Introduction

Increasingly, public managers are faced with complex problems that require thinking and working across boundaries. Such problems span agencies, portfolios and jurisdictions and require actors to work across these boundaries, however, working in this manner requires inter-agency collaboration and cooperation and is based on the premise that important goals of public policy cannot be delivered through the separate activities of existing organisations. Such approaches are pursued due to the notion that the coordination or integration of services will achieve a better result than each party acting separately. In addition, a common assumption is that working across boundaries will enable more efficient and effective policy development, implementation, and service delivery. However, in practice, constraints and barriers lead to less than optimal and, sometimes, paradoxical outcomes.

This paper reports upon the initial stages of a large-scale study of whole of government (WG) experiments in the Australian Public Service (APS). Drawing on empirical research across multiple organisations the paper addresses three areas. First, we identify conflicting terminology and provide definitions of whole of government derived from its use in practice. Second, we report on the critical enablers and major barriers to effective whole of government operationalisation. Thirdly, we consider ongoing tensions and some emerging paradoxes
which emerge from attempts to work across boundaries in a WG fashion. Some tentative advice for developing effective WG working is proffered.
The Australian context

Horizontal government approaches have developed in the last decade or so in public sector practice in order to promote inter-agency collaboration and cooperation in the pursuit of government policy goals (Bogdanor, 2005). These approaches reflected both traditional coordination and new forms of organising, structuring, and collaborating that have sought to connect distinct parts of the public sector. In Australia and internationally, such approaches represent a significant break with conventional notions of public sector organising, and a response to dealing with complex public policy problems and operating in complex environments. A range of instruments reflecting horizontal and WG principles have been adopted in order to address the increasing number of wicked problems and other issues that cannot be handled within a functional department. The issues include climate change, indigenous disadvantage and land degradation (APSC, 2007a).

Australia came late to horizontal government and WG. Earlier experiments had occurred at the federal level – and traditional coordination still existed – but they were not well articulated and strongly supported. The federal government’s ‘connecting government’ agenda was ambitious with high-level commitment to a multi-layered approach that included cultural change, and was encapsulated within a broader reform program of integrated governance. Australian coordination in the 2000s took three overlapping forms: traditional, experimentation with new modes of coordination, variations on joined up government (JUG) and horizontal government, and integrated governance. The boundaries are not always clear, and the official characterisations not necessarily helpful. Take for example the term ‘whole-of-government’, which is used by officials for a range of cross-service and inter-departmental activity, the emphasis partly depending as discussed below on where the observer is located.

These approaches have gained strong endorsement from governments in Australia. Within these concepts and applications there are a range of meanings that vary between managing horizontal relationships in the sense of operating more at the inter-agency level to broader formulations that envisage integration of government operations. Much of the recent reform agenda involved integrating governance (Halligan, 2007) with a focus on the rebalancing of administrative machinery. This is multi-faceted and the dimensions involving coordination and integration are not necessarily congruent. They range from centrally driven policy and
implementation processes to attempts to make horizontal interaction a routine part of agency management.

The Australian agenda was given high-level attention by the head of the public service at the time, Dr Peter Shergold, and was well-articulated and strongly supported. The new WG conception was potentially ambitious with high-level commitment to a multi-layered approach that had at its core a focus on cultural change, centred on collegiality (Shergold, 2004, 2005). Horizontal governance was depicted as being located alongside vertical relationships and hierarchy.

The shift was expressed in three ways. At the political level, the government committed to a series of WG priorities for new policy-making that included national security, defence and counter-terrorism and other generally defined priorities such as sustainable environment, rural and regional affairs and work and family life (Shergold, 2004a). Traditional political coordination through cabinet was streamlined, including changes to processes aimed at strengthening its strategic leadership role. The priorities were pursued through a range of coordinating or WG processes, including: cabinet and ministerial processes; the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and Commonwealth/State arrangements (e.g. sustainable water management); inter-departmental taskforces (e.g. work and family life); integrated service delivery (e.g. stronger regions); and lead agency approaches (e.g. indigenous initiative). Australia also emphasised building coordinating units within current structures, particularly within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (e.g. for national security where the WG approach to national coordination covered strategic and operational levels). Thirdly, attention was given to developing approaches for agencies in working across boundaries with policy development, program management and service delivery. The agenda was given impetus through a report on Connecting Government by the Management Advisory Committee (comprising departmental secretaries, the primary vehicle for examining and setting reform agenda: MAC, 2004), which indicated how to address issues about WG processes and structures, cultures, managing information, budgetary frameworks.

WG was defined as denoting ‘agencies working across portfolio boundaries to achieve a shared goal and an integrated government response to particular issues’ (MAC, 2004: 1). Despite this specific definition, the boundaries were not readily drawn and WG was also viewed in terms of coordinating departments (i.e. central agencies), integration (reducing the
number of departments) and cooperative federalism (MAC, 2004: 6-7). Approaches could operate formally and informally, range from policy development through program management to service delivery. There was an underlying rationalist conception suggesting that difficult policy problems and management questions could be laid out, solutions designed and challenges managed leading to improved problem solving, service delivery and performance.

