



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY
—
Sydney Policy
Lab

Our story in 2025

Sydney Policy Lab



Our unique approach

We believe that diverse expertise makes for better policy



**We begin with
community priorities.**

**We tackle complex
policy challenges.**

**We hold the
conversations
that matter.**

“Better policy won’t
happen by accident.
It happens when
communities and
universities drive
the R&D behind it.”

Dr Kate Harrison Brennan
Director, Sydney Policy Lab



Our work in 2025

18 initiatives

*advancing
systems change*

Projects, collaborations and nodes tackling challenges in care, equity, education and mental health.



4+ national and global partnerships

Fair Foundations, SEED Futures, NSW Premier's Department, CAMHRA at SOAS at the University of London, and others supporting community-centred policy work.



80+ people

*in our research for
policy impact network*

Researchers working across disciplines to connect ideas with real-world change.



Working across metro and regional Australia

From Western Sydney to Broken Hill, supporting communities shaping policy solutions.



1 shared purpose

*Better policy,
built with people.*

Our work to reimagine care

Championing Australia's Relational Economy - CARE Program



Australia is on track for a shortfall of over 200,000 full-time care workers by 2050. The problem isn't just supply. It's how the system is built.

Care is in crisis — but it doesn't have to be.

In 2025, the cracks widened: burnt-out workers, unsupported families, systems stretched thin - a policy system that overlooks the human work holding society together.

Since 2022, we've explored a better way, backed by a nearly \$800k Ramsay Hospital grant: *What if care wasn't a cost to contain, but an economy of connection?*

Our approach

We see care not as a service, but a web of relationships - between parents and children, carers and elders, health workers and patients, educators and students, communities and the systems around them. When policy recognises care as relational work, it shifts from transactions to trust - valuing the people and connections that make care possible, sustainable and real.



Impact snapshot:

Connected more than 460 people from community, academia and government through **Australia Cares**.

Convened a national **CARE webinar** with collaborators and the Productivity Commission.

Contributed to international debate on care by coauthoring an article for the *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*.

Co-wrote with SEED Futures a **National Primary Prevention Framework for Care**.

Supported **community-embedded projects** including:

- **Co-designed a Person-Centred Model of Care:** Health Needs of Older/Ageing Gay Men in NSW
- **The CaNCaLD Womens Project (The Care Navigation for CaLD Womens Project)** co-designing

solutions for mental health support for migrant / asylum seeking women.

- **AusHEARTS of Care** - research grant for cardiovascular health in regional & rural Australia to reduce cardiovascular risk.
- **Established HeARTs of care** - a project examining use of art & creativity in health and care settings.

Head of Program:

Professor Brendan McCormack,

Dean of the Susan Wakil School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Sydney.

Our work on rethinking after-school hours care

Beyond The Bell



Most parents work past 3pm – but only 1 in 5 kids has access to after-school care.

School ends at 3:00pm, work doesn't.

For millions of families, that daily gap brings stress, lost income, and missed opportunities.

Supporting children and families requires attention across the full school day. At the University of Sydney, researchers reimagined Outside School Hours Care as essential infrastructure for learning, wellbeing and equity.

Our approach

The Sydney Policy Lab and Brain and Mind Centre created a first-of-its-kind partnership bringing together child development researchers, policy experts, educators and community partners who want to work more collaboratively.

Through roundtables, workshops and community consultations, we listened closely to families, educators and children to understand what they really need from OSHC.

Impact snapshot:

Our pre-election analysis showed that four out of five children miss out on after-school care.

A groundbreaking paper calling for a national summit on the future of OSHC, funding and roadmap for community-led pilots. Education ministers to address the work-school gap.

Co-authored March 2025 discussion paper cited by The Conversation and ABC RN.

Hosted panel session "Raising Thriving Children" at the Sydney University Community Festival.

Briefings delivered to federal and state policymakers, including the Office of the Education Minister.

Recommendations presented at UNSW's Child and Youth Wellbeing Network event.

Engaged parent groups including the **Parenthood and Primary School Action Group**.

Delivered Ministerial Webinar with Tanya Plibersek, Minister for Social Services and Dr Angela Jackson, Commissioner (Social Policy), Productivity Commission.

Government engagement as part of the University's response to the Education Reform Inquiry.

Co-hosted 3 community workshops in Camperdown and Westmead.

In 2026, we'll deepen this work through a cross-sector summit and further research into OSHC priorities from the perspectives of children, families, educators, researchers and the wider community.



Our work on engaging well across lines of difference

Campus Collaboration

Tensions around speech, identity and power have increasingly intensified - on campus and beyond..

Universities can model what it means to thrive in our diversity.

Our core mission is to deepen understanding and knowledge, recognise complexity, and support debate.

Campus Collaboration seeks to do this in relation to complex and difficult issues.

Campus Collaboration created space for honest, compassionate and thoughtful conversations - not only during divisive moments, but in everyday encounters across difference.

We talked about hard things: from how antisemitism is understood, to questions about trust in the arts.



