

# ACADEMIC FELLOWS PROGRAM



**Fellows Issues Paper 1:  
February 2026  
Policy Capability**

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## Editorial Introduction

Bridging knowledge and practice is fundamental to ANZSOG. The Academic Fellows Program brings leading scholars into novel and sustained engagement with public sector leaders to ground and test evidence-informed ideas and strengthen government decision-making. Through this program, ANZSOG supports applied work that responds to the evolving challenges facing public institutions and policymakers.

Eight Fellows will join us in 2026. Over the course of the year, these leading scholars will focus on policy capability, on evidence and knowledge exchange systems and on collaborative governance. Commencing in February, the two Fellows featured in this Issues Paper will focus on *policy capability and design*. **Brian Head and Giliberto Capano** will contribute their expertise through a program of engagement, dialogue and applied inquiry. They summarise in this paper the focus of their work and why it matters for contemporary public governance.

**Professor Brian Head**, a leading authority on policy expertise and evidence-informed decision-making, focuses on *bridging the gap* between research, policy and practice. Drawing on his extensive work with public sector and policy systems, and taking a long view, he examines how expertise in government is built, used and eroded — and asks us to reimagine what skills, knowledge and practices policymakers now truly need for sustainable policy design in the context of complexity, uncertainty and politicisation.

**Professor Giliberto Capano**, an internationally recognised expert in policy design and policy capacity, examines how robust policy design is produced — or weakened — through the fine-grained calibration of policy instruments in conditions of uncertainty. Analysing two major Australian reforms — the Job-Ready Graduates Package and the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024 — he integrates frameworks on policy robustness and micro-design to show how targets, discretion, resources and accountability arrangements shape whether policies adapt, endure or fail in practice.

Both Fellows invite practitioners to consider, at the micro and macro level, the policy expertise fit for the contemporary demands of public governance.

As the Fellows Program continues through 2026, ANZSOG invites policymakers, practitioners and academics to engage with the suite of projects — to test ideas, share experience and contribute to more capable and connected public institutions. We encourage you to read, reflect, and reach out. Connect with us at [insights@anzsog.edu.au](mailto:insights@anzsog.edu.au), learn more about the [Academic Fellows Program](#), and join us in bridging knowledge into impact.

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## Expertise for long-term policy to meet future challenges

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*Keywords: policy expertise, policy skills, long-term policy, strategic foresight, complexity, uncertainty.*

### What are the issues?

Given my personal experience in the governmental, community and research sectors, I have been especially interested in helping to ‘bridge the gap’ between these sectors. Research over many years has highlighted that academic researchers have insufficient understanding of what public servants actually do in their policy and program roles. I therefore undertook multiple projects to understand and improve the situation. For example, my team studied how public servants and social researchers interact (‘the use of evidence in policy analysis’ – Newman et al, 2017; Head 2016). Another team studied how the roles and capacities of the Senior Executive Service have evolved over forty years (Head & Colley 2021). And another team researched how complex and contested policy issues have been analysed and managed by governments (Head & Alford, 2015; Head & O’Flynn, 2015; Head 2022). I am currently examining several related themes such as complex policy advisory systems (Crowley & Head 2017; Head 2024); the need for strengthening the role of expertise in the face of populist misinformation (Head & Banerjee 2020); and the need for retaining policy knowledge in the face of organisational change (Stark & Head, 2019).

Through these themes, an aim of the Fellowship is to facilitate avenues for ‘bridging the gap’ by enabling researchers in public policy and management to become more aware of the issues and challenges faced by practitioners. My earlier work has explored the importance of understanding the perspectives of current public servants concerning their everyday and longer-term challenges and their capacity to manage these challenges (Head 2010). In recent years, this has evolved to eliciting (through discussion) the perspectives of practitioners about their experiences of managing and coping with turbulence, uncertainty, conflicting goals, complex issues, and their capacities to undertake long-term strategic work (Head, 2025) using innovative and collaborative approaches.

I intend to revisit all these themes in my current work on the changing nature of expertise in the policy process. The context of rapid change and politicisation poses the question of how we can develop new thinking and new processes for strengthening policy expertise. I would also like to offer some reflections, based on my personal experience and my later research in public policy and management, concerning what has changed and what has remained stable in public sector work over the last few decades.

There has been surprisingly little research about how policy staff do their jobs, or how they reflect on the nature of their work. The very nature of policy work is disputed, with some claiming that policy analysis is a broad professional craft, using a range of practical and experiential skills, while others give precedence to the use of statistical analytical tools such as cost-benefit analysis and performance metrics. Clearly the ‘job requirements’ for policy work at all organisational levels have significantly evolved over recent decades. This raises important questions: How have the required skill-sets changed over time? What skills are valued at policy-officer level compared with the roles of senior executives in policy divisions? Are generalists more valued in senior roles than content specialists? In what fields have external consultants tended to displace departmental policy advice? How does policy analysis vary across a range of public sector organisations? In short, what skills are required for addressing the complex challenges of the future?