**WG conceptualisations: academic and practitioner literature**

International observers have variously described WG or JUG (or the several variations on horizontal management) as ‘a fashionable term of art’, ‘a semantic lucky dip’ or simply as ‘an umbrella term’ (Ling 2002). Despite the official promotion of WG language and approach, or perhaps because of its handling of it, a plethora of usages have existed including: WGs, cross-portfolio, inter-departmental and coordination.

In moving towards conceptual clarification, the following meanings can be distinguished.

- WG as cross public service/sector or ‘whole-of-government obligations’
- Framing documents and activities (budget)
- Complex networks involving a range of agencies
- Cross-jurisdictions and sectors (whole of governments)
- Joined-up government as inter-agency collaborations.

The elusiveness of WG has meant a lack of consensus that may reflect location and the relationship involved. The application of WG varies with the stage in the policy cycle (development or delivery); levels of government involved), vertical relationships (centre versus line agency; sector (intra-public or involving private, NGO interaction; and the policy field (e.g. health, defence, environment). Various structures, systems and capabilities apply accordingly. The effectiveness of different approaches depends both on the complexity of the policy or program task and the way it can be configured. In practice, there was a wide spectrum of experiments ranging from the challenges of coordinating the administration of indigenous programs and services (Gray and Sanders, 2006) through to crisis management.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Modes of whole of government work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attribute</strong></td>
<td><strong>Which boundary &amp;</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What is evident from Table 1 is not only the lack of clarity of terms and the range of usage, but also the wide range of expected outcomes which make very different demands upon people and processes. There are two implications from this: firstly, that the probability of agreement as to the function and focus of a WG initiative may not be shared across those working within it and, secondly, it seems unlikely that the adoption of one term can lead to so much in one overarching form; consequently, the methods of adaption and implementation become critical in the development of potential outcomes.

As indicted above, official advice on processes and structures has been undertaken (MAC, 2004). However, despite such advice and the apparently high profile and priority of WG initiatives, problems have been widely reported in terms of the actual success of WG as indicated by improved outcomes (APSC, 2007b). There has been some evaluation of specific WG initiatives (ANAO, 2007a, 2007b), but to date, there is little academic research or systematic study into what is termed a WG initiative by government, the successes or limitations of WG initiatives or of the appropriateness of the implementation advice being given. It is in this research gap where this paper will make a contribution.
Methodology and methods

Although a great deal has been written about WG there is relatively little empirical data concerning the reasons for success or failure of initiatives. Consequently, in this project the researchers adopted an exploratory approach requiring a qualitative approach (Creswell, 1994; Leedy and Ormond, 2005). The research necessitated the acquisition of knowledge that could be elicited and understood only in terms of those undertaking WG initiatives. Understanding would emerge from analysing the interpersonal processes and relationships within the research population which would also act as a context for meaning regarding particular phenomena (Cottone, 2007). Thus, the methods were designed in order to reveal the interactions and relationships between agencies, participants and specific WG projects.

A case study approach was adopted as it enabled an in-depth investigation into a specific set of circumstances in a particular context (Yin, 2003a, 2003b). The investigation of phenomena within a case is supported by Yin (2003b) who argues that case studies are particularly appropriate where the observer has access to novel, previously unexplained phenomena (see also Stake 1994, 2000). The case study approach provided the researchers with the means of examining complex phenomena in situ; it is a powerful tool for both understanding social processes and dynamics, and for uncovering critical contextual factors (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 2000). In this research, a multiple case study methodology was adopted, using key federal APS departments that have experience with WG approaches. Each partner agency nominated an initiative that it considered to be a WG project for study. Fieldwork was been conducted in five agencies: the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO), Australian Public Service Commission (APSC), the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF), Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C).

Each partner organisation was visited over a period of time enabling documentation collection and analysis as well as the undertaking of a range of semi-structured interviews at all levels of the organisations. During the period February – November 2009 interviews took place in Canberra as well as at two regional and two urban sites of one of the partner organisations. Participants were selected through a purposive sample consisting of senior managers of the APS partner organisations, who were selected on the basis of their involvement with WG
approaches in their department. This ensured they were relevant to the research question (Bryman, 2004). Following this, further participants were selected through a snowball sampling technique where, after each interview, participants were asked to identify colleagues and subordinates who have been involved with the relevant case study. This ensured the involvement of employees at different levels of the organisational hierarchy.

Semi-structured interviews were adopted to ensure consistency across interviews and adherence to the areas of interest, yet allowing for sufficient flexibility for the informant to respond (Bryman, 2004). 66 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 82 participants with a mixture of individual and group interviews. The duration of the interviews was approximately one hour and the questions were designed to develop conversations around all aspects of WG. Initially participants were asked to give their definition of WG working and to give examples of where it had been seen to work and/or fail. This led to a discussion where enablers and barriers were identified and then participants were asked to prioritise the issues they had identified as crucial for supporting new WG initiatives. The case study identified by the agency was the main vehicle for the discussion but where participants had had other WG experiences they were encouraged to reflect upon these as well.

