

# **A New National Framework for Australian Gambling Research: A Discussion Paper on the Potential Challenges and Processes Involved**

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Almost all research disciplines pass through difficult, formative stages before emerging as recognizably viable and distinct domains of inquiry. In those formative years, pioneering researchers struggle with establishing their credibility and sustaining the funding base needed to push the boundaries of their research domain.

Although it could be said that disciplines that have little practical application or commercial basis tend to face greater challenges in establishing themselves, it is not necessarily true as a consequence that highly applied and commercially relevant domains have an easier development.

For example, motor vehicle accident and driver behaviour research needed several decades to achieve a critical mass of expertise and funding before it could take its place as an important arm of policy formulation- despite its clear pedigree in engineering and positivist science. Equally, ergonomics/human factors has fought a long rear guard action to be incorporated into the earliest phases of engineering design despite the gains in safety outcomes and operating efficiencies that the discipline has demonstrated.

In the case of gambling research in Australia, its efforts to establish itself have been no less difficult. With the commencement of the second Productivity Commission of Inquiry into Gambling, now is an opportune time to review its current status and possibilities for future development.

Like many research fields that consist of an amalgam of social sciences, statistics and a wide array of research methodologies, gambling research has been a difficult domain to both define and develop. And, again like most disciplines that share its evolutionary history, its path has been bottom up, largely unsupported by academic institutions, or at best spliced into their more mainstream research interests. Understandably, such arrangements can only hope to support a small cadre of part-time enthusiasts

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undertaking equally small scale projects with limited scope and this stasis has typified gambling research in Australia for several decades.

Indeed, unlike very established disciplines such as health and education, there is in Australia no critical mass of gambling research talent on the scale that is needed to sustain a viable, directed and credible national research capability which develops and grows in depth and sophistication from one decade to the next.

Furthermore, current commercial tender arrangements in gambling research (principally those operating through Gambling Research Australia) presuppose that such an industry already exists from which spare capacity can be drawn to undertake pressing, short term research. Yet ironically, these same commercial projects undermine the possibility of developing a national research capacity because their very lean budgets and narrow time frames do not support long term commitment either from institutions or from junior and more established researchers.

Instead, this model encourages commercial consultancy arrangements in which products are driven more by what can be achieved within a number of consultancy days at a given charge rate, rather than by deep research questions and what these really demand in terms of methodological strength and associated cost.

In general, consultants span multiple markets, answering questions to the depth that a budget allows before moving on to the next project- often in another domain. It could credibly be argued that scholarship requires more depth, commitment and rigour and this in turn requires commensurate commitment to scholars both in terms of career continuity and the costs associated with keeping them in place and in funding a, cumulative, incremental, quality research capability of national scope.

In a similar vein, it could be argued that the ad-hoc and politically driven research agenda that stems from current modes of research engagement in Australian gambling, actively *prevents* a planned, national, long term, research program from ever emerging. This is not only because the level of focus and funding is pitched too low and too short term as argued above, but also because the planning substrate it requires has never been encouraged. Even at the basic level of data capture, control, exchange and quality assurance it is clear that cross jurisdictional arrangements are currently inadequate to support long term research questions of national scope. And this is quite apart from the many other processes and arrangements that would be needed for true reform. In the meantime, researchers make do as best they can with what they have.

As a contrast, we could examine the complex cross jurisdictional arrangements, protocols and standards that support the monitoring and research of chronic disease in Australia. Not only do these remain effective despite the many layers of control between the commonwealth, states, health precincts/regions and individual service providers, but they are also Federally mandated requirements for Commonwealth funding. Furthermore this body of administrative, policy and research evidence is achieved despite much greater sensitivities in terms of privacy and data access.

Clearly it is time to rethink the how and why of gambling research in Australia. Certainly it is time to ask how we can expect to build an evidence driven policy framework at the national level when the necessary conditions to support it are not in place either in terms of focus, infrastructure, funding adequacy and time frames or even in terms of a cohesive direction that spans more than the next electoral cycle.