“We weren’t trying to ‘win’ the conversation. We were trying to stay in it - with each other, with humility, with hope.”
Student participant



Impact snapshot:

Across different events and workshops, we used participatory design and story and arts-based methodologies, to try out new ways of learning, leading and grappling with what troubles us. We engaged 400+ participants across the university - both students and academic and professional staff, often in the same room.

“We Can Talk About Hard Things”
Closed roundtables bringing together diverse participants with sometimes conflicting perspectives on complex issues.

“Don’t Trust the Arts?”
Showcase Public panel, moderated by Prof Sophie Gee (Vice-Chancellor’s Fellow).

Leadership & Teaching Workshops 80+ students joined our Student Leadership for Good

series with Student Life, and 36 staff sharing how values guide their work, leading through uncertainty, and how to intervene constructively in conflict.

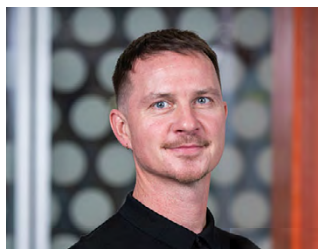
Difficult conversations in the classroom: Four intimate conversations where faculty across the university shared and explored strategies for how to constructively respond when conflicts arise in the teaching context.

New Developments in Policymaking

Policy Bites Seminar Series

This year, complex policy challenges called for new approaches and connections.

Policy Bites, our cross-campus lunchtime seminar series, met this moment, creating space to test new ideas and research findings. In our biggest year yet, 14 sessions brought together our most diverse mix of guests and policy challenges.



Professor Aidan McGarry
Acting Dean and Professor of International Politics, Loughborough University London
How one of Europe's most **excluded communities** fights to be heard.



Dr Rebecca Huntley
Director of Research, 89 Degrees East
Why **understanding public attitudes** matters, and how they steer elections and policy direction.



Dr Luke Mansillo
Political Scientist and Public Opinion Analyst
How **polling and voting trends** reveal what Australians are thinking, and why it matters for policymakers.



Bernadette Black AM
Founder and CEO, SEED Futures
How early, **strengths-based support** can prevent disadvantage and help families and young people thrive.



Associate Professor Sophie Gee
University of Sydney
How the **humanities help communities** connect, collaborate and solve problems in times of crisis.



Dr Nikita Simpson
Reader in Anthropology and Co-Director, CAMHRA, University of London
How **housing pressures**, migration and everyday stress **shape mental health** and the policies that respond to it.



Professor Seye Abimbola
School of Public Health, University of Sydney
Why policy works better when it listens to **local experience**.



Professor Axel Wolf
Director of Centre for Person-centred Care, University of Gothenburg
How **person-centred care** can strengthen whole health systems by making them safer, fairer and more effective.



Professor Mary McCarron
Professor of Ageing and Intellectual Disability, Trinity College Dublin
How to **build better supports** for people with intellectual disability as they age.



Professor Glyn Davis AC
Emeritus Professor of Political Science, University of Melbourne
Why the **everyday craft of government** matters.



Professor Nicola McEwen
Professor of Public Policy and Governance, Director, Centre for Public Policy, University of Glasgow
How **siloed government systems** keep people in poverty.

Our seed funding program

Testing ideas that shape policy

Breakthroughs need new ways of working – ones that give people time to think together, test ideas and build the relationships that make new possibilities visible. When researchers and community partners work in this way, unexpected solutions emerge.

In 2025, the Sydney Policy Lab launched a new network of Policy Nodes to support this kind of work, bringing people together to explore ideas, question assumptions and connect across disciplines.



Impact snapshot:

Nodes received:

- \$5,000 seed funding
- Access to Lab space, events and networks
- Policy engagement, grant and partnership support

This year's nodes focused on health inequality, international education, justice, teacher and school leader wellbeing, the role of arts in care and healing

and policies to better support research commercialisation across the university sector. The Adaptive Policy Systems node took a more theoretical approach. Across the program, some nodes mapped systems, others co-designed pilots or reframed issues for decision makers. They worked toward a more collaborative and responsive policy ecosystem.

We were especially proud to award our inaugural First Nations Research grant to Dr Mitch Gibbs, a postdoctoral researcher in the School of Geosciences and a Thunghutti man through kinship of the Dunghutti nation. He received up to \$35,000 to strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research and influence in public policy. His project explores how institutions can build genuine,

place-based partnerships with Indigenous communities. Working with the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation, Mitch will use yarning circles to map the early steps of a respectful research relationship and document local coastal and shellfish knowledge, then, compare this with insights from the Gamay Rangers to show how place shapes collaboration and why generic engagement falls short.



Our rising researchers

Emerging voices, big ideas

Early and mid-career researchers are the engine room of policy innovation - listening to communities, asking new questions and testing ideas with other disciplines.

EMCRs face heavy pressure to lead, publish and secure funding, often on short contracts. But with purpose and strong networks, they drive real change. That's why the Lab backs them with grant-funding for policy impact and leadership opportunities.

In 2025, we supported nine EMCRs whose work rethought not only what policy tackles but how it is shaped.

