

## Planning the Methodology Work Program in a Statistical Agency

*Susan Linacre<sup>1</sup>*

### 1. Introduction

The methodology area of a statistical agency generally serves three main roles:

- helping to ensure the statistical integrity of the agency's products and services, and in particular to ensure a sound statistical basis to the collection, estimation, and analysis of data;
- helping to develop and evaluate cost effective methods, or methods that produce products and services that are of higher quality than current methods; and
- providing statistical skills, and in particular analytic skills, to develop products and services relevant to user needs (for example, seasonally adjusted and trended time series, as well as value added products such as socio-economic indexes, or model based estimates).

The boundaries of the methodology work program are not clear cut. The term methodology itself is poorly defined, and the skills of the methodology area, generally statistical and analytical skills, overlap to some extent the skills of a number of other areas of the organisation. An agency must decide which components of its statistical and analytic skills to bring together in the methodology group. In the ABS there has been considerable benefit from drawing together econometrics and time series analysts with the mathematical statistics specialists in the methodology area.

The responsibilities of the methodology area can also be unclear. Does it play an advisory role, responding to client requests for assistance, or does it take an auditing role with responsibility to advise senior management of concerns over the quality or cost effectiveness of projects? Does it solely respond to client demand from other areas of the agency, or is it expected to provide leadership in identifying and evaluating opportunities for improvement in agency products and services. In other words does the agency rely on a client pull approach or does it also encourage a specialist/innovation push?

In the case of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the work program for the methodology area is developed by agreement with other parts of the bureau, working largely as a service to clients, responding to their expressed needs, but also with responsibility for playing an audit role where that is considered necessary. As well, the methodology area is expected to be proactive in identifying, evaluating, and helping to implement methods that will move the ABS towards its corporate objectives. Consequently, the ABS has made a conscious decision not to apply user pays princi-

<sup>1</sup> Statistical Services Branch, Australian Bureau of Statistics, P.O. Box 10, Belconnen, ACT 2616, Australia.

ples to determine the work program of the area, in recognition of the innovation and leadership role, as well as the auditing role, that it looks to the area to provide.

The starting point for planning the methodology work program is the agency corporate plan, and the broad level objectives outlined in that plan. The ABS corporate mission is:

“We assist and encourage informed decision-making, research and discussion within governments and the community, by providing a high quality, objective and responsive national statistical service.”

The methodology area has a key role to play in meeting this mission, and elements of the work program must relate closely to supporting the ABS in achieving this mission.

While the corporate mission provides the broad direction, there are many other factors which help determine the methodology program. The people and skills available to undertake the work provide a very real set of opportunities as well as constraints, while the budget constrains the recruitment of further skills. Opportunities for co-operative research with external researchers, including those in other statistical agencies, also acts to influence the planned work program. Other external influences include major changes to client needs, and changes to available technology, both in the way they affect internal agency processes and the effect they may have on accessibility of data from providers. As well, the program is influenced by significant breakthroughs in the development of better methodologies by external researchers including other statistical agencies, or breakthroughs in related fields that place pressure on the agency to further develop or apply new methodologies.

The next section of this paper discusses in more detail the relationship between the corporate plan and the methodology work program. Section 3 looks at how the changing external environment influences the work program while Section 4 looks at some aspects of the role of a cost benefit analysis in determining the work program, and then describes the interaction between the availability of skilled resources and the work program. Section 5 sets out the processes that are in place in the ABS to establish the forward work program. And finally, some possible mechanisms and benefits for sharing information on work programs between statistical agencies are discussed.

## **2. The Role of the Corporate Plan in Setting the Methodology Work Program**

The ABS mission was given above. Supporting this mission, the corporate plan sets out six broad objectives that define the goals of the organisation, with 37 strategies defining areas on which the bureau will focus over the next few years. The six broad objectives are:

### **Purpose**

Informed and satisfied clients through an objective, relevant, and responsive statistical system.

### **Product**

Reliable, timely, and coherent statistics.

### **Providers**

Good relationships with providers, respecting their rights.

**People**

A team of people with the skills and motivation to achieve the ABS mission.

**Productivity**

Continuing productivity improvements.

**Profile**

A high regard held for the ABS by decision-makers and the community.

The methodology area plays a role, to varying degrees, in effecting progress under each of these objectives. While it is impossible in this paper to relate in detail all aspects of the work program to corporate plan objectives, the following paragraphs provide information on some priority projects planned or being undertaken as part of specific strategies under these objectives, and a brief discussion of the role of the methodology area in these projects.

