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Post-Covid: sustaining organisational and product innovation in national statistical offices.

Innovation in national statistical offices organization and working arrangements

Innovation in a time of crisis – the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ response to Covid-19*

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Summary

The coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic created uncertainty for the economy and society. The pandemic provided an opportunity for the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to demonstrate the critical role of official statistics.

As national statistical organisations, we need to produce high quality essential statistics but also to maintain the health and wellbeing of our people and the trust of our providers.

This document presents the ABS journey from the early pandemic response, shift to recovery and preparing for beyond and the ‘new normal’. The paper highlights that a collaborative culture, which brings people with diverse capabilities together, enables innovation which resulted in more timely insights and statistics.

The document is presented to the Conference of European Statisticians’ session on “Post-Covid: sustaining organisational and product innovation in national statistical offices – Innovation in national statistical offices organization and working arrangements” for discussion.

* The present document was submitted late due to resources constraints.

I. Introduction

1. The Covid-19 pandemic created unprecedented levels of disruption to our sense of security, domestic and work life, economy, public institutions, national and international system. People, businesses and governments needed to respond to the immediate health emergency and significant economic and social impacts. Highly trusted, timely, economic and social evidence and data insights have never been more critical to inform policy decisions and evaluate governments' response.

2. ABS took a multi-faceted approach to the challenges of the pandemic. It explored new data sources and embraced new ways of working. It was clear that maintaining a business-as-usual approach was not going to be sufficient. We reprioritised our work program and redeployed staff to work on providing new more-up-to-date data on the impacts of the pandemic. This was enabled and supported by establishing two taskforces to manage the internal changes and external demands during 2020. Since that time, we've taken forward many of these innovations, and these are detailed further in the attached case study (attachment A).

II. What were the key organisational enablers that allowed to react quickly to crisis and how to maintain this agility?

Early response and planning for the Covid-19 pandemic

3. On 28 February 2020, the Australian Statistician commissioned the development of strategies to address the emerging risks and needs of key stakeholders from the Covid-19 pandemic. It was clear the community and governments would benefit enormously from access to a wider range of relevant and timely information to respond to the pandemic. At the same time, ABS put in place measures to protect the health of its staff and survey respondents, while ensuring business continuity and the production of high-quality statistics.

4. As part of its response, ABS:

- Established two Covid-19 taskforces:
 - the first co-ordinated business operations, and supported and communicated with staff; and
 - the second co-ordinated the ABS response to the significant demand for additional information from governments.
- Reprioritised the statistical work programme:
 - Delayed and paused lower priority work and redeployed 127 staff internally to support the new taskforces, deliver new statistical products, and bolster critical functions.
- Rapidly moved to embrace increased workplace flexibility:
 - Conducted a work from home trial in mid-March 2020 to test virtual technology infrastructure and team processes before the subsequent direction that staff should work from home, where possible.

5. Collectively, these decisions and actions were key organisational enablers which provided the ABS capacity to respond rapidly. The two taskforces provided governance, risk management and strategic reprioritisation of work program. The work from home trial successfully confirmed infrastructure could be scaled up to support all staff working virtually. This was an extension to the pre-Covid-19 practice of staff working flexibly, through a combination of office and home-based work and leveraging existing virtual IT capabilities and infrastructure.

6. The ABS Chief Operating Officer engaged closely and regularly with other government departments' Chief Operating Officers to ensure the ABS responses were in step with others and to share and learn from best practice and lessons. We used our network of

outposted officers to connect directly with APS agencies to communicate changes to our statistical program and facilitate access to additional data sources.

III. What obstacles and challenges have become evident in the efforts to remain resilient, agile and responsive? How were staff kept motivated under conditions of teleworking, an uncertain future, and in some cases reduced budgets?

Workforce response

7. ABS changed its working arrangements to ensure the organisation was able to deliver critical products and services, while maintaining the health and wellbeing of staff. While the majority of ABS offices remained open, staff were encouraged to work from home where possible. ABS built on its existing and well-established remote access technology to enable over 85 per cent of staff to work from home at any one time. ABS Offices became CovidSafe workplaces with approved increased social distancing and hygiene arrangements put in place.¹

8. To ensure the safety of ABS Household interviewers and survey respondents ABS field operations were ceased early in the Covid response. The focus of data collection shifted to telephone interviewing and increasing take up of web-based collection where appropriate.

9. ABS managers implemented changes to individual working arrangements to allow staff to balance work, caring, and home-schooling responsibilities. A range of additional communication and coordination processes were immediately put in place including daily Executive stand ups, daily all staff written communication, and weekly all staff town halls where staff could also ask questions, directly and remotely, of senior staff.