All interview and focus groups transcripts were transcribed and then analysed with the aid of NVIVO. Open and thematic coding was used to identify key areas, paying particular attention to themes that generated a high degree of interest from participants or commonality across cases. From this data we now report on the critical enablers of and major barriers to, effective WG working.

**WG conceptualisations: public servants’ usage and WG attributes**

Public servants’ conceptions of WG have been organised in terms of overall objective (e.g. government, citizen), process (boundary-spanning, collaboration, seamless delivery), operational level (central/local) or strategic focus (central agency).

As boundary spanning:
Some discussed WG as a form of boundary spanning, working across departmental boundaries and portfolios: “a consistent way of working across portfolios to identify policy reform agendas and to then get consensus about what they entail and some sort of process around bringing them forward and dealing with them in a systematic way” (Central agency
senior manager). For others, conceptualising WG as a government-wide approach, led to the emphasis on the boundary spanning nature of approaches: “something where the agency boundaries are ignored. It’s a government response” (FaHCSIA senior manager). Essentially this incorporates adopting a bigger picture perspective and working across boundaries for those issues that require more holistic approaches. Another senior manager described WG as: “basically looking at bigger picture items where those issues cut across a few different portfolios” (DAFF).

**As collaboration**

When defining WG, some participants discussed the process of interaction and collaboration, emphasising the need to contribute a particular area of expertise to the bigger picture: “[it is] about how the different agencies work together and contribute their specific expertise to a sort of broader more strategic approach” (DoHA section head).

**Central agency perspectives**

Another important difference was the views of central agency participants, who were more inclined to adopt a systemic perspective, considering the interconnected nature of issues and how they span over multiple departments and agencies: “I like to think of it as a systems thinking approach...when you’re looking at a policy issue within government it’s saying well it’s not just about how it works in here, it’s about how does it fit across the whole system” (Central agency middle manager).

Others emphasised capabilities and authority, and the importance of having the right people involved to progress issues further. In regards to a specific policy reform agenda: “it’s more about are the right people in the tent working on it both from a policy perspective and from an implementation and delivery point of view and once government makes its decisions what is the process of making absolutely sure that things get done in quite a rigorous and systematic way” (Central agency senior manager).

Some discussion emerged with a number of participants regarding the scale of involvement and the desirability to have a numerical requirement attached to WG. Some believed it was important to have every agency across government involved (highlighting the need for WG); others discussed the importance of only those agencies relevant to an issue, whereas others were blasé regarding the number of agencies involved, provided they were working together.
As one middle manager stated: “it doesn’t necessarily mean the involvement of every agency, it means agencies … working in the best interests of the overall APS… it could be two or three or 10 whatever” (Central agency).

As outcomes focused on citizens
Finally, whilst many participants seemed to focus on the process of WG (i.e. number of agencies involved, working together), others extended this idea further and discussed the importance of adopting an outcomes focus: “the whole joined up government or networked government … is what we’re trying to do in the public sector which is to deliver better outcomes for citizens … whole of government is how do we work together whether it be across the APS – but in my view it’s more broad even than that – it’s how do we work to deliver the best outcomes to citizens regardless of what our specific role is on paper” (Central agency senior manager).

As seamless service delivery (level of individual or community)
Similar to the point above regarding an emphasis on adopting a citizen-centric approach, many of the service delivery case study participants emphasised the stakeholder or community perspective of government, stating it is important for government to be accessible and straightforward: “I look at it…from a community’s perspective. They should just see like one face of government really, it should be seamless and just go” (FaHCSIA). A middle manager described it as: “a person should walk to that front counter and be able to have…a one stop shop” (FaHCSIA).

Providing one point of access for communities was also highlighted as an important aspect of community engagement: “…the most value that whole of government offers is at that community engagement level. They’re sick of multiple agencies coming to the table” (FaHCSIA middle manager).

Place-based solutions (local/community)
Finally, tapping into local knowledge and experience at the community level to develop local solutions was mentioned as an important aspect of WG, with one middle manager defining WG as: “…looking at local solutions to local problems” (FaHCSIA).
While the common elements of the conceptions are apparent – inter-agency connections, crossing boundaries and government as a whole - the range and diversity has implications for effectiveness in practice. Discussions with participants also focused on the limitations of the term ‘whole of government’, with some addressing the issues with communicating the concept: “The Commonwealth doesn’t do well in articulating what it means by whole of government generally” (FaHCSIA), others identified the ambiguity associated with, and lack of common definitions of, WG: “It’s a pretty loose thing ... because I don’t think there is necessarily an accepted definition” (Central agency senior manager). Some participants even discard the term due to that it is used loosely and freely: “Do you call it whole of government? But I think we use and abuse the term. For different reasons it creates a perception of a reality in itself which is not kind of useful in terms of actually getting on and doing things. So probably for me it is not a thing which I kind of focus on” (Central agency senior manager). Finally, others discussed the ambitious and ambiguous nature of the term: “So whole of government, the Holy Grail. I think we need another name like say journey to the moon. It can mean anything” (FaHCSIA middle manager).

