

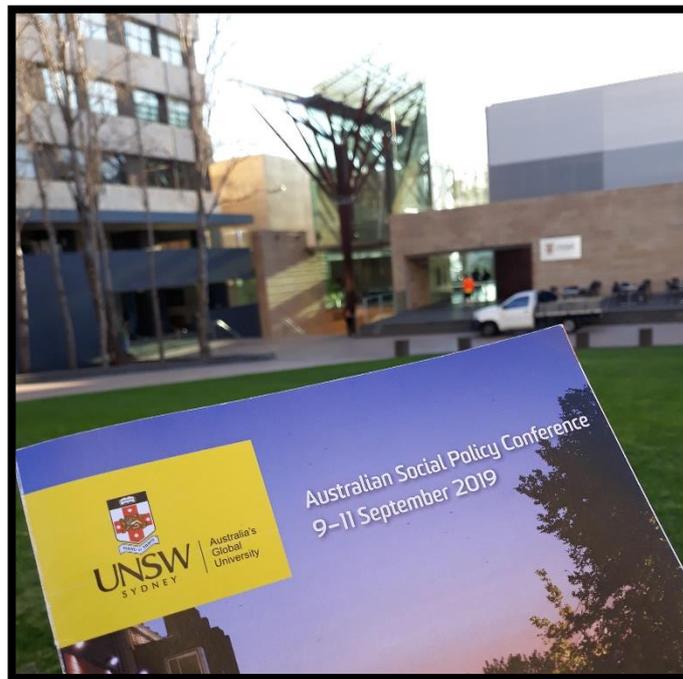


CONFERENCE REPORT:

The 2019 Australian Social Policy Conference

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THE 2019 AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL POLICY CONFERENCE

By Laura Butler, Social Research and Information Officer, WESTIR Ltd

WESTIR Ltd attended the biennial Australian Social Policy Conference (ASPC) from Monday 9 September to Wednesday 11 September 2019. Hosted by the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Sydney, the ASPC is Australia's pre-eminent conference for social policy. Participants were welcomed from academia, government, and the community sector. The program explored diverse themes, such as poverty and social inequality, Indigenous peoples, communities and families, disability, and ageing.

WESTIR Ltd attended over 35 presentations during the three-day program. Most valuably, for WESTIR's focus on Greater Western Sydney communities, the ASPC balanced discussions of concepts and research practices to champion the voices of research participants, therefore providing insight into innovative, ethics-lead research methods. The following Report summarises these highlights from WESTIR's perspective. More information and presentations summaries are available through the [ASPC website](#).

Acknowledgement

WESTIR Ltd Social Research and Information Officer, Laura Butler, attended the ASPC 2019 with the assistance of the Social Policy Research Centre's Bursary for undergraduate and honours year students. Laura is currently undertaking her honours thesis with the UNSW School of Social Sciences. WESTIR sincerely thanks the SPRC for actively supporting students to attend this event.

Day 1 – Monday 9 September 2019

Opening plenary: What – if anything – can we learn from the Finnish basic income experiment?

To open the conference, Professor Olli Kangas from the University of Turku presented the preliminary findings of an experimental study regarding the **impacts of Finland's basic income experiment**. For two years, a group of 2,000 unemployed Finland residents received a basic monthly income of €560. Professor Kangas noted that preliminary results revealed no significant difference in employment rates between basic income recipients and the control group. However, he notes that basic income provision was indeed connected to better wellbeing outcomes. This raises interesting implications for the potential future of this policy in Australia. Further information is available [here](#).

Indigenous research

The energy imparted through Professor Kangas' thought-provoking plenary was only bolstered in the ASPC's first session, where presenters explored the topic of **Indigenous Research**. In the same week where WESTIR Ltd's Social Research and Information Officer, Amy Lawton, was hard at work preparing to [co-present at the AES Conference](#) with Cheryl Jackson from Marrin Weejali Aboriginal Corporation, this session demonstrated the similarly culturally mindful efforts currently occurring across Australia's research community, as discussed below.

It was a pleasure to hear from UNSW's Dr Ruth McCausland and Peta McGillivray on the **community-led partnership – [Yuwaya Ngarra-li](#)** – currently underway between the Dharriwaa Elders group (Walgett, NSW) and UNSW. With the project responding to the criminalisation of Aboriginal peoples, the speakers emphasised the need to develop research protocols where priorities are set by community groups. Questions of data sovereignty, intellectual property, and the importance of co-presenting and co-publishing work posed useful reminders to conduct ethical and culturally mindful research.