## Why does this matter?

The difficulties in tackling complex issues arguably affect the level of public trust in good governance. The wider contexts of complexity, crises, and democratic discontent pose major challenges for public servants responsible for gathering evidence and for generating sound policy options. For example, the knowledge needed within policy advisory systems has been rapidly expanded and challenged by the rise of AI platforms and digitisation.

Moreover, the organisational context has changed with increased competition from external consultants, think tanks and lobby groups. New Public Management (NPM) since the 1980s has encouraged managerialist approaches to the role of government agencies, including the outsourcing of service delivery, increased use of policy consultancies, and the use of market-based policy instruments. But now that governments are suddenly interested in reducing reliance on external consultants, how can this reduction in procurement be managed, and how can departmental policy capacities be increased in compensation?

The capacity of governments to deal effectively with multiple economic, health and environmental crises has been regularly tested and sometimes found wanting. My suggestions are that:

1. Greater investment in long-term policymaking is necessary to deal with these uncertainties and complexities in a coherent manner. In general, this requires (a) collaborative and networked approaches, and (b) a commitment to inclusive processes for establishing long-term strategic goals through foresight and futuring processes (OECD 2025).
2. Within government, policy workers (understood as a very broad grouping) need to be better supported to shift the balance in their work away from a preoccupation with everyday 'fire-fighting' (responding to media stories) and moving towards involvement in longer-term policy development and service improvement.
3. Departments need to clarify the areas of core business where in-house expertise needs to be nurtured and retained, so that reliance on external consultants can be reduced.

## The approach

The Fellowship will include masterclasses and roundtables (either in-person or online) on agreed topics or focus areas such as the types of policy expertise, the role of consultants, 'futuring' and 'strategic foresight', long-term policymaking, and methods to address uncertainty and complexity.

The focus of this Fellowship would be to test new ideas with public servants about: (a) the skills they require for various types of policy-related work; (b) the perceived challenges they face in these various types of work; and (c) best-practice methods to develop key skills and meet emerging challenges.

At the end of the Fellowship, a significant ANZSOG research report will be published based on these core themes, along with some co-authored blogs on topics of wide interest.

## Impact into practice

The Fellowship project will promote collaborative learning between practitioners and researchers concerning key skills and capacities vital for the future of policy development and program effectiveness. The project examines key skills and capacities for the future, while recognising the diversity of required tasks and the diversity of employment roles. There are implications for ANZSOG and for other educators in defining and addressing skills for the future.

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# Designing Robust and Micro-Calibrated Policy Instruments: Comparative Lessons from Australia's Higher Education and Digital Regulation Reforms

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*Keywords: robust policy design, micro-design, policy robustness, higher education reform, digital regulation, Job-Ready Graduates Package, Online Safety Amendment Act*

## What are the issues?

Governments today operate in highly uncertain environments where technological innovation, social contestation and institutional fragmentation challenge traditional policy instruments. Many reforms fail not due to poor intent, but because their design lacks robustness — the ability to perform acceptably across multiple unpredictable conditions — and because their micro-level specifications are misaligned with real implementation contexts.

Contemporary research on the success and failure of policies shows that outcomes depend less on political intent than on the internal coherence of policy design, the quality of micro-calibrations, and the capacity to function effectively in uncertain and turbulent conditions. Gaps in implementation, over- and under-design, and misalignments between goals, instruments, organisations and target groups continue to undermine the performance and durability of many reforms. Recent advances in the literature on policy robustness further demonstrate that policies must be explicitly designed to remain functional during periods of volatility by being adaptable, learning-oriented, and allowing for coordinated discretion rather than rigid control.

Against this background, this applied research project integrates the Robust Policy Instrument Framework with the Micro-Dimensions of Policy Design Framework (Capano & Howlett, 2024) to examine how robustness is produced — or weakened — through micro-design choices. The project focuses on two major Australian reforms that exemplify high-stakes policymaking under uncertainty: the Job-Ready Graduates Package and the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024. Using comparative analysis, expert interviews and diagnostic tools, this Fellowship will provide actionable insights and a practical toolkit to support its capacity for robust, adaptive policy design in uncertain conditions.

## Why does this matter?

Why public policies succeed or fail is one of the most enduring and theoretically contested questions in policy studies. Early implementation research demonstrated that failure is rarely attributable to a single 'mistake', but instead emerges from the cumulative effects of goal ambiguity, organisational fragmentation, weak coordination and contextual volatility (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). More recent scholarship has moved beyond linear implementation models, conceptualising success and failure as multidimensional, politically mediated and evolving phenomena (McConnell, 2010; 2015). The empirical relevance of this shift is powerfully illustrated by the impact of the 2019-2020 SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Capano and Toth (2023) demonstrate that, during the crisis, policy robustness depended not only on pre-existing plans but also on the activation of unplanned frontline behaviours, such as thinking outside the box, improvisation, and rapid learning, which were enabled by specific design conditions.