10. Staff have reported advantages of the new work arrangements, including reduced commute times and feeling more connected as teams changed the ways they worked. Regular staff surveys attested to levels of wellbeing and productivity remaining high throughout the pandemic.

IV. Which innovations were introduced (e.g. new partnerships, sub-contracting, data sources, new ways of conducting surveys); what innovation has been most successful?

A. New statistical products to support Covid-19 insights

11. The first element of the ABS response to the demand for additional information was planning for new, rapid-turnaround surveys. ABS fast-tracked two rapid-turnaround surveys; the *Business Impacts of Covid-19 Survey* and the *Household Impacts of Covid-19 Survey*—to assess impacts of the pandemic on business, people, and households.

12. ABS collaborated closely with stakeholders across government to understand their information needs. To ensure policy relevance, the topics included in the rapid-turnaround surveys were guided by a range of agencies, including the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Treasury, the Reserve Bank of Australia, the Department of Health, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources.

13. ABS and the Australian Tax Office (ATO) expedited work to use Single Touch Payroll (STP) to provide close to real time information on changes in jobs and wages as the

¹ Safe Work Australia has produced guidelines on reducing the risk of contracting Covid-19 through workplace transmission. CovidSafe workplaces are those which have adopted these guidelines which include the requirement to introduce increased hygiene and cleaning practises and enforce social distancing.

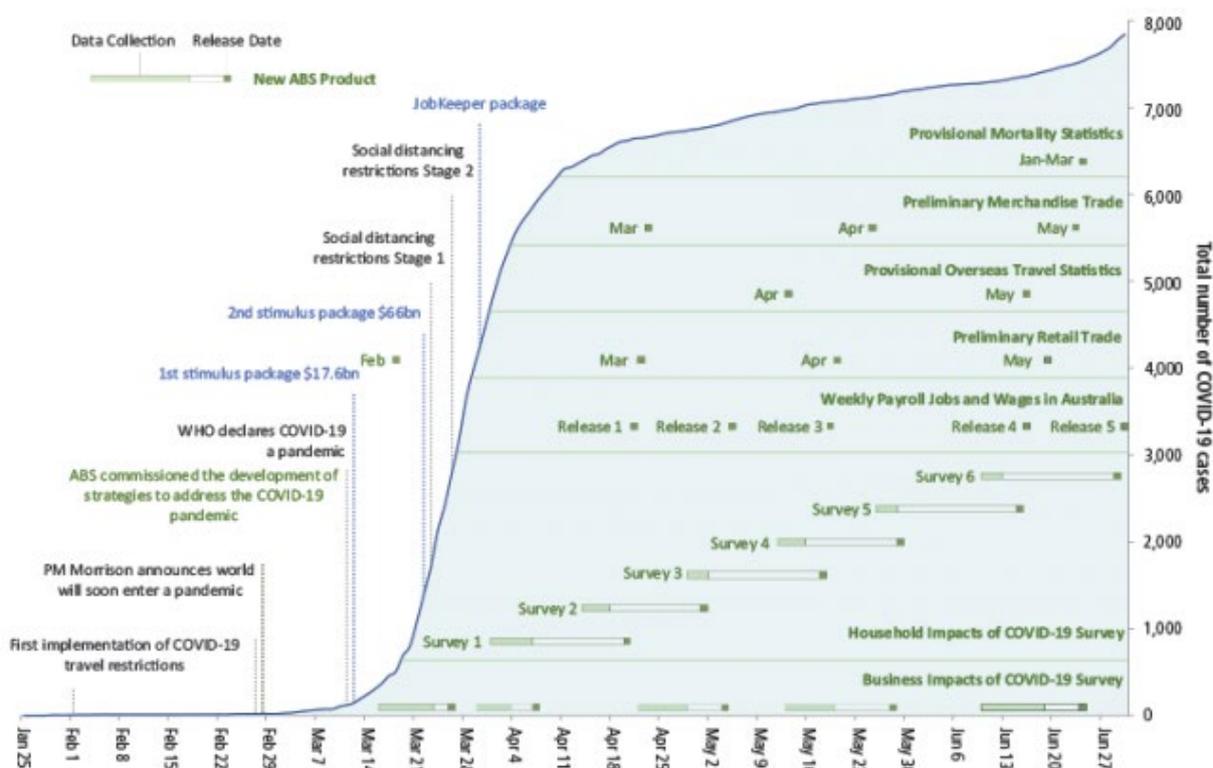
Covid-19 pandemic restrictions were implemented. ABS received the first STP file, containing 351 million transactions, on 2 April 2020, and 19 days later published the first *Weekly Payroll Jobs and Wages in Australia* release. This product has received overwhelmingly positive feedback from users. For example, the New South Wales Treasury noted: “The weekly payroll release from ABS and ATO has been immensely valuable during a period of elevated uncertainty. Having high-quality and timely labour market data is incredibly important for forecasting purposes and to assist government decision making.”

