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Robodebt and the limits of learning: exploring meaning-making after a crisis

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ABSTRACT

The flawed Robodebt programme, and its subsequent exposure through a Royal Commission, represented a serious crisis in Australian public administration. A vital task for leaders after a crisis is communication and meaning-making, which is a precondition for learning. Using Freedom of Information material from over 100 agencies, this study investigates whether and how Australian public service leaders communicated with their staff about the meaning of Robodebt and the lessons to be learnt, in the immediate aftermath of the crisis. It finds more than a quarter of public servants did not receive communication from their bureaucratic leaders interpreting the crisis, in the first six months after the Royal Commission reported. When they did, some messages were dismissive, rejecting the idea that there were cultural problems in *their* agency, and ignoring the fundamental cause of the crisis: over-responsiveness to ministers. Other leaders, however, responded with genuine introspection and engaged with sensitive cultural issues. Organisations often fail to learn after a crisis, particularly where cultural learning is required, or where lessons must 'travel' across agencies. Given the limited meaning-making undertaken by many public service leaders, the article questions whether effective post-crisis learning is likely to occur.

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KEYWORDS Post-crisis communication; policy learning; policy inaction; over-responsiveness; Robodebt

Introduction

> We know that we're not perfect. We fail and get things wrong … sometimes seriously badly. There's a long history of reports … that showed big failures and mistakes. And *we have a lot to learn from these events, especially leaders*. [Our italics]

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These were the words of Dr Gordon de Brouwer, newly appointed Australian Public Service Commissioner in June 2023, just before the Robodebt Royal Commission released its report (de Brouwer, 2023). The Royal Commission examined the processes and decisions that led to the automated welfare compliance programme colloquially known as Robodebt. Its devastating report, released in July 2023, found that:

> Robodebt was a crude and cruel mechanism, neither fair nor legal, and it made many people feel like criminals … people were traumatised on the off-chance they might owe money. It was a costly failure of public administration. (Royal Commission, 2023, p. xxix)

In a damning end to the report, the Commissioner named the causes as 'venality, incompetence and cowardice' (Royal Commission, 2023, p. 659). In public hearings watched by thousands, many public servants gave evidence. Some tearfully apologised while others steadfastly refused to accept any blame. Robodebt, and the public exposure of its causes, represented a serious crisis in Australian public administration. It shook the foundations of trust in government and confidence in the public service; it was a crisis requiring an effective response.

Boin *et al*. (2016) argue that one of the important steps for leaders responding to a crisis is meaning-making: communicating what went wrong, what caused the failure and what should be done to remedy the situation or reset the organisation. It is in this critical phase of responding to a crisis that learning can begin, because 'learning [is] … modulated (strengthened, altered, reinforced, or weakened) by communication processes' (Mastroianni & Profeti, 2025, p. 5). Leaders' meaning-making after a crisis sets the tone for, and helps establish the possibility of, future learning (Mastroianni & Profeti, 2025).

This article uses Robodebt as a case study of post-crisis communication, which begins the process of organisational learning after failure. Robodebt is a rare and powerful case: it was a grave failure of public administration with implications beyond the departments directly involved. It exposed deep cultural problems in how departments respond to ministers, and in how they treat vulnerable citizens. It pointed to problems that are rarely openly acknowledged, which can affect all public service departments.

Most crisis management research focuses on the response of political leaders. We take an original approach by exploring how public service leaders communicated with staff in the first six months after the release of the Royal Commission report. Using Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to all 113 Australian Public Service (APS) agencies, we explore whether and how public service leaders communicated with staff about the Robodebt Royal Commission. Where communication was absent or minimal we leverage the 'policy inaction' framework (McConnell & 't Hart, 2019), to consider

the ways public service leaders avoided addressing the lessons of the crisis. The study makes a methodological contribution by demonstrating an alternative way to identify inaction, which is often methodologically difficult. The absence of communication by agency leaders is likely to inhibit learning because by failing to communicate, their implicit meaning-making is that there was no crisis for us, it was not relevant for us, and therefore there are no lessons to be learnt.