This paper identifies a number of potential models for developing such a national research capability and invites comments from stakeholders and affected parties. Although the models themselves may take on a prescriptive tone at times, the objective is to explore them and invite alternatives rather than seek endorsement or support for one against the other.

Indeed, it is our hope that commentators will identify and correct errors in our thinking and suggest alternatives that we have not considered.

Hopefully, by examining the current context of gambling research in Australia and critiquing the very early thinking contained in this paper, we may begin to identify a national gambling research model, an appropriate funding base and a credible process to achieve both.

The remainder of this paper provides a short overview of current gambling research in Australia- one which is admittedly highly subjective and idiosyncratic- followed by more detailed arguments supporting the need for a new national research framework. The real, practical issues associated with any kind of reform are then discussed. The paper finishes with an explication, comparison and critique of different potential models.

## **2.0 The Status Quo**

In general, the status quo in Australian gambling studies consists of:

- Localised, often small scale research (apart from the obvious exception of prevalence and similar surveys) with constrained research questions, small samples (e.g. Todd & Roberts, 2007), often inadequate budgets with limited integration nationally and poor generalisability to other settings and contexts.
- Longitudinal research is often difficult to implement given the narrow (often annual) funding windows that prevail and changing, politically driven research priorities.
- As suggested above, research questions are often dictated by government and industry need rather than a research agenda that aims to better understand gambling phenomena. Under current funding arrangements and their industry linkages, some crucial research questions can become “off limits” due to their electoral and industry sensitivity.

- An over-emphasis on problem gambling as a binary classification, prevalence surveys and research focusing on gambling as individual and social pathology including its screening (e.g Young & Stevens, 2008) prevention (e.g. Dickson, Derevensky & Gupta, 2008; Hing and Bree, 2008) harm minimization (Sharpe, Blaszczynski, Walker, Coughlan, & Enersen, 2005). and remediation ( Ladouceur, & Lachance, 2006).
- There is comparatively much less research examining changes to the multiphenomenal “texture” in communities accompanying new outlets, comprehensive longitudinal effects of legislative reform and policy changes or indeed- apart from government sponsored reviews- the broader political, social, legal and financial relationship with community, legal and political process. That is, the detailed mesh between the community and political and business processes involved in gambling is at least as important as the activity itself, yet these remain largely unaddressed while we plough on in the pursuit of individual pathology and consumer protection. In short, there is a richness that is left untapped by conventional methodologies and research priorities- a situation that encourages standard, conventional interpretations from quite “boxed” approaches.
- Within this status quo, there is an over-emphasis (especially from industry) on the notion of gambling as an individual, arguably logical consumer choice in which only a small percentage are damaged. There is little acknowledgment of the subtle family, community and regional effects that range beyond the act of an individual purchasing a product. There is even less acknowledgement that families, communities and regions - even if not pathologised- may nevertheless suffer ongoing opportunity costs arising from funds lost to more life affirming pursuits and activities. There is, arguably a wider human texture to gambling which extends beyond a purely economic rationalist account of entertainment choice and economic flows, yet Australian research barely considers this.
- Data access is often restricted by commercial confidentiality and commercial value as well as its political sensitivity. e.g. the real time EGM data gathered by casinos would be a valuable resource for many researchers seeking to understand individual gambling behaviour. The detailed wider patronage patterns pooled across jurisdictions and national populations would be of even greater interest.
- The extent of direct government and industry sponsored research raises the issue of research independence and the ethical bind that researchers find themselves in when potentially biting the hand that feeds them as well as the moral dilemma of spending the proceeds of gambling.

