

ANZSOG CASE PROGRAM – TEACHING NOTE

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Coming back from #censusfail: reflections on the 2016 Australian Census, Marriage Equality Survey and rebuilding at the Australian Bureau of Statistics

An ANZSOG Teaching Note by Marinella Padula

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This Teaching Note references and provides a guide to:

Kalisch, D., & Padula, M. (2022). Coming back from #censusfail: reflections on the 2016 Australian Census, Marriage Equality Survey and rebuilding at the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Case- A)

Kalisch, D., & Padula, M. (2022). Coming back from #censusfail: reflections on the 2016 Australian Census, Marriage Equality Survey and rebuilding at the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Case- Epilogue)

Summary

Census Night 2016 saw the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) plunged into crisis on two fronts: technical and reputational. A denial of service attack prevented the public from completing the survey form online and prompted the Bureau to shut down the Census website over data security concerns. This, combined with a lack of communication from the ABS, resulted in intense criticism and ridicule – something the nation's chief statistical agency was not accustomed to.

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Despite the severe setback, the Bureau managed to salvage the census and much of the outrage soon died down. Nonetheless, the event prompted serious reflection. Many reforms were devised or accelerated to ensure that Census 2021 would not be a repeat of 2016.

In the midst of these changes, the Government appointed the ABS to conduct a controversial nationwide survey into the legalisation of same sex marriage. It represented an opportunity to repair trust in the organisation but also a significant risk given the emotive and politicised environment surrounding the issue. Although the ABS had little more than 3 months to complete the task, it managed to deliver a smooth user experience and statistically sound results which were accepted by participants. The survey also augured well for the 2021 Census which proceeded without incident.

Learning Objectives

This case provides many teaching avenues including – but not limited to – leadership, crisis management, risk management, strategic management, communications, and organisational culture and change. These topics also overlap in a variety of ways. Part A may be used on its own, or in conjunction with the Epilogue, depending on teaching objectives. Overall, they provide students with the opportunity to:

- assess the causal factors leading to the events of Census Night 2016;
- explore and evaluate options available to the ABS both during the Census crisis and in its aftermath;
- discuss the approach taken by the ABS and identify possible alternatives.
- discuss broader issues surrounding data collection, privacy and the production of government statistics.

Suggested Teaching Approaches

1	Discussion Questions	- What is an appropriate role for the Australian Bureau of Statistics? - How could/should it manage its relationship with government? Implicit (and occasionally explicit) in the case is a certain tension between maintaining the ABS's independence as a statutory authority and being responsive to government priorities – all whilst facing inadequate government funding. Maintaining independence and neutrality is important for retaining public trust. So is producing national statistics that are accurate. At the same time, data must also be useful to 'consumers' - principally the federal government in this instance – in order to justify the ABS' continued existence. Part A of the case explains that the Bureau has enjoyed a high degree of autonomy compared to other agencies, something it has strived to protect. This has helped the ABS maintain a certain distance from government and the political fray, enhancing agency credibility. Yet this stance seems to have also left the ABS somewhat isolated and short on allies during times of adversity. Part A touches on the ABS' relationship with Treasury (its principal funder) and other parts of government. Specifically, how Treasury's needs (i.e. economic statistics) were prioritised, while other departments were given relatively little attention and sometimes dictated to. Limited/poor engagement with other departments arguably led to fewer champions for increased Treasury funding and missed opportunities. Yet, would spreading scarce resources even thinner have helped? Was the Bureau's approach reasonable under the circumstances? The Epilogue exploring the 2016 Census aftermath and 2017 Same Sex Marriage (SSM) Survey sees the ABS drawn into wider political debates about data collection, cyber security and privacy, as well as what constitutes appropriate use of the ABS. Although the ABS
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	ultimately had little choice but to run the SSM survey, the Epilogue outlines how the Bureau was able to navigate a path through this tricky terrain under extremely challenging circumstances. Enlisting cross-departmental support, staying on top of public communications and anticipating problems helped the Bureau avoid a 2016 Census style crisis and repaired some of its reputational damage. Though if the result had not reflected general community sentiment (in favour), if far fewer than 80% of Australians had participated, or if the result had been very close, rather than decisive, the impact on the ABS may have been quite different. Students can use Part A and the Epilogue as a basis for considering the questions above and even whether the ABS should exist in its current form at all. They can also consider the challenge of charting a course into the future, given the: • increasingly fractious, polarised nature of public discourse in the 'misinformation age'; • creeping politicisation of the public service; • burgeoning role of data in government; • availability of alternative statistical sources within, and external, to government; • enduring budgetary pressures across government; and • growing demand for real-time or rapid information. Resources Written by a former Australian Statistician, this piece explores what it means to be an independent official statistical agency and the advantages/disadvantages. - Trewin, D. (2018). What does an independent official statistical agency mean in practice? Statistical Journal of the IAO, Vol. 34, pp.165–169, IOS Press, DOI 10.3233/SJI-170412. https://content.iospress.com/articles/statistical-journal-of-the-iaos/sji170412 The following resources provide background information on the ABS and analyse the issues facing it prior to and around the time of the 2016 Census and 2017 SSM survey. Howard (2018) also explores some of the theoretical frameworks that could be used to understand the Bureau's situation, including the Hood and Lodge (2006) concept of 'public sector bargains'. - Australian Public Service Commission [APSC].(2013). Capability Review: Australian Bureau of Statistics. Australian Public Service Commission, (Canberra). https://www.apsc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-06/ABS-Capability-Review.pdf - Howard, C. (2018). 'The politics of numbers: explaining the challenges at the Australian Bureau of Statistics', Australian Journal of Political Science, Vol.54, No.1, pp.65-81. doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2018.1531110. - Howard, C. (2021, March). Government statistical agencies and the politics of credibility. Cambridge University Press, DOI: 10.1017/9781108867962. https://books.google.com.au/books?id=6TliEAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false This article discusses how the ABS produced data quickly to inform rapid decision making during COVID-19. - Martin, P. (2021, 2 July). You can't fix the economy if you can't see it: how the ABS became our secret weapon, The Canberra Times. https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7159512/you-cant-fix-the-economy-if-you-cant-see-it-how-the-abs-became-our-secret-weapon/