Where communication occurred, we analyse its framing and content, capitalising on the study's rare access to the language and phrases used by public service leaders in their internal emails and speeches. While the Royal Commission revealed the deep cause of the failures to be cultural, involving over-responsiveness to ministers, this was rarely named in early meaning-making by public service leaders. We track how poorly this key lesson from the Royal Commission 'travelled' (Stark & van der Arend, 2024) across the APS. While we focus on Australia, there are international implications, as over-responsiveness has been identified as a cause of policy failure across political-administrative systems, yet it remains a problem rarely openly discussed by senior public servants (Christensen & Opstrup, 2018; Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014; Mulgan, 2007; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2020).

Learning takes time. The period studied here cannot capture long-term learning, nor demonstrate changes in outcomes. Rather, it focuses on the communication which is a precondition for learning to occur. Boin *et al*. (2016, p. 92) emphasise that the '*initial responses* to a crisis make a huge difference' (their italics), justifying our approach of focusing on a short time period immediately after the damning Royal Commission report was released.

Context: Robodebt and the Royal Commission

Australia was once regarded as the vanguard of the welfare state, an 'Antipodean social laboratory' (Cox, 2006, p. 107), comprised of high minimum wages, protectionism, and innovative social welfare payments which formed the 'wage-earner's welfare state' (Castles, 2001, p. 539). From the 1990s, Australia's welfare regime increasingly focused on compliance, and became 'mean, discretionary, and moralistically charged' (Castles, 2001, p. 539). This created a vicious circle of negative discourse about welfare recipients and ever-increasing focus on compliance and fraud-reduction (Priergaard, 2025), notwithstanding that overall payment accuracy was over 90 per cent, with little evidence of fraud (Royal Commission, 2023).

Robodebt was a debt recovery and data-matching scheme that ran from 2016–2020. It used historic annual income data from the Australian Taxation Office (ATO), averaged across fortnights, and assumed this was an accurate estimate of people's fortnightly income. This was contrary to the *Social Security Act*, making the 'debts' unlawful, as well as inaccurate. The onus was

placed on welfare recipients to prove the 'debts' did not exist, which was also unlawful under the Act. The scheme, officially called the 'Online Compliance Initiative', was nicknamed 'Robodebt' due to its reliance on automated decision-making. It was rolled out with great fanfare, with then Minister for Social Services, Scott Morrison, portraying himself as a tough 'welfare cop on the beat'. The political narrative of 'crackdowns on rorting', and the huge savings the programme would supposedly generate, were enthusiastically embraced by ministers.

Not only was its methodology flawed, but the way the scheme was implemented was harsh and lacked procedural fairness, leading to distress and harm for many vulnerable citizens, including several reported suicides. After the scheme was shut down, the government repaid more than $700 million in unlawfully claimed debts and over $100 million in compensation to 400,000 people. In the end, despite forecasts of large savings, the scheme cost the government $565 million. Following a change of government in early 2022, a Royal Commission was established, which delivered its report on 7 July 2023.

The Royal Commission Report catalogues many errors, including rushed implementation, poor quality advice, lack of risk management, problems with automated decision-making and data-matching, failure of legal advisers, and deficiencies in the Budget process. However, the *causes* emerge as deeply cultural and attitudinal, and are seen in the behaviour of senior executives in the Department of Social Services (DSS) and Department of Human Services (DHS). The Report describes an environment which was 'fraught … characterised by a powerful drive for savings, strongly expressed ministerial policy positions … and intense pressure experienced by public servants', leading senior public servants to be 'excessively responsive to government' (Royal Commission, 2023, pp. 28, 643). The Report shows the fundamental cause to be over-responsiveness: an unwavering commitment by senior staff to achieve the targets and policies set by ministers, at the expense of accuracy, legality and risking serious harm to citizens. This over-responsiveness led to covering up serious errors and ignoring warnings expressed by junior staff. The Royal Commission (2023, pp. iii, xxvi) continued '[i]t is remarkable … the lengths to which public servants were prepared to go to oblige ministers', including 'dishonesty and collusion'.

In Australia, by law, public servants must be responsive to the directions of ministers, while remaining impartial and professional, providing 'frank and fearless' advice and ensuring the probity and legality of government action. Over-responsiveness has been described as 'the unforced eagerness of officials to assist their government's case' (Mulgan, 2007, p. 578) and insecurity of tenure for public service leaders has been identified as a cause of the problem (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). However, the dangers of over-responsiveness are never discussed publicly by APS leaders.

The Robodebt crisis has all the hallmarks of such over-responsiveness. Yet did this fundamental cultural cause form part of the meaning-making undertaken by public service leaders in the aftermath of Robodebt?