- Data is not pooled in a national archive for integration across data sets and to optimize the analysis “bang” per data point “buck”. In this sense, Australian gambling research is not as cumulative as it could be and consequently there is no agreed foundation or core knowledge base to the discipline.- although GRA appear to making some efforts in this direction.
- Existing research talent and expertise is not harnessed into a national framework and offered ongoing opportunities for collaboration and development. A considerable number of researchers in gambling are relatively isolated within their home disciplines and the community of such researchers is fragmented in focus and overall direction.
- Research quality and quantity is not overly impressive. Our national gambling research journal for example, is hardly overwhelmed with high quality research papers at this time.
- The research focus is often parochial; reliant on consultants who can lack academic depth, rigor or commitment to the field and who tend to operate from limited conceptual frameworks that are focused on a small range of gambling issues (e.g. problem gambling)
- Generational succession is not evident. That is, the senior and most experienced cohort of Australian gambling researchers are now close to retirement and a new cohort of younger replacements is not evident.
- The tender basis for GRA funding implicitly assumes there is a critical mass of experienced gambling researchers available for commercial hire. While other fields such as health and education are well supplied with expertise that can support an “industry” of consultancy projects, this is not the case with gambling. Continued reliance on commercially competitive funding fails to provide the necessary institutional infrastructure and career continuity to develop a critical mass of specialist gambling researchers as opposed to the current band of part time scholars sustained by university teaching salaries. Consequently, under present arrangements research is either tacitly subsidized by academic institutions or is taken up by less qualified commercial consultants who tend to deliver based on day rates rather than the rigour that is required.
- Although Australian gambling studies is underpinned by a wide array of disciplines, it remains poorly developed in conceptual and theoretical terms. As previously argued, the focus on individual, minority pathology has left large holes in the matrix of questions that could be asked and which are implicit in many of the assumptions held by government and industry. For example, how well is the notion of a logical, informed consumer of gambling services supported by the various cognitive and consumer evidence (e.g. Livingstone, & Woolley, 2007)? If the gambler is a well informed consumer, then what legal and consumer evidence is there that the contract that exists between provider and

consumer is a fair one and not- in the case of the more vulnerable- one of unconscionable dealing? If individual gambling addiction is the only form of harm experienced by communities, where is the community based evidence to support that assertion? Where is the legal analysis comparing the control and regulation of toxic industrial substances (e.g. vehicle exhausts), recreational drugs such as alcohol and tobacco, high risk behaviours (HIV) and exposure to gambling? The former have established parameters of toxicity, risk, prevalence, footprint of harm and treatability whereas this cannot be said of gambling.

- In short, in Australian research there is an arguably dominant “short selling” of gambling as an amalgam of individual pathology and consumer choice which in some ways drives a limited intellectual appreciation of the depth of the phenomenon itself and the span of questions that could be applied- regardless of how ever many different disciplines we can muster to address them .

### **3.0 Arguments for a New, National Level Framework in Gambling Research**

- The scale of the gambling industry in Australia is now so significant that it demands a more coordinated, national level approach to gambling research. Despite its social and community sensitivity, the paucity of research evidence that surrounds this massive, community tax base, continues to undermine the development of effective, evidence based policy.
- Present research efforts are too splintered to generate efficiencies and generalisable findings. A more coordinated and effective focus on larger, *common* research issues (hopefully of national scope) is required- especially those beyond the domain of problem gambling.
- Outcomes from this framework should include better articulation of research findings into national and state/territory policy and into episodic, national level reviews such as those conducted by the Productivity Commission and independent jurisdictional inquiries.
- Rapid change in Internet access, speed and associated technologies will continue to evolve new forms of gambling and these developments will require ongoing monitoring and research.
- There is a need for better integration and coordination with international research and trends in gambling industries and gambling regulation. International gambling research does not yet evidence the level of evidence integration that exists in other more developed fields such as health. In the absence of value added research and monitoring, Australia can easily become a

passive recipient/consumer of overseas trends and their unforeseen costs and side effects.

