

Executive summary

Background, terms of reference and review activities

In May 2025 I was commissioned to review and provide a commentary on the plans by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to expand its microdata access to international users:

The high-level objective is the undertaking of a review of the ABS' 5 safes application in the context of researchers access to the DataLab from outside Australia and highlight any improvements to our implementation plan that will further reduce disclosure risk of the ABS integrated data.

Two documents were supplied for review:

- *Pilot of access to DataLab from outside Australia - Evaluation Report* (“evaluation report”)
- *Access to DataLab from outside Australia Implementation Plan* (“Implementation plan”)

An initial review and set of questions were sent to the ABS. A meeting with the ABS team was held which addressed initial issues adequately, and a subsequent meeting with ABS IT and Cyber Security experts to address further questions.

The report is my personal, professional opinion, and does not necessarily reflect any views of the ABS or persons interviewed. For simplicity, I refer to those participating in the pilot (and similar future users) as ‘international users’, and those who only access the DataLab in Australia as ‘local users’.

Findings

The Evaluation Report for the international pilot, along with the Implementation Plan, were reviewed, with a particular aim to comment on the Implementation plan. In particular, I was asked to consider whether the Implementation Plan is well considered and robust. As the Implementation Plan is relatively short and builds on the Evaluation Report, I have considered both in my review.

The pilot, as described in the Evaluation Report, appears well thought out and implemented with a very practical attitude. Not all the ambitions of the pilot were realised; for instance, an ambition at the start of the pilot was to leverage the accreditation process of other National Statistical Institutions (NSIs) in cases where they had already vetted a researcher for access to microdata in a DataLab equivalent under similar conditions. In practice no cases emerged to test this, however useful lessons were learned, of which the most important were that few genuinely new risks

were identified, and that the ABS systems were adequate to provide meaningful protection.

The Implementation Plan is an incremental development from the pilot. It seems sensible and proportionate. It is less detailed than perhaps could be expected from an 'implementation plan', but in its general direction there are no significant concerns. The default-open attitude of the ABS is rare in high-income NSIs, and commendable.

There are number of areas where the ABS could improve its practice or plans for implementation of international access. Some suggestions in this report reflect opportunities for efficiency gains. Some reflect a lack of clarity in ABS thinking or strategy. Some reflect general omissions from the report: in this respect, the most important is the lack of discussion on public engagement.

The recommendations are summarised below, including whether they relate to the DataLab in general, or just to international access. Although there are a large number of recommendations, it should be noted that no significant flaws in the implementation plan were identified; the recommendations are all focused on improvements to those plans.

Summary of recommendations

In considering recommendations, I have defined areas of lower priority as "suggestions" for improvement, and areas of higher priority as "recommendations" for action to deal with significant gaps in plans.

Suggestions for improvement

- The ABS define strategic principles for data access which can be referenced when considering new data access arrangements.
- The ABS continues to explore the possibilities of leveraging equivalent researcher vetting by organisations similar to ABS
- The ABS continues to build and focus training as the most effective channel for building safe researchers.
- The ABS progresses system development in consideration of its long-term access model, user experience and potential barriers.
- The ABS is more active in communicating that data within the DataLab holds no personal identifiers.
- The ABS should regularly review costs to ensure they do not dissuade researchers from accessing the DataLab.

Recommendations for action

- The ABS refers to evidence to back assessments on the risk framework.
- The ABS accredits each of the five safes separately, and international access requirements are specified as additions to the standard framework.
- The ABS should review its approach to screen sharing, and in particular develop a policy which facilitates it using standard meeting tools, but which regulates it effectively.
- The ABS should develop an active public engagement plan around the DataLab, to ascertain wider views about ABS activities and help develop a communication strategy that is robust to challenges

November 2025

Felix Ritchie

Professor of Applied Economics, University of the West of England, Bristol

Director, Data Research Access and Governance Network