A strategy within the first objective is to “undertake a program of reviews of ABS activities to strike an appropriate balance between emerging and continuing demands.” This involves extensive liaison by the agency with users to determine real priorities and explore possibilities for viable, more cost effective alternatives to the data currently provided. This allows resources to be freed up and demands emerging in other areas to be satisfied. Methodologists are involved in this review activity from the earliest stages. The provision of cost effective solutions to real needs requires a good understanding of exactly how the information from collections is to be used. Any reduction in current collection activity requires the methodologist to understand the implications of different levels and structures of error in the data on these uses. This allows targeted design of collections to meet priority needs, with lower priority needs often being met in an adequate way through alternative means, for example, through the use of modelling techniques. The design of new activities, either collections or analytic approaches, to meet emerging needs for statistics has clear implications for the methodology work program.

The second objective focuses on ensuring the statistical integrity of ABS products: one key strategy is to set objectives for quality, including timeliness, and to measure achievement. This objective also covers the reliability of data from different collections and the improvement of methods to achieve this. The methodology area plays a role in identifying and, where possible, measuring the error structures of statistical outputs, including both sampling and non-sampling error. The role often extends to determining the implications of the error structures for alternative uses of the data, and hence an assessment of quality in terms of fitness for the intended use.

The methodology area also plays a role in ensuring the reliability of data. This is done by establishing best practice methods and standardising bureau procedures to conform to these where possible. For example, the methods used to overcome frame and reporting difficulties and deficiencies through new business provisions, the treatment of changes in business structure, the treatment of outliers, and editing and imputation, are standardised as far as practical across the agency. Because the methodology area is a centralised group, providing services across a wide range of bureau activities, it is able to be an integrating force within the bureau.

Under the third objective, two strategies have a strong relevance to methodologists. The first is to minimise reporting load by accessing alternative data sources, coordinating approaches, using flexible data capture methods and commonly understood concepts and terminology. The second is to develop systems and indicators to measure and manage reporting load. Methodological involvement in the first area arises as a result of the potential effects on quality of alternative approaches to data collection, and the need to evaluate these alternatives in terms of provider load, quality affects, and cost. As well, the use of alternative data, for example, from administrative services, often requires investigation of alternative estimation strategies, including possible use of model based approaches. The management of provider load mentioned in the second strategy includes the appropriate design by methodologists, of samples and selection processes to balance load against data collection needs, and to share the load amongst providers.

Methodologists also have a key role in the fourth corporate objective, through the strategy “through training and development, equip ABS people to meet ABS objectives.” They have the knowledge base from which to provide training in many of the statistical skills required to ensure the ongoing reliability and usability of ABS products and services.

The fifth objective involves the implementation of a continuous improvement culture and approach in the ABS. This will involve methodologists in helping to instil this culture. It will also involve them in developing and evaluating new approaches, in reviewing and re-engineering processes to take advantage of new methods or technology, and in identifying, developing, and adopting best practise methods from other organisations including other statistical agencies.

The sixth objective, a high regard for the ABS by decision-makers and the community, includes the strategy of pursuing opportunities to participate in discussions on international statistical standards and practices, and to maintain our standing as a leading national statistical agency. A good reputation is vital for a statistical agency if it is to have the confidence of decision-makers and the community, and hence if its products and services are to be used effectively. The methodology area must play a role in promoting, both nationally and internationally, the quality of the agency’s statistical methodology.

As can be seen from the above discussion, the corporate plan provides very real directions for the agency as a whole, and for the methodology area, to pursue in its work program. However, it does not, in itself, determine specific priorities for the methodology area. This must be addressed by looking at the detailed work program of the rest of the agency, the expected cost to benefit ratio of involving methodologists in various aspects of the bureau program, and the ability of client areas to pick up and achieve benefits from the methodological output. It must be addressed by bringing the requirements for methodological support into balance with the level and quantity of skills available.

### **3. The Influence of Changes in the External Environment**

The methodology area is a support area, and as such the detail of its work program is

determined by the work program of the agency as a whole. In particular, as the work program of the methodology area is largely associated with the design, development, and evaluation of new or different ways of doing things, it is particularly determined by the changes in the work program of the agency as a whole: the new and different collection activities; reductions to past activities; and effective use in new technologies and new analytic approaches. This section looks briefly at the influences on change in the agency's work program that will flow through to the work program of the methodologists.