- On a related point, gambling research as it currently exists is actually an umbrella term for highly discipline specific research efforts in psychology, sociology, human geography, economics and other domains. A national research agenda should help to integrate these monocular efforts into a more synergistic framework that is enhanced by their diversity. Without it, such research efforts remain isolated and limited in their impact and value adding.
- At present, there is an almost complete absence of applicable evidence to guide the daily decisions that regulatory authorities must make in the approval or rejection of licensing applications. For example, authorities have few guidelines or evidence based benchmarks to impose restrictions on new venues and EGM densities within clubs or across suburbs, regions or states. Research which integrates the evidence in such areas would be welcomed by jurisdictions struggling to apply a rationale to their regular decision making.
- A national research framework forces a consensus on priority research questions and from there, allows the focus to shift to the human and institutional resources needed to answer them as well as where these resources come from and how they are governed, monitored and managed. That is, smaller bottom up research efforts need to merge with a comprehensive, top down framework that marshals the necessary structures and associated funding to develop a viable, sustainable, focused research capability. Once established, this capability can also support occasional commercial research opportunities. In the absence of such capacity, commercial research tenders continue to undermine its very development by dissipating promising research talent through partial, short term, underfunded projects that address near-term, “thin” research questions.
- An effective research framework will not only meet the national interest from the perspective of government and industry needs, but in itself represents a massive opportunity to take a lead knowledge role in international gambling. For instance, Australia’s EGM density and Indigenous population as well its involvement in Internet gambling can drive a unique research platform of great relevance to local and international industry as well as our nearest trading neighbours.
- As argued in the previous section, there is a crucial need to expand Australian gambling research away from its orthodox emphasis on individual pathology and impaired consumer choice. This characteristic is shared by research in many other countries, but in addressing it through a more flexible, innovative and “outside the box” approach to research, as suggested in the previous point, Australia has the opportunity to become a world leader in the new world order stemming from the ongoing global financial crisis.

## 4.0 Challenges Facing a National Framework

- In any proposed national research framework there is a major challenge in building a representative, stable and functional governance structure. For example, representatives within this structure could include the Ministerial Council on Gambling, GRA, industry and government representatives from each jurisdiction as well as selected, senior academics and international experts. The sheer number of participants and underlying committees could easily become problematic and dysfunctional given the different assumptions and priorities that a diverse mix of stakeholders will bring. Commercial interests alone may be very divided by the representation choices they would need to make. And even establishing the simple mechanics of voting rights- should they be needed- would be an obvious political tightrope.
- Building a consensus around a long term national research *agenda* will be the first priority of these governance processes. The research agenda will inevitably be unable to address the research needs of all stakeholders and affected parties equally well and must represent a compromise. At its most basic, setting the balance of applied, theoretical and industry related research is a fundamental challenge to any national research agenda- as is for example, research that is potentially critical of existing industry practices. A rather obvious example would be a research agenda that focuses heavily on EGMs within pubs and clubs when Western Australia has effectively banned this form of gambling. Clearly WA would derive limited benefit from such research and could legitimately question the value for money it would derive from its research fund contributions.
- Furthering this point, it is obvious that creating an adequate, transparent and fair funding base that addresses national research questions while *still meeting jurisdictional research needs* will be a major concern. That is, under some present arrangement such as those within the NT, there is scope within the research agenda to address highly localised research questions such as those surrounding very remote Indigenous people. Retaining the funding flexibility to pursue such research can be difficult within a larger national agenda where much bigger, mainstream questions can dominate.
- In any research framework with a national focus, setting the mix of Federal and State/Territory funding contributions will clearly be an early hurdle. Since States/Territories levy their taxes based on different assumptions, at different frequencies and against different kinds of taxable entities, there is considerable room for disagreement on relative and absolute contributions to a national funding pool and consequently upon the research value that each contributing jurisdiction receives for their dollar.