The lack of precision in terminology has implications for the consideration of constraints and obstacles. The differences are perhaps most likely to arise when WG activity involves individuals and agencies in different locations and with divergent positions. If there is conceptual confusion, it is likely that this lends itself to confusion and issues with the implementation of WG. This can either lead to some of the barriers mentioned below or be further perpetuated through the combination of conceptual confusion and barriers. However, as will become apparent, some of the enablers of WG (mentioned below) can circumvent this through providing clarity and clear direction.

**Enablers and Barriers**

There were a range of emergent themes from the data which can be defined as enablers or barriers to WG working (table 2). Which of these has the most impact upon a given situation will, of course, be contextually and culturally specific as well as depending upon the planned outcomes of the initiative. However, some of the areas were common across the majority of cases and interviews. In this discussion we focus upon key enablers and barriers which were the most commonly raised. This is not to say these are the only issues but they appeared to underpin other areas discussed. It should be stressed that the data was being collected within specific WG initiatives and related implementation issues.
Table 2: Enablers and Barriers to Whole of Government Working

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enablers</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear mandate and central leadership</td>
<td>Programmatic focus, operational structure and ‘core business’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattern-breaking behaviour</td>
<td>Staff turnover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared understanding of objectives and outcomes</td>
<td>Decision making and capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Misalignment of evaluation and accountability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clear mandate and central leadership

One of the first themes to emerge was the need for a clear, identifiable mandate. By this the participants meant that there was clarity at ministerial level which was translated into policy spelling out the objectives of a particular WG initiative and how it was expected to work: “I think you’d really want to make sure that you’ve got a very, very clear mandate from the ministers on what they wanted out of this joint team situation. And, also an acknowledgement that this is an integrated whole of government approach and it’s not just going to be a combination of DAFF and DEWHA” (DAFF).

Two of the cases had emerged from Council of Australian Governments initiatives (the role of COAG is to initiate, develop and monitor the implementation of policy reforms that are of national significance and which require cooperative action by Australian governments); it was made clear that once the focus upon the issue waned, it became much harder to get the commitment of other agencies and involved parties at a senior level: “Nothing like having the Prime Minister’s mandate, or the Premiers’ mandate, for other agencies to listen” (FaHCSIA). It was seen as one of the most powerful enablers without which many projects would fall and for many it was fundamental: “…those really two key characteristics, the degree of mandate and the scope of the work” (Central agency). The link to the scope of the work was also important because it was clear that a WG initiative was considered to be
something where a set of outcomes could not be achieved without some form of actively managed and supported collaboration, in terms of the work to be done and the perceived importance it had relative to other agency tasks.

A related element was leadership; more specifically, who was supporting the initiative at the senior level and the locality of that leadership. A policy was seen to be important, but who the leader(s) were behind that policy in consideration to power and political strength was also crucial. Without such champions initiatives would soon fail: “In the ICC nobody has authority; it tends to work best when there’s somebody, and to be honest that somebody is usually a central agency, which comes over the top and has their thumbs on the forehead of the individual agency and the people involved, because with the best will in world it’s just swimming upstream otherwise” (FaHCSIA).

It was recognised that such legitimate power (French and Raven, 1959) supporting a project is always important, but the added importance of high level support for a cross agency initiative was highlighted across all the cases: “...in the whole of government space it needs to be someone at a whole of government pinnacle. It’s pointless doing a whole of government project having a line agency minister trying to run it” (Central agency); “There are often, in my experience, issues where you have lead agencies that aren’t central agencies, so you have a line agency as a lead agency in a whole of government process. Central agencies are traditionally more powerful and used to, and keen on, protecting and exercising I think that power and influence” (DAFF).

The argument that not all agencies (or ministers) were equal led to the assertion that senior support provided more opportunity to gain entry to another agency: “because if we ring up Health and we say ‘hi we’re from OIPC, we need help with this or that’ then... we’re on the same sort of power level as them. Rather than if you’re in PM&C or Treasury and you ring up and say, ‘hey we’re from PM&C or Treasury’, then it’s a whole different relationship” (FaHCSIA). It was also considered that for there to be regular collaboration there would need to be a real change in the way that most agencies worked and this would only be possible with high level drive as well as support: “there’s got to be a commitment or a way from... it can’t be changed from below, can it? It’s got to be changed from high, you would think, one way or another but it doesn’t happen greatly” (FaHCSIA).
Pattern-breaking behaviour

It was observed by several participants that effective WG working is a skill such that, for successful outcomes, there needs to be a greater ability to recognise, support and seize opportunities where WG can thrive and enable what was described as ‘pattern-breaking behaviour’. This is linked to leadership as a part of this is capitalizing upon opportunities which emerge through champions: “If you have corporate events and opportunities where people are coming from - your visibility is enhanced, the visibility of the secretary is important...” (FaHCSIA).