Later, Wendy Jopson and Ilan Katz introduced an evocative allegory to underscore the importance of **ethical practice in Aboriginal community-controlled research**. Ms Jopson recounted the story of [Arabanoo](#), an Aboriginal man captured by colonists near Manly in 1788, who first perceived the imprisoning ropes as an ornamental gift – a *bengadee*. With this story, the presenters highlighted the need to carefully avoid deceptive practice or unclear meanings, like the case of the *bengadee*. For example, researchers must be diligent to only use labels like "community-controlled" when such an approach is actively embedded in practice. Equally, research projects must occur *with* – not *to*, or *on* – Aboriginal communities, with an "ethics-led research approach" the only path forward.

Young parents, sole parents, and social policy

To close Day 1, UNSW's Gonski Room was at capacity with attendees eager to hear the presentations regarding young parents, sole parents, and social policy.

Presenters Elizabeth Conroy (Western Sydney University), Brianna Perrens (Mission Australia) and Julie Jasprizza-Laus (Mission Australia) opened the session, discussing **becoming a parent and keeping a home: meaning making and resilience among young parents experiencing housing instability and homelessness**. In their research, the presenters found no difference between the resilience measures of younger and older parents, suggesting the two groups have similar strengths and resources. However, independent housing for young mothers was shown to be critical for developing parenting skills and family identity. Methodologically, this project also highlighted the benefits of narrative interviews, noted as beneficial when conducting research with groups who may be otherwise intimidated by the research process.

Next, Megan Blaxland of the SPRC, presented captivating research regarding **journeys into parenthood among disadvantaged young mothers**. According to her study, when some young women become young mothers, they move from being framed as young individuals 'at risk', to presenting 'a risk' to their child. With the rules and priorities of the formal support system changing around young mothers, challenges abound. For example, in cases where both the parent and child are under 18 years old, complexities are rife within the child protection system. Further details on this presentation are available [here](#).

Katherine Curchin of ANU, also presented her analysis of **'ParentsNext' as a case study of how mutual obligation poses a roadblock to trauma-informed care**. ParentsNext, a national pre-employment program, is designed for parents of children under 6 years old who are at risk of receiving welfare long-term. However, with the mutual obligation requirements of the program, it is revealed as more damaging than beneficial. As the presentation argued, participation may be restricted by existing traumas, with the program's coercive nature and unequal power dynamics potentially recalling experiences of trauma. Furthermore, enforcing compliance is found to diminish feelings of security and safety. Thus, despite any help provided through the program, its mutual obligation requirements and lack of trauma-informed approach were reflected as unhelpful to the individuals that the program is designed to assist.

Day 2 – Wednesday 10 September 2019

Compulsory income management

In a month where the cashless welfare card frequented [media discussion](#), Day 2's special session on compulsory income management was ideally timed.

To open the session, Louise Humpage (the University of Auckland) and Greg Marston (the University of Queensland) compared **compulsory income management policies in Australia and New Zealand**, investigating their degree of convergence and translation. Comparing various factors such as the context of the policy's emergence, and the rhetoric used to legitimise the approach, the presenters noted that the two policies are not the same, despite their similar appearances. In doing so, the speakers highlighted the need to look beyond the superficial when policies are compared or assumed to be alike.

Similarly investigating differences between Australia and New Zealand, the University of Queensland's Michelle Peterie compared the **representations of childhood in Australian and New Zealand political discourse**. Peterie noted a distinct difference between the two contexts. In Australia, she observed that political discourse frequently frames children as future adults – “human becomings” – that will join the labour force, indicating the neoliberal values underpinning compulsory income management. Within this framing, welfare recipients are vilified, and represented as potentially endangering the capacity of children to become future workers. This was found to contrast New Zealand, where welfare recipients are more often framed as vulnerable children themselves, with the New Zealand government assuming a quasi-guardianship role of mentorship and support.

At the sessions close, it was a pleasure to hear from Beverly Walley, a Ballardong Noongar woman, who reflected on the impact of **insufficient community consultation in the Kununurra Cashless Debit Card trial**. In illuminating lived experience, Ms Walley's contribution was invaluable. Ultimately, this session highlighted the challenges of policies that, in attempting to address an issue, contribute to the issue itself.

Day 3 – Wednesday 11 September 2019

Plenary: “Of good character” – Drug testing welfare recipients

With the proposal to **drug-test welfare recipients** re-appearing in political discourse only days before the conference, excitement was in the air for Professor Alison Ritter’s plenary on the topic. Professor Ritter explored the increasing conditionality of welfare – notably behavioural conditionality, requiring welfare recipients to be “of good character” – to coerce behavioural change.