- Identification of fair and relevant key performance indicators (KPIs) to track outcomes of the research framework is another issue. Again, not only is the issue of- *what should be researched*- any early challenge, so is the issue of performance and productivity tracking. Published papers may have less importance to industry partners, while research that directly impacts upon policy rather than theory may be preferred by government. However, while we do indeed have some useful metrics for determining the impact and quality of research, evaluating just what is good policy is much more difficult- especially if there are considerable lags between application of a policy and its impact measurement window. Furthermore, it may take some time and also good judgment to both accumulate and later assess the readiness of the knowledge base for application to policy. Governments can be quick to respond to early “good news” stories but tend to lag when negative evidence begins to coalesce- often waiting for other jurisdictions or nations to broach reforms.
- Maintaining independence from industry groups while still developing and retaining research partnerships with them will always be a balancing act. Clearly, for a national gambling research agenda to work, industry must remain a key player. Their expertise and input is essential to the design and conduct of relevant, quality projects as is access to venues for data gathering, quite apart from the long term possibility of access to some industry gathered data. Finally, without diminishing their inherent bias and vested interest, industry partners will always be valued for their interpretation of research findings- especially in terms of their real applicability. Rather than being unaddressed and left to politically fester, industry viewpoints are best explored in a common, collaborative, multidisciplinary context where they can be melded and tempered by a wide evidence base and ultimately incorporated into policy in a much more refined form. At least that is the vision...
- In line with earlier criticisms of the formulaic approach underlying many gambling research efforts in Australia, there is a need for a more innovative, risk taking and adventurous basis to the questions asked within the new framework. It is interesting to ask whether the research formulas common to Australian gambling research are the direct result of the kind of commissioned research on offer and the frequent need for academics to behave as consultants to help their bottom line. Regardless of the validity of this speculation or lack thereof, there is a major challenge in throwing off the dominance of harm focused, economic analyses that rely on partial, incongruent data sets and measures, written to a consultant’s brief. Framing exciting, deep research questions that span electoral cycles may not be appreciated by those with more pressing business and political issues to address.
- There is also the strategic issue of the connectedness of a new national gambling research agenda to national and jurisdictional level policy development. In particular there is the question of how a Federal approach to gambling policy will dovetail with policies independently developed by individual states and territories from their own commissioned research. Of course, a

national research agenda does not in any way diminish the risk of disparate and even conflicting policy responses on the part of different jurisdictions, but it does at least help form a coherent mass of accepted evidence- in which case there is less justification and room for using selective evidence and narrow arguments for parochial policy formulation. In a sense, a national framework provides the policy threads for all jurisdictions, even though their legal and political right to formulate gambling policy independently of this remains unaffected.

- Even under ideal circumstances where a national agenda, effective governance structures and adequate funding and allocation methods are in place, the reality is that developing a credible research expertise large enough to fulfill industry and government needs will take some time. Indeed, a substantial lag is likely to exist between the establishment of the minimal development conditions required and the emergence of a viable and credible national research capacity. At the least, this lag is likely to occupy 5-10 years and an interim issue remains in terms of the role of current commercial tender-based consulting over this time frame. That is, if there is agreement that short-term research offered on a commercial basis is detrimental to the long term establishment of a viable national research capability, then what happens to these opportunities while we pass through the proposed development/incubation period?
- The following section outlines a number of organizational configurations that could apply to a national gambling research framework. These vary by degree of centralization/regional autonomy but there are many variations that could apply. They are offered not necessarily as a complete representation of the universe of possibilities, but merely as a starting point for discussion.

## ***4.1. Informal Network Model***

### ***4.1.1 Description***

In this model- which already operates to some extent within a number of jurisdictions such the Northern Territory- small groups of researchers rely on equally small “coalitions of the willing” amongst other researchers to identify and progress their common research agendas. These networks are driven by mutual interest and a mixture of jurisdictional, academic research and consultancy funding.

Yet, for even the most stable elements of these networks, funding support occupies narrow time frames and very few can rely purely on gambling research to keep them in place. Many are reliant upon full-time teaching or allied research roles within universities or institutions that are agreeable to them splicing this research interest into their academic portfolio. For example a number of individual gambling researchers

exist within psychology departments (as part of clinical/addiction/abuse focus), as well as sociology, geography, tourism and humanities departments.

The additional reality within this context is that many members of these networks are actually isolated individuals- both physically, professionally and financially- who operate more on intellectual passion than actual funding and more on the passive tolerance of their institutions than their active support. Such arrangements clearly perpetuate the risk of burnout and certainly an over-reliance on key individuals to maintain the ongoing viability of the discipline itself is a risk of national significance..