There needed to be spaces where novelty could occur and where the accepted practices could be changed. An example given by several participants was where a crisis or unexpected finding had led to a change in not only policy, but also the implementation of service delivery in some crucial way. An example given in several contexts was where changes in funding enabled a move away from a tightly structured programmatic approach. The Northern Territory intervention was cited, for example, as a time when the way that money was allocated change dramatically. Instead of the usual programme funding there was a shared fund which was allocated against an outcome leading to a very different set of priorities and behaviours: “...the funding agreements that government just makes it really, really difficult to do whole of government work because you’re funded by program, by department and joining that up is really hard. In the Northern Territory it was the emergency response that was changed. I mean it wasn’t perfect, but we actually had flexible funding and that make a huge difference huge, huge difference” (FaHCSIA senior manager).

The difference in funding was given as an example of ‘pattern-breaking behaviour’. This was cited as being crucial if there was to be real change. The argument was that, for there to be a real collaborative development, the traditional patterns of behaviour needed to be amended, ignored or actively put aside in order to enable real change: “…people are a little bit risk averse when they’re looking for a local solution that creates one. To be quite frank I’m out there a bit further than a lot of people. I much prefer to find solutions that work” (FaHCSIA).

Several participants talked about being given the space to do something different and how that needed to be supported: “people will step up if you give them the room to do it and support them in doing it” (FaHCSIA). In the ICC’s the role of many of the employees within the ICC
was a ‘solution broker’ which was seen as a facilitating role. Some argued that the role needed to be a ‘dealmaker’ as that was a more positive, innovative and challenging idea that would then be outcomes focused; it would also change the evaluation pattern considerably:

“...it seems to me the whole of government approach is about being entrepreneurial inside the Public Service, like whether you can do a deal...it’s focused on the outcome and that’s the way business operates. And we can deliver social outcomes in a business-like way” (FaHCSIA).

**Shared understanding of objectives and outcomes**

The need for clearly articulated, shared outcomes was identified by many participants as a crucial issue in WG working: “Where we have had any traction and have actually had any kind of credence, to the ICC managers’ authority around whole of government, has been where there’s been a particular issue or a particular place that there has been some legitimate want for whole of government and that is what our experience has been, I could talk whole of government and attempt to coordinate the other agencies until the cows come home, just for the purpose of having whole of government and we’ll never get any outcome” (FaHCSIA).

In another agency it was agreed that outcomes were vital to overcome inherent differences in the systems: “Well I think what makes it work is clarity from government, from the elected government, so having a clear objective or set of objectives that government wants to achieve, a clear policy objective which allows you to work across the differences, if you like, to identify how they should be done. It requires or it relies on the very high levels of government accepting the collaborations” (DAFF).

When the focus is not upon outcomes there is likely to be a recognisable focus on either process or inputs which led to a reversion to previous practice “there is a tendency to not focus on the issue; focus is on the document, which takes a lot of time” (DoHA) and “there isn’t really a focus on outcomes – there is more of a focus on process/inputs, which results in the document not getting out – when the intention of the document is to inform people. This doesn’t happen because they’re so focused on getting it right” (DoHA).
This point is seen to link to issues of evaluation and the programmatic focus in that many participants were of the opinion that short term funding, regular measurement and a pressure to work to the agency goals led to a loss of focus upon the planned WG outcomes.

**Barriers**

**Programmatic focus, operational structure and ‘core business’**

In all of the cases issues of structure were raised as causing difficulties for collaborative working. This was the case both for central and line agencies, as well as in cases where there had been developments specifically structured to try to overcome collaboration difficulties.

Several reasons were posited by participants as to why the current ways of working would need to change if there was to be real progress in the effectiveness of such initiatives.

Firstly, it was suggested that the way that programs were developed and delivered led to a nature of competition: “They talk lots about that sort of, agency collaboration, but the very nature of competitive tendering I think divides agencies and agencies aren’t good at coming together because of the whole nature of competitive tendering” (FaHCSIA). Secondly, it was argued that, because all individual and agency outcomes would be measured against agency strategies and plans, a lack of communal development was inevitable “if you take the perspective of an agency in the process they will have a view about how the outcome is panned out from their perspective. And that’s normal because so many people are involved. The dilemma is that you’ve also got a whole range of other requirements that are a burden to people and people tend to fall back on them if they’re a little bit lost in the relationship stuff, which are the line manager relationships around delivering programs efficiently, effectively..” (FaHCSIA).

