

Data Surveys

A New Arrangement for Confidentialised Unit Record Files

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1. Introduction

On 7 July 1999, the Vice Chancellor of the Australian National University (ANU), Professor Deane Terrell, hosted a morning tea to commemorate the launch of a new agreement between the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) on behalf of Australian universities. The agreement concerns access by university researchers to confidentialised unit record files (CURFs) and ushers in a new era of academic research using ABS data. It is a considerable cause for celebration and a consummate example of the benefits of cooperation and consultation between disparate institutions with common aims.

The purposes of this note are threefold: first, to publicise to Australian economists and others the exciting new environment which the CURF agreement creates; second, to explain how academics can take advantage of the new arrangements; and third, to acknowledge the efforts of the many people who brought about this change in data access policy.

2. The Need for Australian Reform

Prior to 1999, the ABS had a pricing policy for CURFs which aimed to recover the extra cost

of creating a unit record file (that is, costs above and beyond the actual survey outlays). This typically meant that each file was priced between \$5000 and \$12 000. If a researcher wanted to compare several years of data, or use multiple surveys for the same year, the total data costs of such a project were the sum of the costs of each separate file. Research exploring changes in empirical relationships over time could cost as much as \$30 000 for data alone.

These arrangements had critical consequences for Australian social science research. One was that access to data was often limited to established researchers because members of this group were more likely to have the requisite funding to purchase the data. Over time this would have had the obvious and deleterious consequence for the development of younger social scientists. It is conceivable that within a matter of a few years there would have been a significant paucity of academics with knowledge of and interest in ABS unit record file information.

Another consequence, and perhaps even more important, is that the pre-1999 pricing policy actively encouraged Australian researchers to use the surveys of other countries. The very low cost of similar data from the United States and Canada, for example, meant that Australian social scientists were increasingly likely to explore issues without institutional or direct policy relevance to this country. This issue encouraged ANU's Centre for Economic Policy Research to help finance and promote an alternative, a point developed in what follows.

* We wish to acknowledge the assistance of senior personnel from the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University; the Australian Bureau of Statistics; and the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee. The authors are responsible for any errors.

The pre-1999 pricing arrangements were also not ideal for the ABS. First, compared to potential alternatives, unit record data were under-utilised. This is a critical issue: there is little point in the ABS conducting expensive survey work if the fruit of its activities remains relatively unanalysed. Second, the revenue that the ABS was receiving from CURFs was hard to predict which presumably made their planning more difficult.

In short, for both the users and provider of Australian unit record data, there was a strong case for reform. Interestingly, the same set of issues precipitated change in Canada in the early 1990s. This country's experience formed the basis for the recent Australian policy developments.

3. The Canadian Experience as a Model for Reform

In 1993 Statistics Canada (the Canadian equivalent of the ABS) reformed unit record file access with a policy known as the Data Liberation Initiative (DLI). The background is as follows.

A major concern related to microdata access was often expressed by the research community. High unit prices had the effect of excluding university usage except for a few top researchers with financial resources and personal contacts with Statistics Canada. The inability of most to pay was both inequitable and implied poor public policy debate.

The main features of the DLI were designed to address these matters. It is a consortium between Statistics Canada, university research libraries and participating federal government departments. Subscription costs were set at around \$12 000 per annum, with the price of all unit record files being zero for academics employed in participating universities. The policy was built on the existing network of organisations and norms of operation, and has the flexibility to expand to other government agencies and other community college and municipal libraries.

The new government in 1993 was clearly interested in undertaking broad policy reviews and this provided the principal hook for the

consortium's establishment. Critical academic leadership was provided by Professor Charles Beach of Queen's University who promoted effectively the initiative to an important bureaucratic player, the Treasury Board. To help the process, the consortium appealed to the general public concern about open government and an informed public—ideas which seemed to resonate with the incoming administration.

A further background issue was that the lack of familiarity with domestic data was becoming a serious issue for Statistics Canada. The institution complained to the academic community that their new university recruits knew far more about US data than they did about Canadian statistics, an issue that academic researchers had been aware of for several years. The initiative began as a five-year pilot, to be reviewed after this time.