### ***4.1.2 Advantages***

- The model is cheap in the sense that it is subsidized by the university system which effectively pays for office space, research tools, communications and other overheads as well as a portion of the researcher's time. However expansion of these networks solely in the pursuit of a national gambling capability would clearly incur normal, "real world" level, unsubsidized costs and overheads.
- Where these networks are able to survive, they offer a credible (but still undersize), contextualized research capability for their jurisdiction.
- While funding arrangements remain unsatisfactory, they are at least relatively simple and direct when they stem from jurisdictional gambling levies.
- Similarly, the research agendas that apply in these arrangements are also direct and clear in the sense that the "client" base for research is very small and the pool of research service providers equally limited. Hence, research customers and research service providers have a reasonably intimate understanding of each other, if not a general workable relationship.

### ***4.1.3 Disadvantages***

- These networks are unstable due to the ongoing realities of grantsmanship. Chronic funding uncertainty means that staff retention and research cohesion are constantly under threat. Once lost, research expertise in gambling is enormously difficult to replace.
- These realities enforce a focus on short term research at the expense of long term and pure research.
- This reliance upon local funding sources also limits the overall scope of research and prevents the formulation of a national focus.

- Tautologically, the lack of a national focus augments the difficulties in pooling funds from jurisdictions to support it.
- Intermittent, inadequate funding does not support generational succession and expansion of research capacity through new research students and Ph.D graduates. This perpetuates a research capacity that often consists of the “part-time and the passionate and those who still have a day job” and those who are comfortable with the career style of a consultant.

In short, this model is the closest description of the Australian status quo that we can formulate. While it does indeed meet the needs of a number of stakeholders, perpetuating it inhibits the development of more effective, ambitious and stable national approaches and the appropriate governance and funding mechanisms to support them.

## ***4.2. Decentralised Node Model***

### ***4.2.1 Description***

This model differs from the first by (a) formally recognizing each jurisdictional research capability as a distinct node within a national network and (b) having (hopefully) deft oversight and steering from a light weight, nonintrusive centralized structure.

The forms that these centralized functions take is of course a matter for further exploration but could include linking nodes to national priorities and monitoring their progress toward them, overseeing a national research funding mechanism and providing ancillary or top up funding for activities that fall outside the scope of main funding (e.g. scholarships, student projects, conferences etc). Some of these are functions that are currently undertaken by NAGS and GRA.

Clearly, once such a body becomes responsible for major funding allocations, it could legitimately be argued that it no longer retains a lightweight, nonintrusive hub. Indeed it could be argued that its funding processes will ensure rigid, centralized control. However there is scope within such a model to devolve the research funding process to an external, independent group after which the hub becomes an administrative, coordinating mechanism concerned with collaborative efficiencies and integration into a national body of evidence. In this sense the hub is more facilitative than directive in its role and takes on elements of the Cooperative Research Centre model that has become common in Australia.

### ***4.2.2 Advantages***

- If funded from a national pool with long term time frames, this model offers the potential to build staff stability and continuity as well as ensuring a steady stream of new Ph.D graduates to maintain a national research capacity.
- If the distribution of research funds are not conducted on a commercial tender basis, it may genuinely cover the overheads involved in developing and retaining academic expertise. This offers real hope for establishing a stable, adequately funded, long term national research capability wedded to a longer term, well planned research agenda.
- The research agenda itself is more likely to be a transparent balance of industry and academic priorities, applied and theoretical research than is currently the case.
- The model's relative lack of formality could also potentially encompass isolated, individual researchers into a common structure, thereby retaining and incorporating their expertise more efficiently. In turn, a steadier stream of funding support to these more isolated researchers can ensure that they remain in place and their expertise and local knowledge is no lost to the system.
- There is a greater chance of establishing a core knowledge base to the discipline that could feedback into teaching curricula, thereby enhancing the profile of gambling research and allowing it to develop into a more distinct discipline in its own right.
- Independent, comprehensive, long term, national scale monitoring of policy outcomes becomes a real possibility.
- Similarly, ongoing integration with overseas evidence and outcomes would be of considerable assistance in policy formulation.
- In short, the model offers the benefits of stability, depth of focus, sustained capacity building and guaranteed funding at adequate levels.