What is interesting about these issues are that even where there is a clear mandate, inappropriate structures and systems will prevent effective working. In one case where a structural solution to collaboration had been chosen there were serious problems as the team was trying to work together but the differences in their agencies, employment practices and historical focus, as well as the interests of their minister was leading to some tensions within the relationship that were causing serious problems for the project: “at the moment every department has different wages and pay scales and whatever and it’s very hard, I think, to get a whole of government - get the team, yes rah, rah team - when people that you’re sitting next to are earning three or four thousand more than you might be going home a couple of hours
earlier every night” (DAFF), and “getting back to basics and another issue is, for example, DEWHA people sitting - who work in DEWHA outside of this - Directors get an office. In the AGLC team no Directors get an office because DAFF doesn’t give offices to its Directors” (DAFF).

A third major issue was the way that funding is allocated as each agency had to release funds and would not be happy to do so unless the new initiative fitted with their current suite of programmes: “first of all, it takes the collective of people from government agencies to have agreement that there is an issue or a problem and then there’s a requirement for them to put on the table the options and solutions that they can provide from their agencies and then also to collectively have a think tank around available resources and one of the key elements, I guess, that we struggle with is finding allocated funds because allocated funds aren’t available for a particular issue at a fixed point in time unless it’s been put into a budget about two or three years prior. So finding funds immediately, it is very, very difficult unless... some planning has been completed around that and that’s not often - unless it’s escalated to ministerial level that the funds become available” (FaHCSIA).

All of these are related to the wearing of multiple hats and trying to match the needs for, sometimes, competing projects: “it is a challenge between saying I’m here as part of a whole of government representing DAFF trying to get some integrated projects, so we need to take into consideration whatever other agencies, in this case DEWHA’s interests as well. And trying to develop projects which, as I say, can help to meet both portfolios’ outcomes” (DAFF). These tensions were felt not only at outcome level, but also at the personal level. Examples were given, especially from those at the regional level, between the need to fulfil outcomes and the need to keep more senior colleagues on side: “I think it’s about that boundary between what your role is here and having that connection with the region there. So similar to what my situation is, but yes it’s about being much more diplomatic and thinking a lot more about relationships. Being a lot more relationship-focused” (DAFF). It was leading in some places to a perceived need for dual reporting whereby only activities related to the department were reported, unless there were successes and the all of the whole of government activity was declared.

The need for strong relationships was identified in terms of physical location as well: “There’s no opportunity for that and so they’re often not seen and so they - they’re either
forgotten out of meetings or decision making sometimes or they have lost their opportunity to influence because they’re not physically here enough ... I’m surprised at what an impact it has” (DAFF). It should be stressed, however, that whilst a lack of co-location is a barrier, putting people together is not enough to overcome other barriers, as can be seen in the next section.

Several participants raised the issue of tensions between ‘core business’ and the demands of collaborative working, even when the initiative had high priority. For example: “Turf always inhibits whole of government working ‘this is our area’ more so ‘this is your area to do things with’. I think the pressure on Health has been enormous because there has been a constant need from all of the agencies at once to help the other agencies, at the same time as Health has been trying to prepare a health response, so I think there has not been a lot of recognition of just how much of a drain on Health it has been. And the people there were really trying to do both their jobs and help people with other jobs at the same time, so I think the recognition that whatever is not necessarily the lead agency or the lead subject agency in any emergency or any area that you are dealing with whole of government is going to have a much greater load upon it to inform and assist all of the other agencies” (DoHA).

In one of the case studies a structural approach to WG working had led to a cross agency section being set up with members of different agencies working side by side. However, tensions were clearly apparent: “some people do feel like they’re losing their identity of their department but also losing the opportunity of being seen by the core of the department and what they can do and that sort of stuff. As far as thinking about their career and where they go next, if they spend too much time here, will they be losing opportunities in the rest of the department” (DAFF). It was argued that the HR systems did not support WG working, the focus was still upon performance within an agency.

Another issue raised was the expectations of those receiving funding: “So even within whole of government another challenge...has been, how you structure the program and how you manage changes, how you manage stakeholders’ expectations as that’s changed. Because most stakeholders just expect to put their bid in every year and continue to get funding for what they’ve got in the past” (DAFF). It was explained that sometimes the historical patterns of providers will also need changing if there is to be any real development of novelty.
Staff turnover
It was argued that there is a need for strong relationships for there to be effective collaboration and that this would emerge over time. In order for such longer term plans to be delivered participants opined that there was a need for the same people to be involved: “changeover of staff can inhibit progress, as often they will get 80% of work done, then when new staff join the group, there are new personalities, priorities and focus, so go back to 10-20% completion and re-commence work again” (FaHCSIA).

The problems of changing collaborators over time was frequently raised: “That’s mirrored in the planning we’re doing, both in government agencies and in businesses over three years, exactly the same thing happens. The contact you had in a state or territory is now a different person and you’re getting this hideous situation where you bring a new person to the - and it’s happened in all the different sector groups, the whole community of interest that’s working on this work - someone new comes to the table and they unravel three years of work. They don’t unravel it, but they haven’t come to the discussion with the understanding and knowledge of what’s been done before. So you actually have to go all the way back and start all over again to bring them up to where everyone else is at. So it’s the one step forward and two back, but that’s the nature of the beast” (DoHA).