These insights bring micro-design to the analytical centre. Robustness is not realised through abstract principles alone (e.g., modularity, diversity, redundancy, and polycentricity), but through their translation into precise calibrations of targets, stringency, discretion, resource allocation, monitoring, accountability, and organisational responsibility. Failures frequently originate not at the level of political intention, but within these micro-calibrations, where misalignment between formal design and real delivery conditions can undermine both effectiveness and adaptability (Maor, 2020; Mukherjee and Bali 2019; Hudson et al., 2019).

In summary, the success of contemporary policies hinges less on selecting the 'right' instruments than on constructing robust delivery architectures through accurate micro-design. Policies succeed when internal consonance, administrative capacity and adaptive robustness reinforce each other, and they fail when design assumes stability, suppresses discretion or neglects learning. This research is explicitly grounded in this integrated perspective, examining how robustness principles and micro-design calibrations jointly shape policy performance in situations of deep uncertainty.

## The approach

The research combines two complementary analytical dimensions:

- Robustness dimensions, which capture the structural and institutional features that enable adaptability and resilience (see Table 1)
- Micro-design dimensions, focusing on how goals (target specifications) and means (calibrations) are configured to deliver the policy (see Table 2).

Together, these frameworks reveal how design robustness is realised through specific policy settings — what Capano and Howlett (2024) refer to as the 'delivery package' of policy.

Table 1. Dimensions of Policy Robustness

Dimension	Core Characteristic	Expected Effect on Policy Performance
Diversity	Inclusion of varied actors and resources	Enhances agility and plural responsiveness
Modularity	Semi-independent functional components	Enables targeted adaptation
Redundancy	Overlapping functions and backup options	Ensures continuity amid failure
Polycentricity	Multi-level coordination among institutions	Fosters legitimacy and distributed learning
Scalability	Capacity to mobilize and demobilize quickly	Increases responsiveness to shocks
Prototyping	Iterative experimentation and feedback	Encourages learning-based adaptation
Bounded Autonomy	Local discretion within shared strategy	Allows contextualised problem-solving
Bricolage	Creative use of available tools and resources	Fosters innovation and improvisation
Strategic Polyvalence	Solutions adjustable to changing contexts	Anticipates future policy challenges

Coordinated Autonomy	Central steering with decentralized flexibility	Balances control and local adaptation
Political-Institutional Capacity	Ability to steer, coordinate and enforce	Enables operation of other robustness dimensions
Dynamism	Continuous monitoring and self-organisation	Institutionalises adaptive learning

Elaboration on: Capano and Woo (2018); Capano and Toth (2023, 2025), Howlett and Ramesh (2023), Sørensen and Ansell (2023).

Table 2. Micro-Dimensions of Policy Design (Capano & Howlett, 2024)

Target Specifications (Policy Goals)	Calibrations (Policy Means)
1. Designation of the target population 2. Expected outcome of intervention 3. Time frame for achieving aims	1. Stringency 2. Public visibility 3. Automaticity 4. Resource intensiveness 5. Agencies responsible for implementation 6. Monitoring and auditing mechanisms 7. Accountability rules

Drawing on an integrated theoretical framework of policy success and failure, policy robustness and micro-design, this study employs an applied, comparative research design to explore how robustness is produced through micro-calibrated policy instruments in uncertain conditions. Rather than treating robustness as a purely structural property of policy systems, the project conceptualises it as an emergent outcome of the interaction between design features, implementation dynamics and the adaptive behaviours of actors. The following research questions guide the empirical investigation:

- i. How do robustness and micro-design features interact to influence the effectiveness and adaptability of policy instruments?
- ii. Which micro-calibrations (target specifications and means) contribute most to robustness across uncertain contexts?
- iii. How do policymakers and implementers perceive and operationalise robustness in practice?

A comparative, diagnostic, and applied research design will be adopted, combining document analysis, expert interviews, and analytical mapping. The Fellowship will also draw on international comparisons, including the EU and UK.

## Impact into practice

The project will produce four main outputs: (1) an applied policy brief on robust and micro-calibrated design; (2) a robustness–calibration diagnostic toolkit for practitioners; (3) a seminar at ANZSOG for cross-sector learning; and (4) a draft academic article for submission to *Policy and Society* or *Public Administration*.

This research will refine and empirically validate the Robust Policy Instrument Framework through its integration with the Micro-Dimensions of Policy Design, showing how macro principles of robustness are

realised—or undermined—by micro-calibrations. For policymakers, it will deliver evidence-based guidance on how to design policy instruments that are both resilient and implementable.

For ANZSOG, it will provide a proof of concept for using diagnostic frameworks to evaluate real-world reforms and strengthen the adaptive capability of public-sector leaders.

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