### ***4.2.3 Disadvantages***

- Extracting funds from jurisdictions or even from Federal coffers to construct a common funding pool is no mean achievement and could prove legally impossible.
- Jurisdictions would be reluctant to part with funds they lose control over and even if it were achieved, they may legitimately question the value of certain research projects for them i.e. their return on investment.

- Keeping such diversity well managed could entail significant overheads in communication and control. That is, the light touch could easily be too light at deadlines slip and regional autonomy impacts upon a central direction.
- A risk lies in enforcing a well funded, rigid, but common research agenda that may not meet the needs of some as against a more diverse research agenda that has greater agreement but splinters funding ineffectively.
- The lure of steady funding could yield a sudden boom in self-identified gambling researchers with obvious risks for quality control.

### ***4.3. Hub and Spoke model***

#### ***4.3.1 Description***

This is a more formalised version of model 4.2 in which there are very structured relationships between the centre and each node- possibly encapsulated contractually in terms of discrete research projects across a three to five year time frame- or more loosely as a tranche of funds that each node applies somewhat creatively in pursuit of identified research questions that conform to an over-arching, institutional research framework..

In this model, the lines of communication, control and reporting to the centre are very strong, bureaucratic, often board monitored at 2 month intervals and closely tied to monitored KPIs and performance metrics over short time frames. A key example would be the National Centre for Military Veterans Health ([www.health.adelaide.edu.au/school\\_phcp/cmvh/](http://www.health.adelaide.edu.au/school_phcp/cmvh/)) which incorporates a number of research teams within universities as distinct nodes within the centre- each having particular, acknowledged expertise.

The central core of this model is administratively heavy with considerable secretarial support to undertake the volume of reporting to a board that meets frequently in different locations across the country.

Despite the depth of specialisation there is still considerable cross talk and collaboration across nodes. However what characterizes this model is its heavier corporatization, short term, rigid accountability against an annual plan and the quite constant reporting requirements from the periphery to the centre.

However, within such a model there is scope to assign key areas of expertise to different nodes and also to invest in common resources such as literature database tools, national data archive access and other web available resources.

This model is more centrally heavy in that it is more process and reporting driven, more contractually based than the decentralized node model and more rigid in its expectations and the research template it applies.

### ***4.3.2 Advantages***

- Most of the advantages of the decentralized node model also apply here. at least in the sense that a well funded, more formalized structure of any kind has a greater chance of developing and maintaining research capacity, larger research questions, long term viability to the discipline while better meeting the national policy interest.
- The model has great appeal to government since the volume and frequency of reporting is reassuring to them.
- Boards of eminent people provide media photos opportunities and media releases .that assist government in perception management and staying on message with the electorate. In this sense, research centres that attract heavyweight, prominent management help to provide media credibility to research outcomes and underscores government commitment to the serious issues underlying gambling.

### ***4.3.3 Disadvantages***

- Within such structures there is a lower limit on the practical size of nodes. It is difficult to envision the incorporation of existing, isolated, individual researchers into such formal structures
- Similarly, given the level of control and reporting there is a practical upper limit on the number of potential nodes- certainly less than half a dozen. This therefore suggests that most will be significant, existing, or newly developed independent research capabilities in their own right. Few such potential nodes already exist in Australian gambling research.
- Centres of this kind need considerable, expensive administrative resources to support the volume and frequency of reporting against planning templates and to provide essential secretarial support to the board.
- The high profile of these centres demands media and publication support as well, This adds to the administrative, research and Board servicing/logistics costs associated with the model.
- The nodes within these structures are often sufficiently powerful in themselves to encourage conflict over resource allocations and other matters. Internal conflict resolution can be an issue.

- There is a real risk that the overheads of management and accountability swamp the gains made from formal collaboration and a larger research agenda. i.e. the centre becomes a black hole of accountability that constantly distracts attention from the productivity of research activities.

#### ***4.4 Centralised Research Institute***

##### ***4.4.1 Description***

This model is the very familiar one in which expertise is recruited to a common geo-location or to a small number of very nearby locations- usually within a metropolitan center.