There are a number of ways the external environment can bring change to the agency work program. These include major changes in user needs relevant to fulfilling the first objective of the corporate plan. They also include new technological opportunities, and breakthroughs in survey methodology as a result of research, internal or external, relevant to achieving a number of corporate objectives.

### *3.1. Changing user needs*

Changes in user needs may take the form of a new or an increased need for data on a particular topic, for example, the family, the indigenous population, the environment, or the service industries. In some cases the need is new and the topic no more difficult than other topics to cover effectively with a survey approach. Such cases do not typically involve significant methodological input. More frequently however, the need is not new, but is recognised as a difficult requirement to meet, with pressure for a solution building as the policy need increases. For example, this was the case in the ABS for information on the indigenous population and some components of the service industries. In these cases the methodology area is involved extensively in testing, evaluating, and developing workable methodologies.

Sometimes the new user need is not for a different topic, but for information that supports a more sophisticated analysis by users of the data on an existing topic. This may give rise to the need for new types of output on the topic. For example, the sophistication of analysis made possible by current technology is leading to greater demand for distributional data, data on the probability of transition from one state to another, and data on the relationships between variables and how this changes over time, including data that best allow the estimation of certain model parameters. For users of this information, simple level and movement estimates are not enough, and as users have been able to articulate their needs, changes have been made.

An example of these changes is the running of longitudinal surveys. Increased policy interest in the long term unemployed and the transition probabilities of various at risk groups into and out of employment coupled with a government policy of program evaluation have led to a longitudinal household survey in the ABS. Similarly interest in the characteristics of businesses contributing to economic growth, and particularly employment, has given rise to a strong interest in longitudinal surveys of businesses. Another example of changing needs is provided in the increased interest in microsimulation of social data. This places pressure on the inter-relatability of household survey data between collections,

often at quite detailed levels, and with specific implications for the weighting strategies used.

### *3.2. Technology related change*

New technological opportunities provide another impetus for change in the agency work program. This is especially true in the area of data capture. New technology may provide opportunities for accessing data more cheaply or more quickly, but evaluation may be required to ensure the technology is implemented in a way that provides the best solution, and in particular that the effects of new technology on data quality are understood. The likelihood of breaks in a series, or even changes in the seasonality of the series, needs to be assessed, and if necessary action taken to provide a bridge in the series.

New technology available to data providers may also have implications for the range of data that they can readily provide. For example, a recent modernisation program within the Australian Taxation Office has enabled them to provide the ABS with more comprehensive and timely administrative by-product data that have potential implications for cost effective design and estimation in the ABS annual financial business surveys. Similarly Electronic Data Interchange offers the promise of easy access to a range of statistical information for businesses.

New technology can also affect directly the quality and cost effectiveness of ABS processes. For example, editing and analysis processes have undergone significant changes in many agencies in recent years as a result of improvements in technology. Again the methodologists of these agencies, including the ABS, have been closely involved in the evaluation and implementation of new approaches.

Technology also offers direct benefit to the methodology work program. Recent advances in both hardware and software have substantially increased the scope for interactive analysis. This has improved the cost effectiveness of data analysis in statistical agencies, and in the case of the ABS has been instrumental in including more analytic work within the work program, enhancing the value of the data as an information source. Another way in which technology can affect the methodology work program is through the development of computerised tools to assist in methodological applications. Many agencies have systems to support survey design. The ABS has recently developed an expert system for time series analysis, automating the more routine processes, and embedding many of the expert decision rules common in performing seasonal adjustment and trend analysis. Use of the system within the methodology area, or directly by clients of the area, will free resources to undertake other investigative research.

### *3.3. Methodological research*

As well as technological innovations, there can be innovations in methodological approaches to agency work. These innovations may result from internal work, or the work of researchers outside the agency, including the work of other statistical agencies. It is the responsibility of the methods area to keep abreast of relevant developments and assess the implications of these developments for the ABS. The

work program needs to provide sufficient capacity for the interchange of ideas, and the evaluation of the applicability of the more promising of these ideas.

A recent instance where the ABS methodology program has been affected by developments of this kind has been in household survey weighting. External researchers in microsimulation have identified aspects of the way the bureau has applied weights to some household surveys which, when the surveys are used as the basis for microsimulation, give rise to inconsistencies. At the same time other statistical agencies have been grappling with the same problem and developed linear and integrated weighting approaches directly applicable to the Australian situation. Given the changed external demand, coupled with the real advances in weighting methods developed by other statistical agencies, the ABS methods work program was amended to include a household survey weighting project that involves substantial work in the evaluation and application of new weighting techniques to ABS household surveys.

