aging populations, digital transitions, climate change, and democracy, the research community can cultivate partnerships and nurture a culture of responsible research from earlier stages of educations. In this endeavour, social scientists can play a pivotal role in influencing the next generation of researchers and fostering a sense of purpose and responsibility in addressing pressing global challenges.

Thank you once again for the invitation to comment on ASSA's exciting Decadal Plan for Social Science Research Infrastructure. We look forward to the outcomes of this consultation and look forward to offering our support for ASSA's ambitions in this space.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Megan Warin', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

Professor Megan Warin - *Co-Chair of the Research Portfolio, School of Social Sciences*
A/Professor Georgina Drew - *Co-Chair of the Research Portfolio, School of Social Sciences*
A/Professor Tim Legrand – *Acting Deputy Dean (Research), Faculty of Arts, Business, Law and Economics*
(On behalf of the School of Social Sciences, University of Adelaide)