The review became unnecessary because the response was phenomenal. The original expectations were for a take-up rate of 50 to 60 per cent in the first year, rising to 90 per cent after the third year. However, the DLI achieved 100 per cent subscription in the first year of operation. This meant that Statistics Canada's revenue from the distribution of unit record files doubled at the same time that researchers had unprecedented access to data.

4. The Process of Change in Australia

As with much policy change the process was evolutionary, with the scene being set before the late 1990s. Several individuals and institutions had been agitating for the adoption of the Canadian arrangements, and it is important to acknowledge their efforts. Perhaps most importantly, Dr Roger Jones, the former Director of Social Science Data Archives at the ANU's Research School of Social Sciences (RSSH), had been a consistent campaigner for the type of changes which have come about. In an institutional context the Australian Consortium of Social and Political Research Inc., with its current President, Professor Frank Jones from the Sociology Program of RSSH, providing strong support.

As a consequence the ABS was aware of alternative approaches and, in April 1997, the

RSSS's Centre for Economic Policy Research organised and helped finance the visit of Dr Ging Wong, Director of Strategic Evaluation and Monitoring at Human Resources Development Canada, a senior bureaucrat keenly involved in social science research. His explanation of the success of the Canadian approach, to both ANU economists and senior ABS bureaucrats, turned out to be a watershed in the process of the Australian reforms.

About six months later senior RSSS economists and the Director of RSSS, Professor Ian McAllister, invited the Statistician, Mr Bill McLennan, and his Deputy, Mr Tim Skinner, to lunch at the ANU. There was only one topic under consideration: how to move towards a pricing arrangement for ABS unit record data files with the potential to benefit both the users and the provider. The Canadian model was agreed to be the best available alternative, and questions of detail and process dominated the conversation.

After this meeting the responsibility for further progress seemed clearly to lie with the RSSS academics. However, it was also the case that the group lacked formal institutional standing. It did not represent, and could therefore not speak for, Australian university social scientists, even if the consequences of change would be unambiguously beneficial.

Consequently contact was made with the Executive Director of the AVCC, Mr Stuart Hamilton, and his Deputy, Mr John Mullarvey. The AVCC became convinced of the benefits for Australian academics of the proposed changes, and took on a leadership role in promoting the change. Over the ensuing year or so liaison between the AVCC and the ABS led to the drawing up of a formal agreement very much in the desirable flavour.

The agreement entailed the ABS receiving \$172 000 per year as a fixed total fee, to be paid in equal shares by participating universities. This meant, for example, if 10, 20 or 30 universities chose to be involved the cost per institution would respectively be \$17 200, \$8600 and \$5333 per annum. In return the ABS would provide free of charge the majority of recent CURFs. The agreed new system

was very similar to the Canadian model, and had the very desirable properties for participants of a fixed set-up and a zero marginal price.

When the agreement was reached between the ABS and the AVCC, in December 1998, all Australian Vice Chancellors were sent a letter in which the new arrangements were explained, and a form was included which gave universities choices related to the likely cost. That is, a university might not want to be involved if only a few others agreed, since the cost might be prohibitive; for example, if only one university chose to participate, the cost would be \$172 000 per year.

However, just a few days before the 27 January 1999 deadline, only a very small number of universities were prepared to participate unconditionally. Even taking into account those agreeing to be involved contingent on the participation of say, 10 or 20 others, it became clear that the numbers were too small to make the scheme viable. This unfortunate outcome was presumably due in part to a lack of complete understanding of the benefits of the new arrangements (after all, most Vice Chancellors would not be expected to be fully aware of data dissemination issues for social scientists).

Those of us who had been involved in the process were, understandably, very concerned that the initiative would come to nothing. This led to a concerted last minute lobbying process by RSSS staff and the AVCC of the many universities who had not agreed to participate. This was a successful exercise, and by the deadline 19 universities had signed. We should acknowledge the cooperation and effort of a large number of Australian economists and university administrators in helping to make this happen.

