

WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY



29 July 2016

To whom it may concern

Please accept the following as Western Sydney University's response to the Privacy Commission's request for submissions regarding its inquiry into data availability and use.

Western Sydney University strongly endorses Universities Australia and the University of Sydney in their calls for wider and, where possible, open access to government data sets. Universities are under an obligation to make the results of their publicly funded research available. This obligation stems from the commonsense proposition that generating a social and economic return on publicly funded research requires open access to that research. Imposing additional costs on researchers through data access charges for public agency data merely results in a transfer of funds between government-funded entities. More than that, these cost transfers stifle important research and prevent the generation of social and economic returns. Such costs should be removed wherever possible.

There is a need for close attention to the way the public sector manages data. The technical aspects of data management in the public sector often receive the bulk of attention: protocols for linking data, standardising metadata, storing data, and other associated matters. These matters are important. However, in some respects welcome technical advances—for instance, the development of open data portals across Australian governments—have outpaced the internal understanding and soft mechanisms required to take full advantage of them. The governance questions surrounding data release and use in the public sector are important and complex. Poor data governance around access procedures—for instance, the lack of pre-existing inter-agency agreements to facilitate data release—is a barrier to the free flow of data both within and outside government.

The University encourages the Commission to carefully consider the broader governance framework employed by public sector agencies in the generation, treatment, and dissemination of data.

Western Sydney University endorses the Commission's focus on the community benefit to be derived from releasing publicly and privately held data. We observe, however, that the skills available to manipulate, analyse and interpret data are nascent in the labour force (if increasingly rapidly in response to demand); in the broader community these skills are very unevenly distributed. Equity of access, understanding and control is the necessary precondition of an individual's ability to manage their data privacy. We encourage the Commission to consider the impact and sensitivities of a variety of user-groups when making their general recommendations concerning privacy of and access to an individual's data.

Sincerely

Professor Scott Holmes

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