Interestingly, one of the senior managers argued that one of the reasons why his apparently successful regional centre was developing WG more effectively than others was because: “I tend to sit in place for a while because I believe you don’t make a difference unless you do” (FaHCSIA). This manager had stayed in jobs much longer than average despite being urged to move on.

Decision making and capabilities
A major barrier, identified within all of the cases, was the location and level of those involved in the initiative; it was stressed that there was a need to access the appropriate level of decision making if anything was to actually happen: “But what I need is if you actually have a gap you’ve identified in the service matrix or in a developmental matrix I need a portal straight to someone who can help and connect and manage and input (FaHCSIA).

It was argued, for example that one possible structural solution, co-location did not work as the people in the shared space were not appropriate for the task in hand: “The ICCs are a
failed example of WG because of the way they are resourced: their staff are not at the right level (staffing levels are too low) and they do not have the skill-set required to achieve WG outcomes” (FaHCSIA) and “So what happened initially with ICCs you had lots of different levels of people at the places. So some had delegation, some didn’t. Decisions were made elsewhere; it’s just a matter of scales” (FaHCSIA). Because limited decisions could be taken within the ICC, over time it was perceived as an expensive, ineffective shopfront and agencies began to pull their staff back increasing the inability of decision-making within the ICC. This problem was exacerbated by the ICC manager having very limited formal authority, and the need for the achievement of outcomes through influence, and so any successes were linked to the personality and perseverance of the individual on the ground.

The need for the right people to be present in order to achieve appropriate outcomes was raised in other cases as well: “I think the power balance, I think if the voice of service delivery is not at the table then the risks of implementing it are great and I think vis-a-vis in policy intent is not with, high level policy is not with service delivery, the risks are there. So the key players need to have equal voice and be at the table” (Central agency).

Capability to actually undertake WG working was also raised: “People aren’t engaged particularly in thinking that way I think and you have people here who aren’t recruited to think like that” (DAFF). This has also been linked to training and development of staff, with a lack of understanding regarding what WG actually is and how to operate in this way evident: “…the ICCs…show pretty clearly that we haven’t trained our staff very well and they didn’t actually understand what whole of government meant. I don’t think that there was sufficient investment in the new model; just with the benefit of hindsight, looking back because it does require a different way of working” (FaHCSIA). Difficulties undertaking WG working due to insufficient capabilities has also been linked to staff turnover, with some case studies experiencing turnover which has resulted in capability gaps. These have emerged as a result of the promotion of middle managers to the Section Head level, of which requires higher level management and strategic capabilities: “The turnover’s huge... what happened is when they were promoted from EL1s to EL2s and some came from outside... then you have EL - there’s a lot of EL1s but a lot of them are State based Facilitators. So... there’s a capability problem” (DAFF). There has been evidence elsewhere (Blackman and Kennedy, 2008) that staff shortages in the period 2000-2008 led to rapid over promotion of talented individuals, many gaps in the staffing levels and high turnover of staff as they were poached from agency
to agency. These issues were confirmed by the current research and were cited as contributing to serious capability gaps throughout the case studies.

The timeframes given for decisions was also raised as an issue because WG working can take longer as multiple stakeholders will need to buy in to the process. However, this time was often not available: “we get really unrealistic timeframes as well, therefore, collaboration with other departments becomes next to useless. When you say that you’ve got an urgent task that’s due the next day, the next morning you can hardly do what really should be taking many, many weeks of collaboration saying how do we develop this policy, how to we come together et cetera.” (FaHCSIA). This short timeframe focus has been identified as being a barrier to WG working, as constantly being in reactive and responsive mode perpetuates the short-term thinking and stifles the potential for adopting a WG perspective: “…they tend to respond to day to day pressures and what ministers want, which is responding to the political pressures, and often whole of government stuff is long term complex policy so inevitably it’s going to fail…” (Central agency).

Misalignment of evaluation and accountability

It was clear that all projects need to be seen to be effective and that evaluation is a key part of this: “the purpose of this being to ensure that our investments do meet our intended targets and that we’re able to report on that effectively to government and meet our commitment to government in that regard, which is one of the things that we’re very criticised for under previous programs” (DAFF).

However, it was argued that there is tendency to over-evaluate projects before they can be seen to have been able to deliver outcomes. Moreover, where there is evaluation it is potentially likely that it will be encouraging the wrong behaviours or outcomes unless the matters being measured are appropriate (Blackman, 2006): “The dilemma for me is I don’t think we understand what evaluation means really that we measure things that we do, but we don’t measure impacts that we do and we don’t really know how to measure impacts to be quite frank” (FaHCSIA).

This misalignment indicates one of the interesting issues emerging in this research: that there has been long term commitment to the concept of WG by the Australian government and yet, when there are attempts made to measure it, it becomes clear that there has been little real
change over time. This concern emerges from a desire to measure again in the hope of finding changed outcomes, and yet each time many similar issues are raised – usually that the structures, systems and processes in place do not support WG emergence.