While there is no uniformly agreed definition of policy crisis, disaster or fiasco, Fagan (2023, p. 245) defines a policy disaster as 'policymaking decisions that lead to avoidable, extreme negative policy outcomes'. As well as the cost, suicides and ongoing harm to the 400,000 people impacted, this failure of public administration did 'potentially irreversible' damage to trust in government and public institutions (MacDonald, 2023). Following the Royal Commission, there were inquiries by the National Anti-Corruption Commission about possible corrupt conduct and the APS Commission found 12 people (including two former departmental secretaries) had breached the APS Code of Conduct (de Brouwer, 2024).

Using Robodebt as a case study to explore leaders' communication after a crisis, and thus their meaning-making, has several original contributions. The study focuses on how lessons were communicated across the entire Australian federal public service, arising from one crisis, within one jurisdiction, in a short period of time. Other studies have explored post-crisis learning within the specific organisation involved in the crisis, (Broekema *et al*., 2017); or how lessons have travelled across jurisdictions (Boin *et al*., 2016); travelled across time (Dwyer, 2022); or travelled between policy areas. Additionally, over-responsiveness of public servants is an issue of concern across political-administrative systems, but how public service leaders communicate with their staff about the problem is rarely examined, and is difficult to detect. Such exchanges usually remain hidden. Using an innovative method, we uncover new evidence of how public service leaders grapple with this challenging subject in their internal communications.

Theory & literature

Meaning-making as part of crisis management

Boin *et al*. (2016) identify five critical tasks of crisis management: sensemaking; decision-making and coordinating; meaning-making; accounting; and learning. The first two tasks (sensemaking and decision-making/coordinating) occur while the crisis is underway; the last three begin in the aftermath of the crisis. Most pertinent to this case is *meaning-making*, which is the communication and crucially, the *interpretation*, of what went wrong, why it went wrong, and what should be done about it. Leaders must manage the meaning-making process by formulating an authoritative message or narrative that explains what happened and why, what the repercussions are, how it can be resolved and 'what lessons will need to be drawn from the episode' (Boin *et al*., 2016, p. 80).

In this process, leaders have an opportunity to provide a frame through which the crisis can be understood, and to suggest a way of thinking 'pointing to a way forward out of the rubble' (Boin *et al*., 2016, p. 87). This shapes what lessons can be learnt. Exploring meaning-making can help explain why some organisations learn after crisis but others do not.

Where public service leaders did not communicate, or communicated in a limited or minimising way, we employ a framework from the literature on inaction. Brown and Stark (2022, pp. 51–56) suggest four moments of 'policy inaction', preventing lessons being learnt:

- Moment one: **reframing of lessons**, following the release of a report, 'the fine print is rewritten in ways which allow nothing to happen', often accompanied by 'tokenistic gesture[s]' to avoid substantive reform.
- Moment two: **offloading of lessons**, 'a government actor rhetorically accepts responsibility … but then ships them off to other actors and takes no further action'.
- Moment three: **pausing and refining,** actors take additional time to consider and analyse the recommendations, often to ensure proper, thorough implementation. This inaction is deliberate and functional, often for good reasons.
- Moment four: **refusing to acknowledge lessons** 'those who might take carriage of implementing lessons purposefully look away and refuse to engage in sensemaking'. This includes a willingness to blame 'bad apples' rather than recognise a broader cultural, systemic failure.

In examining whether more than 100 Australian public service organisations undertook meaning-making following the Robodebt crisis, our first research question is:

- RQ1: Where, across APS agencies, did communication about the Royal Commission occur?

Our second research question draws on qualitative analysis of the meaning-making exercises that took place and asks:

- RQ2: How were the lessons interpreted and communicated in different agencies?

Organisations can learn lessons relating either to procedure or to culture. Some lessons (often referred to as 'single-loop') are embedded within existing systems, such as improvements to policy tools or procedures. Other lessons question underlying assumptions, norms or cultures of the organisation (known as 'double-loop' lessons) (Argyris, 1976; May, 1992). There is an increased likelihood of double-loop learning after a crisis and when leaders

allow 'errors and failures [to be] communicated openly' (Argyris, 1976, p. 369). When leaders remain silent or offer only procedural responses, learning is constrained. Thus, limited meaning-making can lead to a failure of learning: leaders' post-crisis communication choices determine whether cultural reflection occurs or the status quo is maintained (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Boin *et al*., 2016).