The centre is primarily concerned with undertaking research identified within a national framework. Much if this it would undertake in its own right, however, given the existence of expertise in other jurisdictions, there would also be logistical sense in subcontracting some localized projects (or jurisdictional contributions to national scale research) while maintaining overall control for design and implementation.

This model is commonly seen in the health domain in terms of cancer research institutes or other specialized research capabilities addressing heart disease, diabetes, kidney research etc.

These centres by their very nature demand location in large metropolitan areas and have limited linkages to regional researchers although they often collaborate with equally metropolitan centralized research institutes in allied disciplines.

##### ***4.4.2 Advantages***

- A simpler model with generally fewer communication/collaboration/administration overheads since the main research tasks and talent are both based and work under the same roof.
- Consequently, there should be less “slippage” stemming from the overheads of communicating/coordinating with multiple research groups and individuals across the country.
- The model benefits from the same arguments that apply to most centralization scenarios i.e. in terms of reduced complexity, savings in communications/control overheads, synergies from intense interaction amongst a core groups of co-located experts..



### *4.4.3 DisAdvantages*

- All of the challenges in funding reform that apply to earlier models also apply to this one but are amplified since jurisdictions may be unhappy about paying for research that both occurs and is managed from a universe “far, far away” in other words in a capital city “not of this State”.
- There are significant challenges in recruiting experts to a common geo-location within a realistic time frame. Whether there is a large enough pool of Australian and international researchers to staff such an entity even if they were willing to relocate, is a moot point.
- Local context and jurisdictional expertise is lost. i.e. The research agenda can become as centralized as the institution itself unless there are mechanisms in place to ensure the research agenda is truly “federalized” and accountable to jurisdictions in some way.
- In this model, the fate of existing expertise that is unlikely to be recruited or to move to the new centre remains unknown. There is the possibility that their funding opportunities will be reduced as resources coalesce toward the centre. In an extreme scenario there a chance that they may simply disappear altogether as projects become dominated by researchers from a national research institute.
- While the ongoing running costs required can be cost effective, the start up costs in establishing these research centres can be very significant- especially in terms of infrastructure and recruitment.

## 5.0 Conclusions

There is an urgent need to redesign and restructure the direction, focus, funding and governance of gambling research in Australia. The above models suggest some parameters to guide subsequent discussion and debate and are provided for illustrative purposes only.

In its present state, Australian gambling research is dominated by the restrictive orthodoxies of the problem gambler as either individual pathology or dysfunctional consumer. Richer, more complex and subtle investigations of gambling have been ignored in favour of pursuing pathology, detection, prevention, minimization and remediation. All of which are strongly wedded to a very restrictive interpretation of the locus of harm and the forms it takes as well as ignoring the subtle displacement of other activities, the opportunity costs to family cohesion and changes to the social fabric that accompanies gambling-- amongst a host of other phenomena.

In addition, the commercial basis underlying a considerable amount of gambling research in Australia has prevented a critical, sustainable research capability from emerging which can be harnessed in pursuit of these broader questions. Thin consultancy budgets pursuing equally thin, often politically driven research agendas do not provide sustainable research infrastructure and capacity that develops from one decade to the next.

Existing research capacity will decline as senior researchers retire and there are insufficient numbers of junior researchers to replace them. There is a strong likelihood that gambling research will lose the critical mass of Australian expertise needed to sustain and drive relevant national and jurisdictional policy. The prospect of an industry the scale of gambling being policy driven almost totally by commercial consultants requires an urgent risk management assessment. There are few precedents for such a socially and politically sensitive industry being directed by what are often perceived by the public as “cheque book experts”.

These criticisms also represent an opportunity for change. A new national research framework, adequately resourced, transparently managed and guided by both larger and more subtle research issues offers immense scope for developing a knowledge lead that serves the national and jurisdictional interests of government, while protecting Australians from malevolent international and technology related developments.

The economic and social priorities associated with gambling deserves comprehensive, quality research, bedded down for the long haul, answering the questions that need answering for the sake of the elected and those who elect them.

In short, Australia can do better than this and in the process illustrate to the world that they can too.

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