This short history of the CURF initiative illustrates two things. First, just as overseas governments sometimes rely on Australian leadership in social science research and policy, we too benefit from the experience of other countries. Second, cooperation between and commitment of players from disparate perspectives and institutions can lead to highly productive change.

5. How to Get Yourself a CURF

What now follows is the practical side to all this. There are two possible circumstances, depending on whether or not an academic's university currently participates in the scheme.

5.1 Access to CURFs if You Are an Academic in a Participating University

Table 1 lists participating universities as of October 1999.

Social scientists employed in the universities listed need to take the following steps. First, to

obtain the necessary application form for a CURF it is necessary to obtain the document 'Confidentialised Unit Record Files'. The document can be downloaded from the web site: www.library@abs.gov.au

The direct ABS contact is:

The Director
ABS Library Services
Unit 5 Ground Floor, Cameron Offices
Chandler Street
Belconnen, ACT 2616, Australia
Phone: +61 2 6252 6610
Fax: +61 2 6252 6906

Table 1 Universities Participating in the ABS–AVCC Agreement

Australian National University
Charles Sturt University
Curtin University of Technology
Deakin University
Edith Cowan University
Flinders University of South Australia
Griffith University
La Trobe University
Macquarie University
Monash University
Murdoch University
Queensland University of Technology
RMIT University
Swinburne University of Technology
University of Adelaide
University of Canberra
University of Melbourne
University of New England
University of New South Wales
University of Newcastle
University of Queensland
University of South Australia
University of Sydney
University of Tasmania
University of Technology, Sydney
University of Western Australia
University of Western Sydney
University of Wollongong
Victoria University of Technology

Source: AVCC.

The second step is that approval has to be given by the person or persons in the university authorised to do so. This is the Vice Chancellor, or their nominee, who would normally be a Departmental Head. To facilitate this process it is sensible to have the Vice Chancellor delegate the authority to such a person. If your Departmental Head is not currently authorised she/he should be encouraged to take this simple step. This requires only an authorising letter from the Vice Chancellor.

Third, the form is then sent to the ABS for processing. It will take around four to six weeks before the CURF or CURFs arrive.

5.2 Access to CURFs if You Are an Academic in a Non-Participating University

In this less fortunate circumstance it is critical to have your university signed up. This will take the form of the Vice Chancellor contacting either the ABS or the AVCC, writing the appropriate letter and paying the joining fee. If your Vice Chancellor seems unconvinced of the merits of participating, compelling arguments can be made. Apart from the research benefits explained above, perhaps the most persuasive case relates to the financial implications of non-participation. An example helps here.

To gain access to unit record data files non-participating universities face the previous pricing regime. The important point is that a non-participating university which offers a grant for an empirical social science project

will very likely be required to cover the costs of the purchase of an ABS unit record file data set. On average this will cost the university around \$7500 for each data set; in a given year the university might support, for example, three projects of this type at a total cost of over \$20 000. In comparison, joining the new scheme currently costs less than \$6000, meaning that there are potentially significant savings to be made.

If you have trouble convincing the relevant authorities of the merit of your university joining, it is important to seek outside help. The most effective and approachable person is Mr John Mullarvey from the AVCC (phone number: +61 2 6285 8200). Alternatively, Professor Bruce Chapman from the ANU (phone number: +61 2 6249 4050) is happy to help explain to Vice Chancellors or their representatives the benefits of participation.

6. Some Observations from the ABS

There are three final points, all related to the ABS. The first is that the new system does not compromise in any way the ABS's stance on confidentiality. In particular, the strict requirements of the Census and Statistics Act have to be fully met, including the requirement for each recipient of a CURF to sign a legally binding undertaking to maintain the confidentiality of the data and to honour the constraints that are set on its use. That is, the data being made available under the new pricing arrangements have the same level of protection as all survey results have always had; only the financial rules have been changed.