The findings of the Royal Commission suggest a need, and provide an opportunity, for cultural learning across the APS, including in agencies not directly involved in Robodebt. This could involve a reweighting of the competing obligations of public servants, a reassertion of the importance of their core duties to protect the public interest and ensure probity and integrity, and a warning of the dangers of over-responsiveness to ministers. Argyris and Schön state that double-loop learning 'resolve[s] incompatible organisational norms by setting new priorities and weightings of norms' (cited in Boin *et al*., 2016, p. 128); it may also 'touch sensitive nerves' by calling into question the status quo. As well as tracking which public service leaders communicated with their staff about Robodebt, the study seeks evidence of any cultural lessons communicated by leaders in the aftermath of the Royal Commission.

Data and method

The study examines communication about Robodebt by both central APS leaders and individual agency leaders. This communication provides evidence of the way APS leaders understood and named what went wrong, and what lessons they saw as important – their meaning-making.

The study uses both quantitative and qualitative methods and is based on data obtained under the Australian *Freedom of Information Act 1982*. FOI requests were sent to all 113 Australian Government entities with staff employed under the *Public Service Act 1999* (PS Act), as at 31 December 2023 (Department of Finance, 2024). The requests were submitted in January/February 2024 and covered 1 July 2023 to 31 December 2023.[1] This six month period was chosen because it includes the release of both the Royal Commission report (7 July 2023) and the Government's response (13 November 2023). As noted above, Boin *et al*. (2016, p. 92) emphasise that the '*initial responses*' (italics in original) are crucial. If a longer timeframe was chosen, it would increase the risk that the requests would be refused under s24AA, on the basis that they would 'substantially and unreasonably divert resources'. Five agencies initially sought to refuse the applications on this basis, but all agencies eventually released the relevant documentation.[2] The text of the FOI request is in the Appendix and the documents released are available in the online supplementary information.

There is increasing attention to using FOI (or similar legislation) as part of academic research. Walby and Luscombe (2020) provide detailed discipline- and country-specific analysis of the pros and cons of using FOI in research. While

there are many hurdles, carefully designed FOI can produce high quality data (Casey, 2024; Walby & Larsen, 2012). While we faced significant delays by many agencies,[3] only one agency (Comcare) sought to impose a fee – initially AU$288 (approximately €175), which was later waived once we appealed to the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner. FOI was the appropriate data collection methodology for this project because it gave access to primary material, written for an internal audience, and allowed us to compare these with the 'cautiously prepared public relations texts and official discourse' of the public statements by the APS leadership (Walby & Larsen, 2012, p. 39).

The material obtained includes all-staff emails; agendas of executive meetings and board meetings; transcripts of departmental meetings; speaking notes used by departmental leaders and videos of senior leaders discussing the Report in open staff sessions. Some documents were heavily redacted, but we do not consider this to be a serious risk to our findings.[4]

To provide a context for the communication by individual agency leaders, we examine three documents sent to all APS staff by the central leadership of the public service – Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) and the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC). These were two letters to all APS staff from the most senior leaders and a set of 'Talking Points' for senior executives to use when communicating with their staff about Robodebt (see supplementary information). The study examines the phrasing and tone of these documents, but where a department or agency did no more than forward these on to its staff, we considered this to be 'no communication', since the study sought internally generated communication by the leaders of individual agencies.

Coding the material

We manually coded the internally generated material using variables set out in Table 1.

To address RQ2, the content of the documents was analysed qualitatively to detect where meaning-making addressed matters of procedure (leading to

Table 1. Coding the data.

Research question	Coding
RQ1: Whether communication occurred	**Communication:** Agency leaders communicated with staff about Robodebt
	No communication: Agency leaders did not communicate, or did no more than forward on centrally generated documents
RQ2: What was communicated	**Procedural issues:** Communication related to problems of internal procedure such as record-keeping, legal advice, or training
	Cultural issues: Communication addressed cultural issues, such as over-responsiveness to ministers, willingness to accept bad news or attitudes to vulnerable clients
	Other: Communication did not address procedural or cultural issues

single-loop lessons) and where communication related to deeper cultural issues (potentially leading to double-loop lessons) (see Deverell, 2009). We also used qualitative analysis to explore the phrasing and words used by any leaders who addressed the core theme of over-responsiveness.