External research can affect the work program in other ways as well. Where an external researcher is working on a problem related to the agency, this of itself will put some pressure on the agency to gain knowledge in the area, in order to be able to adequately meet the queries of the researcher and take advantage of any findings of the resultant research. Alternatively there may be the opportunity for joint research or co-operative development in a particular field with external researchers or another statistical agency. Similarly the temporary availability of a research fellow who is expert in a particular field, may provide particular opportunities for the work program to develop in a given direction.

#### **4. Cost Benefit Analysis**

While there are many determinants of the work program of the methodology area, an obvious prerequisite for any project is that it satisfies a cost benefit analysis. For longer term research the analysis may be less clear cut than for shorter term projects, which relate directly to the solution of current problems. In both cases, however, it is important that there be some appreciation of a pay-off towards corporate goals in the foreseeable future. Resourcing in the ABS is insufficient to allow "basic research" in statistics, that is research not directed at solving currently encountered problems, and we look largely to the academic sector to provide this basis for future breakthroughs.

An important determinant of the benefit that will arise from short term methodological work is the extent to which the outcomes of that work will be implemented. For example, development of a quality monitoring system for an area that is reluctant to implement it, is unlikely to have substantial pay-off. Development of the same system for an area that is facing tight budgeting problems, asking for assistance in implementing productivity gains, and enthusiastic to continue to assure quality, could be expected to be very worthwhile. Thus in a pragmatic sense, it is often profitable for a methodologist to target projects at areas where their work is most welcomed, and where there is a willingness to implement ideas.

The use of user funding of methodological work by client areas would have the

advantage of ensuring that some form of cost benefit analysis was undertaken by clients in requesting methodological services, and would be likely to lead to high levels of implementation of the outcomes of shorter term projects. However, the disadvantages of charging users in situations where the methodology area is being asked to lead change and provide a statistical audit function, as well as to undertake strategic longer term projects, have prevented the ABS from using this approach to determining the methodology forward work program. Other means must be found to ensure the best results for the agency from the resources available.

#### *4.1. Availability of skilled resources*

The availability of skilled resources affects the work program of the methodology area in two ways. Firstly, certain elements must be built into the program to ensure the ongoing availability of the required skills. These include appropriate recruitment action, training, and development activities. Secondly, the program must be planned to be achievable with the skills available, recognising the ongoing load that will be placed by ad hoc urgent requests for assistance. If too large a work program is attempted, it is likely the strategic issues will fall victim to the urgent day to day issues. Alternatively while work may be undertaken in certain new and important directions, this will be of the little benefit if insufficient resources are available for the required follow through with clients to ensure effective implementation.

#### *4.2. Maintaining availability of methodological skills*

Looking first at ensuring the ongoing availability of the required skills in the methodology area, the main issues are recruitment, training and development, and retention. With regard to recruitment, the ABS methodology work program includes an annual specialist recruitment campaign, and ongoing liaison with universities to ensure effective recruitment approaches. As those recruited form the future skills of the area, recruitment is undertaken by senior methodologists.

The training that follows recruitment is a significant component of the work program both in terms of its provision and receipt. Undertaking methodological work, and in particular those aspects that involve playing a key role in achieving change within an organisation, requires not only statistical expertise but also a very good understanding of the practical constraints of the work area, and good interpersonal skills. Furthermore, the highly varied and often unpredictable nature of the work of a methodology area, and the need to be able to pursue long term objectives, while remaining responsive to short term and urgent needs, means that senior methodologists also need to be skilled managers and supervisors.

In the ABS, staff of the methodology area are relatively young and less experienced, compared to staff in other parts of the organisation. Over a third are new recruits to the ABS with less than two years work experience, another third have two to five years experience, while slightly less than a third have five or more years experience. To



ensure the availability of the right mix of skills, the training program for ABS methodologists incorporates the following elements:

- Training in survey methodology where this has not been adequately covered at university. (The ABS has developed a one semester undergraduate statistics course in survey methods which it presents at the Australian National University, and which it encourages other universities to present. As well, advanced courses are provided nationally in post graduate courses in some universities. Recruits to the methodology area of the ABS who have not undertaken these or very similar courses attend the courses at the Australian National University.)
- Attendance at conferences and workshops relevant to the work of the methodology area, as well as encouragement through paid study leave to undertake further, related academic training.
- Opportunities for on the job training. (This might involve design or redesign of smaller, less complex surveys that provide good opportunities for practical training, while not in themselves being of high priority; it also includes a weekly seminar series where particular work projects or areas of research are discussed.)
- A planned program of job rotation amongst methodologists to ensure exposure to a wide variety of statistical problems and collections.
- Opportunities for gaining a better understanding of client areas and survey processes by outposting to client areas. (Again the right opportunities may result in important but lower priority work joining the program.)
- General statistical training relevant to the ABS as a whole. (This provides an overview of the various elements of the agency's work program.)
- Management and supervision training.