Whole-of-Government paradoxes and implications

From the participants two important paradoxes were apparent. Firstly, despite so much being written about WG there is still no shared understanding about the term or its implementation. The case studies proposed for study as WG working by different agencies were not always seen as such by those working within the initiative: “What I do here isn’t whole of government; so it’s across two departments and occasionally engages central agencies... We have some engagement with state departments but I don’t regard [this project] as a whole of government programme I regard it as a bilateral programme across two departments that’s all” (DAFF). Thus, there is still tension emerging as to what WG actually is and whether this really matters.

The second paradox manifests itself such that, although the Australian Government has been emphasising the need for departments and agencies to work in a WG way for a number of years, indicating a desire for such approaches, it does not appear that there has been the appropriate institutional support to work in this way. The lack of human resource structures, systems and processes that encourage and facilitate working across portfolio, or even departmental, boundaries were all raised as indicators of a mismatch between the espoused desire to have WG working and the theory-in-use (Argyris and Schon, 1996) whereby business as usual prevails. One aspect of concern was the lack of unified terms and conditions, with pay disparity frequently cited as a deterrent. When asked what would need to be in place to increase the ability to work together, one participant said: “If I was doing something like this I would set up a situation where everybody...were all working on the same terms and conditions. You have to have an agreed sort of HR policy, recruitment policy...but you need to get agreed policies, agreed HR structures in place and I think that would be a huge benefit” (DAFF). Whilst developing common structures would not be an enabler of WG it is seen as not only a deterrent in some real practical structural team issues, it is also seen as a symbol of preservation of difference.

From the identified themes it is clear that, despite a push towards WG working that has lasted several years, there remain serious issues around the potential and possibilities of effective
collaboration. When reviewing all the enablers and barriers discussed above they can be seen to ways of trying to encourage WG on the one hand, in terms of building the rhetoric and strategic vision, whilst preventing it at the same time by making such ways of working too hard to achieve. Where successes were apparent it was usually where those involved had worked around potential the obstacles in their way. The question then, is what lessons need to be learnt from the data in order to identify what key issues need to be addressed in order to develop and sustain effective collaboration into the next phase.

An important reflection upon the data is that whilst, in some cases, a barrier may be overcome so as to move towards enabling, for the most part they are actually not the same things. Developing structures to support working will remove barriers but will not be enough on its on to promote WG. Consequently, enablers on their own are not enough; there needs to be a lack of barriers as well. In terms of a model of the way that they impact upon effective WG, they need to be seen as different triggers leading to different outcomes which are independent of each other. This may seem obvious but whilst they are seen as opposites of each other, strategies for supporting WG are likely to prove ineffective. In Figure 1 two conceptualisations of barriers and enablers are depicted. In the first one, barriers and enablers are seen as being on the same continuum and so concentrating on one will enable movement in terms of WG development. Our research argues that this conceptualisation is a contributor to the current lack of progress.
The second conceptualisation locates barriers and enablers on different continuums, which leads to them being considered separately. A precedent for this approach has been seen with Herzberg’s factors of motivation and demotivation whereby only when they are conceived of as separate triggers can behavioural outcomes be better understood (Hertzberg in George and Jones, 2005). This change alone will not be enough but acts as an underpinning for better understanding the tensions to be found in supporting WG.

In order to manage both of these paradoxes changes in WG implementation will need to emerge. Firstly, a definition of WG and the need for its usage will need to be established for a given set of outcomes and context. This shared understanding will enable greater clarity for those involved and early discussions will enable a greater possibility of shared outcome clarity. Secondly, possible tensions between espoused ideals and on-the-ground problems will need to be clarified in terms of are they enablers which will actively progress the project or real barriers preventing movement. Both and recognising their differing impacts should enable greater progress to be made.

**Conclusion**

This research set out to explore the current state of WG working within the Australian Public Service in order to clarify why there has been limited progress despite the emphasis placed upon it. What has been established is that, despite considerable literature on the topic, there is a lack of clarity as to what is WG and that there are a range of reasons why progress has been limited.

Enablers have been identified in the form of a clear mandate and leadership, pattern-breaking behaviour and shared understanding of outcomes whilst barriers are seen to be staff turnover, programme focus, structure and ‘core business’, issues of decision, making and misalignments between evaluation and accountability. These were the strongest of the themes identified and they lead to the important conclusion that there needs to be a greater clarity as to the difference between enablers and barriers and how they are managed. Implications for WG in practice is that, in order to develop an environment that is conducive to, and supportive of, WG working, departments and agencies will need to focus on both enhancing
the enablers and minimising the barriers to WG. We call for more research to refine these ideas and develop more complex practice implications.

References
Blackman, D. and Kennedy, M. 2008. ‘Talent Management: developing or preventing knowledge and capability?’ IRPSM, Brisbane, Australia.


— (2004b) Plan and Deliver: Avoiding Bureaucratic Hold-up, Australian Graduate School of Management/Harvard Club of Australia, Canberra, 17 November.