Categorising agencies

For the purposes of analysis, the 113 agencies were categorised based on their different governance arrangements as departments, Non-corporate Commonwealth Entities (NCCE) and Corporate Commonwealth Entities (CCE) (Department of Finance, 2024).[5] Non-Corporate Commonwealth Entities (NCCEs) are legally and financially part of the executive and have limited independence/autonomy. This includes both departments of state (separated out in this analysis) and other core executive agencies.[6] The distinction between NCCEs and CCEs is relevant as CCEs are legally and financially separate from the executive, are structured to have more independence and distance from ministers and are often governed by independent boards (Van Thiel & Smullen, 2021).[7] Danish experiments showed staff in different types of organisations managed dilemmas of responsiveness in distinct but complex ways: departmental staff preferenced legality over responsiveness, while staff in implementation agencies were more likely to uphold professional norms when they conflicted with demands for political responsiveness (Christensen & Opstrup, 2018).[8]

Nava (2022) notes that post-disaster learning can spread beyond those organisations directly involved, if organisations perceive they may be impacted by similar disasters. While all staff are public servants employed under the *Public Service Act*, staff in departments are more likely to work with vulnerable clients and to engage closely with ministers on policy development and implementation. This suggests leaders of departments would be more likely than leaders of NCCEs and CCEs to communicate with their staff and address cultural issues in their meaning-making after Robodebt. Since a core lesson from the crisis relates to managing relationships with ministers, leaders of CCEs may have felt it less important to communicate with their staff about the lessons of Robodebt. On the other hand the greater independence of CCE leaders from ministers may grant them freedom to talk openly with staff about the type of cultural problems exposed in the Robodebt crisis.

Findings

In this section we first explore how the central public service leaders communicated about Robodebt. This reveals critical signals from the top and provides context for leaders of individual agencies in framing their internal communications. Secondly we explore which agencies communicated with

their staff and which did not; and thirdly for those agencies that did communicate, we explore the content of communications. Finally, we focus closely on how leaders engaged with the issue of over-responsiveness.

Response of central public service leaders: what is not said

On 10 July 2023, the first working day after the Royal Commission Report was released, the Secretary of PM&C Glyn Davis and APS Commissioner Gordon de Brouwer wrote to all 180,000 public servants across all 113 APS agencies.[9] In this way, they signalled that the findings have broader systemic relevance, and not only have implications for the two main departments involved (DSS and DHS). However, their message is notable for what it did not say. The words 'mistake' and 'failure' de Brouwer had used only a month earlier at the National Press Club did not appear. There was no mention of 'errors' or 'harm' or an apology. Instead, these were elided these under the word 'findings':

> We would like to talk with you about the release last Friday of … the Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme. We want you to know the Australian Public Service takes the Royal Commission's findings seriously. We are committed to working through the findings in an open and constructive way with you – the APS – and with the Australian public. (Davis & de Brouwer, 2023a)

The next paragraph stated 'we know the vast majority of public servants are committed to … the APS values and code of conduct' and are 'professional' and 'diligent' (Davis & de Brouwer, 2023a) which suggested the problem is not cultural or systemic, but perhaps a case of a 'few bad apples'. The email spent five of its 21 sentences on the processes of investigating individual public servants, to determine if they had breached the APS Code of Conduct. This approach constitutes a moment of inaction, by both reframing lessons ('moment one'), and refusing to acknowledge lessons ('moment four'), focusing on individual bad apples, rather than cultural issues.

The findings themselves were not discussed or named, nor was their relevance for a broader public service audience explained. With approximately two-thirds of public servants working outside the nation's capital (Canberra), the email failed to translate the lessons of Robodebt for a meat works inspector employed by the Department of Agriculture in a small country town, or a human resources officer managing call-centre employees at the ATO. Lessons must be translated, particularly where they need to move across multiple agencies and audiences (Stark & van der Arend, 2024). The meaning implicitly made by Davis & de Brouwer was that the failure was individual, not systemic – implying that there is no need for cultural, double-loop learning.

