Turning deep listening into a critical piece of our social infrastructure

The Sydney Policy Lab and the next twelve months
From the Director

The Lab & the next twelve months

Welcome. While the Covid-19 pandemic forced us apart for so long, it made us more aware than ever of the importance of human connection, the significance of the moment in which we are living, and the need to rethink how we relate to one another and express what we value.

I have set out below some indications about how we will be facing the year ahead, including the sorts of work we will intend to do and how we will do it. As you read it, I’d like you to keep one thought in mind: the importance of deeply considered work. We are in a moment in which our relationships with one another, our institutions and the planet are incredibly malleable and fast changing. At first glance, this might suggest that our solutions should be global and fast-paced. Let me propose the opposite. What is most urgently needed is the ability to work together at a human pace that allows the proper consideration of practical knowledge and the participation of a diversity of voices. Rushed policies, narrowly conceived and informed, seldom work.

I hope that while reading this picture of what we plan to do in the next year, you see a place for yourself and your community. So please consider this an invitation to join us in the exciting policy experimentation that our inclusive policy laboratory will be undertaking.

Best regards

Dr Kate Harrison Brennan
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The Sydney Policy Lab

A multi-disciplinary policy laboratory to strengthen community and achieve progress.

The Sydney Policy Lab was created by the University of Sydney to be a multi-disciplinary, non-partisan space where the academy and the community can come together to investigate and solve complex policy issues that face our world, build community and make progress. It represents a powerful contribution by the university to the common good.

The Lab’s prime focus is on and with community. It was created by people searching for practical answers to the question of how we can best arrange our life together. Its work reflects this, building relationships with and between people from diverse backgrounds to encourage greater empathy and understanding, supporting them to create community-led policies. In particular, we want to work with those who have been excluded from power.

Since our establishment we have demonstrated that this approach works and that the university is an ideal place to host it.

The best thing about a ‘Sandstone University’ is that it’s porous.
Building community is becoming ever more important – and so are we.

The birth of the Lab has coincided with unexpected shocks that have demonstrated the vital need for community building:

- the Covid-19 pandemic, which exposed how cultural, class, geographical and age divides made tackling the virus and its social and economic consequences more difficult
- the dramatic acceleration of climate change, whose bushfires and floods have global causes but local effects, often in communities not adequately equipped to cope.

Our collective work is becoming ever more important.

That’s why within the next five years we want the Sydney Policy Lab to be regarded as a critical piece of social infrastructure, initiating and sustaining the sorts of relationships, conversations and collaborations needed to address the challenges of our times.

We will do this by:

- adding world-leading research and lived expertise into the conversations that matter
- remaking relationships within the university and with local communities
- connecting with philanthropists and policy partners (including analogous policy labs) across Australia and the world.

We aim to become collaborative leaders, known for the success of our research and community-led policy design, and for creating a network of learning communities within a strong economy of cooperation.
The way we do things will set an example

We aim to influence policy development and reshape the conventional ways in which it is developed.

We seek to become a true policy ‘laboratory’ – a space that brings together diverse perspectives and experimental methodologies to formulate, test and apply our policy hypotheses to real-world situations. We will relish the opportunity to try out new ideas and employ new ways of being together to create sustained forms of civic dialogue. We will stand out for the collaborative and community-led nature of our work and for being a place that welcomes those who tend to be excluded.

We will work collaboratively with First Nations peoples and our work will be informed by the rich forms of knowledge that have governed this land for thousands of years. In this and other ways, our work will take into account the everyday and historically-derived power imbalances that exist within our society.

This work will be aided by the wide range of skills of our team members, who possess deep experience in community organising and community development, public policy creation and government relations.

Relationship precedes action.
Policies of existential importance

Our policy work will continue to focus on the issues of greatest immediate and long-term consequence for our communities.

We are unafraid to address the most immediate, pressing and politically-contested issues of the day, but we will do so in ways that focus on what really matters. We will address the full complexity of these problems and aim to provide answers that are clear and capable of timely and practical response.

We therefore intend to redouble our efforts in our current areas of research and practice: climate change, care and civil society. Our approaches in these fields set us apart and promise practical gains that will directly change people’s lives, for example:

– helping members of carbon-intensive and climate-affected communities come together to decide how they might transition justly to a low-carbon world
– connecting people in need of care, carers and academics to forge a new narrative and ethical framework that will help us understand the care economy and the rights and needs of everyone involved

As shown, our policy work eschews fixed, narrow categories, searching always for interconnections and dependencies, mindful that the solution to one set of problems is often part of the solution to another. The climate, the economy, care, workers’ rights – all are connected.

— broadening our well-received work on civil society and the Covid-19 pandemic into an investigation on the theme of ‘people and democracy’, encompassing issues of migration and forced migration. If possible, we will explore further how best to make the economy work for people, not the other way around.
Speed kills in the world of the media, but effective policy development, which requires knowledge gained from experience, takes time. Quick fixes seldom work and ultimately waste even more valuable time. This is why we have decided to base our policy development on methodical, community-led work, that brings together diverse forms of expertise and experience. The relationships and collaborations needed for success take time to develop and grow in strength. They can’t be rushed. We also value deliberate and slow conversations. It’s a radical thing to say in this fast-paced world, but we champion, protect and support this slower pace of this work, knowing how vital it is.

This doesn’t mean we won’t work fast. We move quickly when the situation demands a timely response and the need to connect with a fast-moving conversation. When this is the case, we bring people together quickly, develop a hunch, and seek answers along with those whose lives would be most affected.

Much of the work we do happens in between communities who operate at different speeds. As a result, we bring our ongoing work to the attention of policymakers and government in ways that build relationships with power. This results in better policy development and lasting social change.

Avoiding policy ‘quick fixes’

At the Sydney Policy Lab, we are purposeful about the pace at which we work, taking the necessary time to understand the full complexity and practical implications of everything we do and propose. We aim at considered solutions that actually work and we believe the methods we employ are as important as the policies we jointly create.
From listening to action

The Lab is now moving from a period of deep listening to a time of testing how well our policymaking works. We want you to join us.

We’re excited about the coming year. Over the next twelve months we will be broadening our collaborations and testing our approach to see just how well we can realise our vision for the Lab. Existing projects will be joined by exciting new ones.

With every new finding we will be building our effectiveness and contributing to better lives for the communities we work with and for.

We ask you to join us in this exciting collaborative undertaking for the common good. We would love you to think about who’s not yet taking part in the conversation and who should be.

Relationship precedes action and diverse thinking leads to better solutions.