The training component of the work program of the ABS methodology area is high partly because of the high turnover rate of staff in the area, and retention of staff is an important issue in the methodology area. Recruits join the ABS with strong quantitative and analytic skills, and these are further enhanced by training and practical application in survey methodology across all subject fields. Methodologists are therefore very attractive employees elsewhere in the bureau, in statistical areas of other Government departments, and in private enterprise. Those statisticians not attracted to moving to more practically oriented work, or enticed by high private sector remuneration, are often interested in research work and a university environment. An important element of retaining staff is to ensure job satisfaction. This may influence the work program of the area. In a methodology area it may mean allowing personal research interests to be followed where they are in line with the directions of the program priorities, despite possibly low levels of immediate pay-off. It may mean allowing researchers the opportunity to write up, present and publish work, building the time required for this into the work program. In a situation of strong and urgent demand for the methodology area to address priority agency issues, this must be carefully balanced, but time needs to be built into the program to cover research and publication of results.

### 4.3. *Implications of constraints on the available level of skills*

The above paragraphs have looked at the implications of maintaining a viable set of skills for the methodology work program. The other issue to be discussed in this section is the implications that available resources have on what can be undertaken in the work program.

In planning an effective work program, and considering an individual project as part of that work program, the following issues need to be taken into account in addition to whether the project, if successful, would be likely to make a significant contribution to corporate goals:

- the resources, including level of skills, required to undertake the research and investigative work;
- the likely level of support from the client area (for example, ensuring clean data are available for analysis, in collecting information needed in an analysis, setting flags and providing evaluation data);
- the resources required to implement solutions from the work (for example, to change systems to allow estimates to be calculated in a different way, or to provide training and documentation for the client area to effectively undertake new approaches);
- the willingness of the client area to implement solutions (and hence the resources that would be required to change the culture of the area to acceptance of the new approach);
- the support for the project from senior management in the agency, and its willingness to support the methodology area in any required culture change.

If there is a deficiency in any of these areas, it is unlikely the agency will reap the full benefits of the project. In the ABS, the work program is put together as the sum of a number of projects, both client initiated and methodologist initiated. When the projects are taken together as a whole, an attempt is made to ensure that all necessary support will be available.

Where a complex project on the work program has not been initiated by clients, but has strong management support, and particularly where it is expected that implementation of project results will need to be “sold” to the client area, it is recognised that experienced people will need to be available to ensure the success of the project. A number of projects that fall into this category in the ABS have been separated from the ongoing client support activity and included in a special projects area with a higher ratio of senior staff and with fewer administrative responsibilities. This allows the necessary senior level focus and follow-through of the project.

Part of the planning process for the methodology work program is to ensure appropriate resources are available from the client area to provide support for the project and to implement the outcomes. Where it is clear that the required resources, either in the methodology area or in the client area, are not available, projects are explicitly rejected from the work program for the current time, and relevant information provided to management. Recent examples of explicitly rejected projects on this basis are: further work on confidentiality of microdata

(given the low expectation of success in obtaining objective rules that provide reasonable release criteria, given past studies); generalised confidentiality tools (again because of the high cost to expected benefit ratio); sample redesign work on some surveys (system constraints and high costs of changes); and some small area estimates (the high cost of system requirements).

In summary, the influences on a methodology work program are many and varied. As well as the preplanned program, there will be a significant component that is made up of urgent needs and areas where priorities change on the detail of a work program on a daily basis. In planning the work program it is important to allow for this flexibility. At the same time it is important to map out broad areas to progress, and to ensure that projects undertaken are brought to completion, and outcomes implemented. The way the methodology area goes about its planning process in the ABS, incorporating changing priorities over the course of the year and gathering commitment for implementation, is set out in the next section.