Four months later, on 17 November 2023, Davis and de Brouwer again wrote to all public servants, to announce the release of 'Louder than Words: an APS Integrity Action Plan', (Davis & de Brouwer, 2023b; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2023). The plan, released by the Secretaries

Board, constituted the only formal response from the public sector leadership to the Royal Commission, though it was not framed as a direct response. Rather it was framed as 'particularly pertinent' at a time when the Government is responding to the Robodebt Royal Commission. Neither the plan, nor the covering email, named any problems or discussed their causes. One sentence hinted at the problem of over-responsiveness: 'The Secretaries Board is committed to promoting a pro-integrity culture where all staff feel confident to contribute ideas, *provide frank and independent advice* and report mistakes' [our italics]. In its meaning-making the email is opaque; it is up to readers to imply the negative (i.e., that there currently is not a pro-integrity culture in the public service and staff are not confident to provide independent advice to ministers). Implementation of the Plan was devolved to individual departments and agencies, effectively offloading responsibility.[10] It then placed caveats on implementation by noting the 'recommended actions … would only be taken forward if adequately resourced' (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2023, p. 6). This offloading of responsibility first to other agencies, and then to the political executive to provide funding is indicative of Brown and Stark's (2022) 'moment two' of inaction ('offloading of lessons').

It is telling that the response of the most senior leaders of the APS is called 'Louder than Words', since they expressed no words about the underlying cause of the misconduct in Robodebt: over-responsiveness of senior public servants to the agendas of ministers. These messages demonstrated a failure to confront fundamental problems, without which there cannot be meaningful learning. It appears that naming the problems, and responsibility for learning broad lessons from the Robodebt case, was delegated to individual departments and agencies. This represented opportunities, but also enabled moments of policy inaction.

In a similar vein, the Talking Points sent to all Senior Executive Service officers to use in their discussions with staff, which therefore define the 'appropriate' words to use, were not explicit about the problems seen in Robodebt. They stated that Robodebt 'exposed failures in the APS' and that 'there were failures of leadership and judgment' but these were not described and the caveat was that 'it's important to remember at the same time many good people were trying to do the right thing' (see Supplementary Information).

Response of individual departments and agencies

Research question 1: whether lessons were communicated

Table 2 shows that most departments communicated with their staff about Robodebt (81 per cent), but only around half of non-corporate agencies (NCCEs) and only around one-third of corporate agencies (CCEs) did so. Overall, the 50 agencies that did not communicate with their staff in the

Table 2. Whether lessons were communicated by type of organisation.

	Departments	Other non-corporate Commonwealth entities (NCCE)	Corporate Commonwealth entities (CCE)	Total APS agencies
Communication to staff	13	36	11	60
No communication to staff	3	29	18	50
Exempt from FOI	0	3	0	3
Total	16	68	29	113
% of responding agencies that communicated with staff*	81%	55%	38%	55%

*Excludes 'exempt' from calculations.

immediate aftermath of the Royal Commission represent more than 45,000 public servants, which is over 25 per cent of the public service.

In answer to RQ1, we found that lessons from the Robodebt crisis travelled to only 55 per cent of Australian government agencies in the first six months after the Royal Commission and, as expected, meaning-making was least likely to occur in the more independent CCEs. Communication was most likely to have occurred in departments of state.

Agencies that did not communicate with staff

It was surprising to find that three departments did not communicate with their staff about Robodebt: Defence; Home Affairs; and Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, and the Arts ('Infrastructure').

The failure by the Departments of Defence (the largest department in the APS) and Home Affairs (the second largest department in the APS) to communicate with their staff is concerning, given significant cultural failures that have been uncovered in both departments (Evans, 2023; Smith, 2013). Interestingly, in an APS-wide forum in July 2023, the Secretary of the Defence Department, Greg Moriarty, commented that '[w]e are dealing, I think, with a very fundamental crisis in the public service at the moment around Robodebt' (Coade, 2023).

Similarly, in February 2023, while the Royal Commission was underway, the Secretary of the Infrastructure Department Jim Betts identified the 'fear and deference that the hierarchical culture of the APS can engender' as his biggest leadership challenge, and said 'The Robodebt Royal Commission has yet to conclude, but we have seen enough sobering evidence of the harm that fear can do when it creates a culture of silence and complicity' ('Jim Betts on getting sh*t done in 2023', 2023). Yet he does not appear to have undertaken any internal communication in his department about Robodebt in the period under examination.