14. ABS also produced a number of new preliminary and provisional estimates, providing more timely access to data on the retail industry, international merchandise trade, overseas travel, and mortality statistics. New interactive maps provided information at a regional level about age and health conditions, persons with a disability, unpaid carers, employment, Weekly Payroll Jobs, and housing characteristics. Additional analysis on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was provided in a range of labour, economic, and social statistics publications. ABS released Business Longitudinal Analysis Data Environment (BLADE) microdata for financial year 2018–19 in TableBuilder, to support analysis of the Australian economy prior to the pandemic.

15. By 30 June 2020, ABS had released 26 new statistical products² (59 releases across these products) to help understand impacts of the pandemic. Figure 1 shows how some of these products aligned with Covid-19 case numbers and government announcements. Between March and June 2020, ABS facilitated more than 3,000 DataLab sessions for analysis of detailed data, which was more than three times the number of sessions held for the same period in 2019. The new statistical products also drove 19.5 million-page views of the ABS website between 1 March and 30 June, a significant increase from the previous year.

² This includes new statistical products, additional analysis in existing products, webinars and analytical papers in response to Covid-19. For more detailed information on products measuring the impacts of Covid-19 please refer to Attachment B.

Figure 1
New ABS statistical products, key policy announcements and Covid-19 cases



16. In the 13-month period to the end of March 2021, ABS had released 38 new statistical products (178 releases across these products) to measure the impacts of the pandemic. Almost a third of all ABS website releases provided Covid-19 insights. Detailed information on ABS products released on [Measuring the impacts of Covid-19](#) can be accessed on the ABS website (please refer to attachment B). ABS also released two infographic stories looking at the social and economic impacts of the pandemic over the last twelve months. Animated versions can be accessed via attachment C.

B. Changes to the statistical work programme

17. In addition to publishing new statistics, ABS made several changes to the statistical work program due to the Covid-19 pandemic, including:

- Suspending face-to-face household interviewing. ABS adapted household surveys and field operations to focus on telephone and web data collection, and/or deferred household surveys that required interviewers.
- Revising the work program to reduce reporting required by businesses, while meeting critical information needs about business activity, changes in the economy, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Consulting and agreeing with key stakeholders to pause elements of the statistical work program to deliver pandemic-critical economic and social statistics.³
- Reviewing and updating methods, in consultation with the statistical community, to maintain the quality and reliability of statistics, including treatment of policies related to the pandemic at source, seasonal adjustment, and trend estimates.

³ <https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/home/ABS%20Media%20Statements%20-%20Statistical%20work%20program%20changes%20in%20response%20to%20COVID-19>

- Exploring alternative data sources to supplement existing data, such as de-identified transactions data from major banks and using scanner data from major supermarket outlets, to inform official ABS estimates.⁴

18. ABS was transparent with users of our products about the changes we were making.

V. Coming out of the crisis – recovery and beyond

19. As Covid-19 restrictions in Australia have eased and we transition to recovery and beyond, new policy questions will emerge and there will be an even greater reliance on data. We need to consider these and related data needs during this phase so we can continue to deliver innovative products to inform governments, businesses and our community. There will be strong interest in understanding causes and consequences. Leveraging administrative data, data stewardship and integrated microdata will be valuable to support this kind of reflective type of analysis and exploration. We will also continue to support staff to return to the office, through different Covid-19 restrictions in each State and Territory, and will rapidly respond to any future lockdown changes if they occur.

VI. Conclusion

20. The ABS response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been positively received by staff and a range of external stakeholders and key data users. Stakeholders and users have provided comments on the timeliness, accuracy, and relevance of new products, and praise for the collaborative and flexible approach to responding to the pandemic.

21. As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to unfold, ABS will continue to support staff and provide data and insights across social and economic dimensions to inform policy discussions and support decision makers. The role of national statistical organisations in producing highly trusted, timely, official economic and social data has never been more critical to inform policy decisions, evaluate governments' response and the impact on the nation.

VII. Attachments

Attachment A:

- Case Study: [Innovation in a time of crisis – The Australian Bureau of Statistics' response to COVID-19](#)

Attachment B

- ABS website: [Measuring the impacts of COVID-19](#)

Attachment C

- YouTube clip: [How Aussies reacted in a year of COVID-19](#)
- YouTube clip: [One year of COVID-19: Aussie jobs, business and the economy](#)

⁴ <https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/home/ABS%20Media%20Statements%20-%20ABS%20exploring%20new%20data%20sources%20to%20inform%20official%20statistics%20in%20response%20to%20COVID-19>