## **5. The Planning Process in the ABS**

A tiered planning process operates within the ABS. On the highest level is the mission statement and corporate planning, providing the broad objectives the organisation is striving to meet. Underlying this is the formal ABS Planning Cycle. This operates on a rolling three-year basis. Each year around June, divisions nominate the strategic issues that will drive the forward planning of the division in the three years ahead, submitting proposals for additions to the forward work program as well as options for savings that might free resources to meet the emerging client requirements. Following a series of corporate discussions on the priorities of emerging needs and the feasibility of savings, as well as the implications for the corporate budget, the forward program is completed around November and becomes the base for further planning.

The formal planning cycle for the ABS, described above, can generate major new projects for the methodology area, for example, the design of a new set of collections, or the cutting back of a collection with the intention of meeting data gaps through model based approaches. However, the detail of the work program does not fall from this process. Following the November finalisation of the ABS forward work program, there is a meeting of the Statistical Services Branch Advisory Group, consisting of the senior management team across the ABS. The aim of this group is to advise on priorities in the methodology work program across the bureau, given corporate priorities, and to identify impediments to progress in the work program or in the implementation of outcomes from the work program.

As well as meeting in November/December to look at the implications of the ABS three-year forward work program on planning for the methodology area, the Advisory Group also meets in April to look at short term issues, problems of resourcing, fine tuning of priorities, and implementation of outcomes.

For each meeting of the advisory group, a broad work plan for the methodology area is set out, indicating the main areas of development work, as distinct from ongoing maintenance or basic design work, to be pursued, the resources required

and the resources available, ranked by perceived priority. The paper also includes projects that cannot be part of the planned program due to lack of resources.

In addition to being cast within the frame of the corporate plan and the forward work program, these papers are developed on the basis of a program of ongoing consultation with client areas. An important element is regular consultation with the head of each of the subject projects to determine coming requirements in terms of support. From this consultation is developed a detailed forward work program, describing individual tasks and expected resource costs, proposed starting and finishing data, the methodologist responsible, and the client details. The forward work program is stored on an electronic data base accessible across the bureau.

This working level consultation is supplemented with twice yearly meetings with the executive of each client division (there are four such divisions in the bureau). These meetings are used to obtain a top-down view of priorities within the different client fields. It is often at these meetings that the main input in terms of corporate priorities for development, as distinct from basic maintenance and design, is provided. These meetings provide methodologists with a chance to explore areas of possible advance for the ABS and gauge the likely level of management support across senior management. The methodology area is also represented on peak internal ABS steering groups for the two broad areas of statistics, the Economic Statistics Steering Group, and the Social Statistics Steering Group, as well as numerous support committees that report to these groups. These groups also provide an important input to the methodology work program planning process.

Another important element in getting the proposed work program document together for the advisory group has been internal consultation within the methodology program. This gives senior methodologists a chance to get together and discuss priorities and opportunities. Brainstorming and discussion at meetings of methodologists from different areas of the program provide a fertile ground for the development of ideas and strategies to meet corporate goals. It also encourages ownership of the program developed.

An additional element of the consultation process in preparing a draft work program for the advisory group should be consultation with external researchers and other statistical agencies to identify issues possibly on the horizon for the ABS, or opportunities for shared work. At this stage the ABS does not follow a well laid out plan, although some consultation of this sort occurs, chiefly through forums such as national and international statistical conferences, and bilateral discussions with other agencies.

Once the Statistical Services' Advisory Group has agreed on the broad parameters of the work program, the remaining planning function is to establish workable project agreements between the statistical units that now make up the methodology program. In particular, there is a need to develop project agreements between the Central Office methodology area, and each of the small Maths Stats units providing support in the States Offices, where a number of the major collections are undertaken.

Progress against the overall methodology plans is monitored through the Forward Work Program data base and particular views from it, produced as regular reports. These are supplemented with an Annual Branch Report which focuses on progress

the branch has made against objectives, and what the branch hopes to achieve in the coming year. The branch report is discussed by the division heads and feedback provides input to the following planning round.

### *5.1. Sharing of plans between statistical agencies*

Currently the process of sharing work plans and progress reports among statistical agencies is one of visits, conferences, and journal articles. The latter mechanisms tend to provide information largely after the event, while the former can involve substantial expense, especially for geographically isolated countries such as Australia. It may be possible for methodological areas which produce forward planning documents to circulate them to other statistical agencies, as they are determined. Internet may provide an option for sharing information of this sort. Summarised annual reports might also be of use, together with a listing of reports and papers produced that are available to other agencies.