Explaining and understanding inaction can be difficult, because of an absence of observable data. However, we suggest it is likely to align with both 'moment two' (offloading) and 'moment four' (refusing to acknowledge lessons). Because Davis and de Brouwer had issued their APS-wide emails, it provided cover for other leaders to suggest the matter had been dealt with. The other possibility is that these public service leaders did not regard Robodebt as relevant to their agency. This view was common when agencies informed us there were no documents. These often assumed the issues associated with Robodebt could not happen at their agency. For example:

> [The Independent Health and Aged Care Pricing Authority (CCE)] is not an outwardly facing organisation and as such does not provide payments to individual recipients. Consequently, it is not required to respond to the Royal Commission and there are no documents that are relevant to your request.

Similarly, the Australian Submarine Agency (NCCE) responded that '[w]e are of the view that the… request is more closely connected with the functions of Services Australia than of Australian Submarine Agency'.

The failure of 50 agency heads to directly communicate with their staff about the crisis (representing more than 25 per cent of all public servants) is likely to mean the lessons from the Royal Commission will not travel to, or be learnt by, those agencies. This absence of communication is still implicit meaning-making: it communicates that there are no lessons to be learnt, it is not relevant for us, there is no need to 'point[] to a way forward out of the rubble' (Boin *et al*., 2016, p. 87) because we are not in the rubble to begin with.

Research question 2: how lessons were interpreted by agencies that did communicate with staff

Focusing on those departments and agencies that did communicate with their staff, we examined what was communicated, and how it was transmitted.

Some agencies held all-staff 'townhalls' which allowed staff to ask questions, including IP Australia (NCCE), the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman (NCCE) and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (NCCE). This is likely to encourage double-loop learning: by allowing staff to engage and contribute, it can facilitate power sharing and a rejection of a top-down control of the learning process (Stark, 2021). Obviously, this is easier in smaller organisations, and other agencies may well have had similar meetings at more local levels, which would not have been identified by our FOI request.

In one of the agencies at the heart of Robodebt – Services Australia (the renamed DHS) – the CEO Rebecca Skinner sent all-staff emails and circulated a video in which she said, 'to all of you, I am deeply sorry'. Senior staff

acknowledged the distress, anger, shame, and other emotions staff were feeling and conducted dialogic communication that allowed open debate, by running 'Safe to Speak' and 'Listen to Learn' group sessions where Senior Executive Service (SES) officers would listen to the views and experiences of staff. This sort of activity is more likely to encourage double-loop learning, because leaders are sharing power and allowing errors and failures to be openly discussed (Argyris, 1976). However only a minority of departments and agencies engaged in open discussion with all staff. Instead, most communication was top-down, or restricted to meetings of SES and agency leaders.

To analyse the nature of the lessons communicated, we explored how much of the communication involved improvements to procedures, such as Budget processes, data management and legal advice protocols, and how much went to issues of culture, focusing on ability to speak truth to power, guard the public interest and protect vulnerable clients (Table 3).

In answer to RQ2, around half the departments and NCCEs communicated cultural lessons but only a quarter of CCEs did so.

We now turn to specific examples of the types of meaning-making that occurred, seen in the language and framing of communications.

While 55 per cent of agency leaders communicated with their staff about Robodebt, they did not always communicate in ways that would lead to learning. For some leaders, their meaning-making had the opposite effect: their messages rejected the need to learn from Robodebt. In a virtual town-hall, the head of the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) (NCCE) dismissed a concern from a staff member, who asked '[s]ome of us have been super concerned watching Robodebt. Could we have an independent ethics adviser, not an AEC SES, so if we need to consult someone we can[?]'. In an example of both moments four (refusing to knowledge lessons) and two (offloading), Tom Rogers, the Australian Electoral Commissioner, said 'I've certainly never seen anything like [Robodebt] … internally [within the AEC],' assuming such integrity issues couldn't happen in his agency, and directing

Table 3. What type of lesson was communicated.

	Departments	Other non-corporate Commonwealth entity (NCCE)	Corporate Commonwealth entity (CCE)
Topic of communication			
Procedural lessons	8	17	2
Culture lessons	7	19	3
Other	3	9	6
Total agencies that communicated	13	36	11

Notes: There is double counting as some agencies communicated both types of messages. Agencies coded 'other' did not address either procedural or cultural issues in their communications or it was unclear (e.g., the FOI material included only a dot-point on a meeting agenda).

staff members to the APSC. In response to a similar question from a member of staff at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (CCE) about the impact the Royal Commission would have on the work of the Institute and across government more broadly, the response by the head of the AIHW, Rob Heferen was 'I don't think it'll have much direct impact,' before pointing to other agencies as responsible for dealing with the cultural issues – which aligns with moment two in Brown and Stark (2022), of 'offloading of lessons'.