To maintain its strong reputation and commitment to the privacy of survey participants, the ABS has made it clear that continuation of the new arrangements would be seriously jeopardised if a CURF researcher compromised confidentiality, even if inadvertently. The progressive, flexible and accommodating stance shown by the ABS in this pricing and access reform should be seen by the academic community as a symbol of the considerable benefits of partnership. The protection of the ABS's reputation is a critical part of our continuing responsibility.

Second, it is important that the CURF arrangements are not just about the acquisition of data. The new opportunities will be maximised only if the data are used gainfully in research, which implies the value of them as a source for the empirical work of PhD, Masters and Honours students. The best assurance of the arrangement continuing in the longer term is a strong body of research and analysis relying on the CURFs.

Finally, the ABS is in the process of other progressive reforms. Proposals are about to be put to universities, through the AVCC, for a similarly funded arrangement for unlimited web-based access to all ABS publications, time series data, and related meta data in electronic form. The ABS is looking for complete coverage of the sector, which will require similar organisation and commitment by the universities that have led to the successful new CURF arrangements.

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Appendix 1

Table A1 lists CURFs covered as of 1 July 1999 by the ABS–AVCC agreement.

Table A1 CURFs Covered by the ABS–AVCC Agreement

Alcohol and Tobacco Consumption Patterns	1997	Released
Aspects of Literacy	1996	Released
Australian Families	1982	Released
Australian Housing Survey	1994	Released
Australians' Employment and Unemployment Patterns	1994–96	Released
Australians' Employment and Unemployment Patterns	1994–97	Released
Business Longitudinal Survey, Australia	1994–95 to 1996–97	Released
Census 81—Sample Files	1981	Released
Census 86—Household Sample Files	1986	Released
Census 91—Census of Population and Housing: Household Sample File	August 1991	Released
Census 96—Census of Population and Housing: Household Sample File	August 1996	Released
Child Care Arrangements Survey	November 1994	Released
Disability, Ageing and Careers	1993	Released
Disability, Ageing and Careers	1998	Not yet released
Domiciliary Services, Victoria	1986	Released
Education and Training Experience, Australia	1997	Released
Families in Australia	1992	Released
Household Expenditure Survey, Australia	1975–76	Released
Household Expenditure Survey, Australia	1984	Released
Household Expenditure Survey, Australia	1988–89	Released
Household Expenditure Survey, Australia	1993–94	Released
How Workers Get Their Training	1989	Released
Income Distribution Survey, Australia, Sample File	1986	Released
Income and Housing Costs and Amenities Survey, Australia	1989–90	Released
Income and Housing Costs Survey, Australia	1981–82	Released
Income and Housing Costs Survey, Australia	1994–95	Released
Income and Housing Costs Survey, Australia	1995–96	Released
Income and Housing Costs Survey, Australia	1996–97	Released
Income and Housing Costs Survey, Australia	1997–98	Not yet released
Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Migrants	1986	Released
Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Migrants	1993	Released
Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Migrants	1994	Released
Labour Mobility	1984	Released
Labour Mobility	1986	Released
Labour Mobility	1994	Released
Mental Health and Wellbeing of Adults, Australia	1997	Released
Mental Health and Wellbeing of Adults, Western Australia	1997	Released
National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey	1994	Released
National Health Survey (formerly Australian Health Survey)	1977–78	Released
National Health Survey (formerly Australian Health Survey)	1983	Released
National Health Survey (formerly Australian Health Survey)	1989–90	Released
National Health Survey (formerly Australian Health Survey)	1995	Released
National Nutrition Survey	1995	Released
Rental Investors' Survey	July 1993	Released
Rental Investors' Survey	June 1997	Released
Survey on Rental Tenants	April 1994	Released
Time Use Survey (pilot test New South Wales only)	May to June 1987	Released
Time Use Survey, Australia	1992	Released
Time Use Survey, Australia	1997	Released
Training and Education Experience, Australia	1993	Released
Women's Safety Survey	1996	Released
Working Arrangements	1993	Released

Source: ABS, as of 1 July 1999.

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