What we offered in 2025:

- Small-scale grants (up to \$5,000) to run EMCR-led events and build networks.
- Access to the Lab's network of community, government and multidisciplinary partners.
- Platforms to shape policy-relevant research and influence decision-making.

Dr Claire Golledge

Lecturer in Education,
Co-Ordinator, Humanities Curriculum
Sydney School of Education and Social Work,
University of Sydney

Dr Golledge was awarded a grant to advance her research on Culturally Nourishing School Leadership – a project focused on shared leadership between schools and Aboriginal communities in Far Western NSW.



Smoking ceremony at a Welcome to Country held with the community on Wiradjuri land, Nov 2025.



Presenting to Aboriginal Cultural Mentors and school leaders as part of the Culturally Nourishing Schooling Leadership Hub in Parkes, Nov 2025

“Receiving this grant meant a great deal. It allowed me to travel on Country, meet communities and begin the trust-based work this research needs. These projects take time and real presence, and without this support I couldn't have started building the relationships that make them possible. It also enabled me to share my work at the national AARE conference and join conversations about equity and justice for Aboriginal students. I'm incredibly grateful.”

Dr Claire Golledge



Our 2025 Annual Lecture

Building Trust in Public Institutions

David Thodey AO
Chancellor of the University of Sydney
28 March 2025

At our major public event of the year, Chancellor David Thodey AO offered a powerful endorsement of the Sydney Policy Lab’s work reconnecting universities, governments and communities.

Speaking to a full room at the Sibyl Centre, he reflected on declining trust in public institutions globally, the need for clarity and purpose, and the everyday work required to rebuild confidence in the systems that shape our lives.



“Trust is getting scarcer in today’s world. And trust and truth go together. If we lose truth, we lose objectivity - and we lose our ability to solve problems together.”
Chancellor David Thodey AO



“Universities have an extraordinary opportunity to rebuild trust by working alongside communities, not at a distance. That’s why the work of the Sydney Policy Lab matters.”
Chancellor David Thodey AO



Our thanks

To everyone building better policy with us, thank you.

“Our **Lab Leadership Group** brings together an incredible breadth and depth of expertise from across the University of Sydney.

Our **Advisory Group** ensures that our work is deeply informed by a diverse range of insights as well as foresight about the nature of future public policy challenges. We are deeply grateful to these individuals for their committed service.”

Dr Kate Harrison Brennan
Director Sydney Policy Lab

Sydney Policy Lab Leadership Group

Dr **Kate Harrison Brennan**, Director, Sydney Policy Lab
Prof. **Seye Abimbola**, School of Public Health, University of Sydney

Louise Beehag, Chief Program Officer, Sydney Policy Lab
Assoc. Prof. **Gareth Bryant**, Economist in Residence. Chair of Discipline, Political Economy. School of Social and Political Sciences

Assoc. Prof. **Luara Ferracioli**, Head of Good Childhood Program and Philosopher in Residence. School of Arts and Humanities.

Assoc. Prof. **Sophie Gee**, Vice-Chancellor’s Fellow

Assoc. Prof. **Leigh-Anne Hepburn**, Deputy Director (Design). School of Architecture, Design and Planning

Prof. **Debra Jones**, Head of Communities and Universities Program. Head of Rural Clinical School (Broken Hill).

Prof. **Brendan McCormack**, Head of CARE Program and Participatory Methods Advisor. Head of School and Dean Susan Wakil School of Nursing and Midwifery

Prof. **Gaby Ramia**, Professor of Policy and Society, School of Social and Political Sciences

Sydney Policy Lab Advisory group:

Prof. **Elizabeth Cowley**, Chair, Sydney Policy Lab Advisory Group; Professor of Marketing, University of Sydney Business School

Prof. **Ali Abbas**, Associate Dean (Research), Faculty of Engineering, University of Sydney

Kirsten Andrews, Vice-President (External Engagement), University of Sydney

Bernadette Black AM, Founder & CEO, SEED Futures

Lee Cooper, Lecturer, Centre for Social Impact, University of NSW

Fred Dust, Founder, Dust & Co; former Global Managing Partner, IDEO

Dr **Frances Foster-Thorpe**, Executive Director, Shaping Futures, and Chief Data Officer, NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet

Prof. **Fleur Johns**, Dean and Head of School, Sydney Law School, University of Sydney

Sarah Leary, Assistant Commissioner, Productivity Commission

Prof. **Jakelin Troy**, Director, Indigenous Research, University of Sydney

Looking ahead to 2026, we’re excited to launch three new programs – **Communities and Universities**, **Good Childhood**, and **Inequalities and Poverty** – expanding the work of our **CARE Program** and strengthening the Lab’s impact. We also look forward to growing partnerships across Sydney, Australia and abroad.

Stay tuned

*We have big events and new work launching from February.
Join our mailing list to keep in the loop:*

policy.lab@sydney.edu.au

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We recognise and pay respect to the Elders and communities - past, present, and emerging - of the lands that the University of Sydney's campuses stand on. For thousands of years they have shared and exchanged knowledges across innumerable generations for the benefit of all.