Through her plenary, available both in [audio](#) and [slides](#), Professor Ritter revealed the need to change cultural narratives regarding welfare. She traced how expert debate and political debate used different frames to understand the issue, causing each group to “slide” by each other and dismiss alternative frames as irrelevant. In this context, Professor Ritter raised the strategy of shifting and appropriating frames to inspire change. With the policy discussion still evolving, time will tell whether the basis of this policy’s argument can indeed be shifted.

Permanency practice in out-of-home care

On the afternoon of Day 3, a special session chaired by the University of Sydney’s Amy Conley Wright regarding **permanency practice in out-of-home care** presented an inspiring and hopeful case of innovative research. With only perhaps a dozen attendees, a beautifully musical Acknowledgement of Country was followed by three fascinating presentations.

As the speakers described, the presented project aims to reduce the numbers of children in care and focus on gaining permanency, including in residence, work, and culture. Through its use with the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) Youth Consult for Change team, **arts-based participatory research** was demonstrated as a helpful tool for capturing abstract concepts like permanency. In asking participants to capture photographs representing their understanding of ‘permanency’, rather than a researcher asserting its meaning or assuming a single definition, participant voices are central. It was especially fantastic to hear from one member of the FACS Youth Consult for Change team reflect on her own positive experience of this approach.

Additional presentations

In addition, WESTIR Ltd attended the following presentations over the 3-day conference. Our thanks to all presenters for their informative and engaging contributions at the ASPC.

Session	Topic	Speaker/s
Funding and organising service delivery	Perceptions of funding and commissioning models for alcohol and other drug treatment services in Australia: a qualitative study of service providers and policymakers	Katinka van de Ven, Drug Policy Modelling Program, UNSW Sydney
	Outcomes based contracting in child protection: views from the peaks	Wendy Foote, University of Newcastle and Jennifer Mason, JPM Advisory
Child safety and protection	Bolstering mandatory reporter's decision making to child protection situations	Annalese Bolton, UNSW Sydney/NeuRA
	Investing early to transform future outcomes	Paula Cheng, Their Futures Matter
	kContact - Improving contact between parents and children in out-of-home care: the main outcomes from a cluster randomised control trial	Aino Suomi, Institute of Child Protection Studies
Compulsory income management	Income management and crime: rethinking evidence and theory	Zoe Staines, University of Queensland
	The makings of a toxic triad: conditionality, automation and privatisation – the case of the Cashless Debit Card	Sue Tilley, Uniting Communities and University of South Australia
Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS)	Introduction to the study and how children in out-of-home care are developing over time	Merran Butler, FACS
	How does placement stability influence children's developmental outcomes over time?	Robert Wells, FACS
	Caseworker contact and relationships with children in out-of-home care	Ilan Katz, SPRC
	Educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care	Michelle Townsend, University of Wollongong
Australia's welfare and social data	An overview of Australia's welfare	Matthew James, AIHW
	Insights on migrants from integrated 2016 Census data	Lev Makaev, ABS
	How do we use an area-based indicator for social policy? Lessons learned from a Child and Social Exclusion Index in Australia	Riyana Miranti and Laurie Brown, University of Canberra, and Robyn Seth-Purdie, UnitingCare Australia and Griffith Institute of Technology
	The geography of personal and household incomes: data from the Census of Australia, 2016	Ian Manning, National Institute of Economic and Industry Research

Concluding thoughts

Compellingly, the conference closed with a panel discussion on **perspectives on poverty and inequality in Australia**. The panel featured SPRC's Professor Peter Saunders, [ACOSS](#) Director of Policy and Advocacy Jacqueline Phillips, and Owen Bennett, CEO of the [Australian Unemployed Workers Union](#). Most notably, Mr Bennett provided a refreshing perspective, discussing not *unemployed people*, but *unemployed workers* in Australia. Mr Bennett's presentation, echoed by Ms Phillip's recognition of those "that have known what it is to go without", powerfully ended the conference by grounding its conceptual discussions within crucial lived experiences.

Finally, this discussion raised **key lessons for researchers and policymakers**. We must remember:

- There is value in more accessible, thematic research reports.
- Advocacy and academia operate at different paces. Consistency and adaptability must be balanced in these relationships.
- Ethics-lead research is the only path forward.
- Research must reach the audiences that need to know it.