2 Discussion question/ essay topic	- To what extent did the ABS' organisational culture impact the 2016 Census? An organisation like the ABS with a strong workplace culture emphasising statistical prowess, optimism and commitment to getting the job done no matter what might seem like an ideal situation. But this case illustrates the paradoxical scenario where strengths can mask weaknesses. Part A describes staff's positive, 'mend-and-make-do' attitude in the face of aged infrastructure and dwindling funding. However, it's arguable this concealed problems and contributed to the optimism bias that led the ABS to underestimate or overlook risks when planning the 2016 Census. Part A also points to the ABS's longstanding preference of having statistical specialists occupy senior management roles without duly considering their aptitude for managing people or practical and strategic issues. They also tended to be relatively homogenous as a group. Such conditions make it more likely for blindspots to occur, perhaps explaining why the ABS gave insufficient thought to issues such as communications and contingency plans. Part A also notes how Australian Public Service Commission review (below) found the ABS 'inflexible', 'insular' and unresponsive to key stakeholders suggesting that management was very inwardly focused – something that would cost the organisation down the track. However, perhaps organisational culture was less important than other factors such as funding constraints. In the context of limited budgets, perhaps it made sense for the ABS to concentrate on its core specialty: producing economic indicators. Scarce funds wouldn't have allowed much scope for taking on new tasks for other stakeholders. Hence, the Bureau's perceived inflexibility or unresponsiveness may have been more about pragmatism. It may also be one reason why they lacked staff with the right skills to oversee contracts with external providers like IBM. As Part A notes, the ABS did recognise that Census 2016 would be a stretch well before the event and was at risk of falling over. These concerns were taken to government, along with a proposal to reduce census frequency and use alternative, smaller scale surveys in the interim. However, the government ultimately rejected this plan compelling the Bureau to go ahead regardless. The Epilogue, meanwhile, provides a contrast to Part A in that we see the ABS create a more consultative, outwardly focused culture that takes a more comprehensive and proactive approach to matters such as risk management. However, the case points out that the ABS also received a considerable funding boost (\$122 million) to carry out the survey, making much easier to invest in. In working through this question, students have to opportunity to consider the way culture can promote various cognitive biases and fallacies which, in turn, influences risk assessment and performance. They can also contemplate the: • interplay between cultural and structural factors, • pros and cons of 'strong' vs 'weak' cultures and • potential to change an organisation's culture without losing its positive aspects. Resources The following resources each contain information on the Bureau's organisational culture from the perspective of both staff and external stakeholders, as well as its impact on ABS functioning. - Australian Public Service Commission [APSC].(2013). Capability Review: Australian Bureau of Statistics. Australian Public Service Commission, (Canberra). https://www.apsc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-06/ABS-Capability-Review.pdf
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