Other agencies which ignored the procedural and cultural issues, such as the National Transport Commission (CCE), forwarded information around the Royal Commission to staff marked 'FYI only'. The Clean Energy Regulator (NCCE) was one of several agencies focused on public perception, rather than procedural or cultural change in its meaning-making: 'There is a heightened sense of scrutiny on regulators … Please be vigilant if you are approached by anybody working for a media outlet.'

Other moments of inaction were evident. The Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) (NCCE) sought to delay implementation of a clear and direct recommendation in the Royal Commission to publish decisions of the first tier of the AAT, writing that 'the policy to not publish these decisions should remain in place … other avenues to achieve the benefits' should be considered, which aligns closely with 'reframing of lessons' to avoid taking substantive action (Brown & Stark, 2022). In examples of moment 2 (offloading lessons) and moment 3 (pausing and deferring action), several other agencies delayed any action until after the official government response.

Across these agencies, the meaning-making was similar to those agencies that did not communicate at all – *this* agency is not in crisis, we are doing fine. In such circumstances, it is highly unlikely that cultural learning could occur, because (as far as the leadership is concerned) there are no cultural problems to address.

For other agencies, however, there were many examples of communication about procedural issues, such as applying recommendations for improving legal services and recordkeeping. This was evident in 24 agencies, through Executive Board papers detailing changes to internal legal services, or updates to risk management processes. For example, the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) (NCCE) identified a series of procedural recommendations 'albeit directed at other agencies … that ASIC should act on' or 'not directly relevant to ASIC [that may] have implications for ASIC'.

We next turn to examples of communication that recognised broader cultural issues needing to be addressed. ASIC noted 'given most of our people come from the private sector', there was a strong need to improve training on 'our obligations as public servants'. This is an example of an agency that could have ignored the Royal Commission, but instead identified

almost 30 recommendations relevant to ASIC and set out what actions they were taking.

Some leaders demonstrated introspection about what Robodebt meant to them. The head of the National Library of Australia (CCE), an agency with no direct connection to Robodebt, reflected at an all-staff meeting:

> *I* want to ask myself – can I set aside my own assumptions about how we conduct ourselves in our organization, recognize that I'm now a long way from the coalface, and truly listen if an allegation, or even a suggestion of something really disturbing happening comes my way. Can I create an atmosphere … so that serious matters are taken seriously? [Original italics]

Other agencies that sought to engage with cultural issues included the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Australian Skills Quality Authority, the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM), the Inspector-General of Taxation and Taxation Ombudsman; and IP Australia (all NCCEs). For example, Australian Statistician David Gruen emphasised to senior ABS staff the importance of creating a culture where 'people feel supported if and when they seek to raise difficult issues with their colleagues or superiors'. At another small agency, the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) (CCE), their CEO wrote that the Robodebt lessons 'will have parallels to the work and role of the APVMA, and it's important we all consider and seek to implement these opportunities to strengthen capability and integrity in our work'. At a management retreat, the BoM (NCCE) emphasised that 'the public administration shortcomings … could occur, without any malicious intent, in any government agency', and noted that 'beyond discrete recommendations, the Royal Commission report highlights how critical it is for public servants to provide frank, fearless, and accurate advice'. They then went on to discuss whether any of the underlying issues that lead to Robodebt could be present at the BoM. Similar discussions were had in leadership discussions at Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (AUSTRAC) (NCCE) seen in this slide (Figure 1).

The meaning-making at these agencies is fundamentally different from those quoted earlier. These leaders recognise the relevance of the Robodebt crisis, explain what it means for *their* agency and began internal conversations about how to address underlying cultural issues.

Lessons about over-responsiveness?

In earlier sections, we highlighted that the deep cause of Robodebt was over-responsiveness, and that this is most likely to be of concern departments, which have the closest relationships with ministers. We would expect their communications with staff to be more likely to address the problem of over-responsiveness. Was there reference in their meaning-making to the pressure senior staff are under to be 'accommodative', follow the plans of ministers even

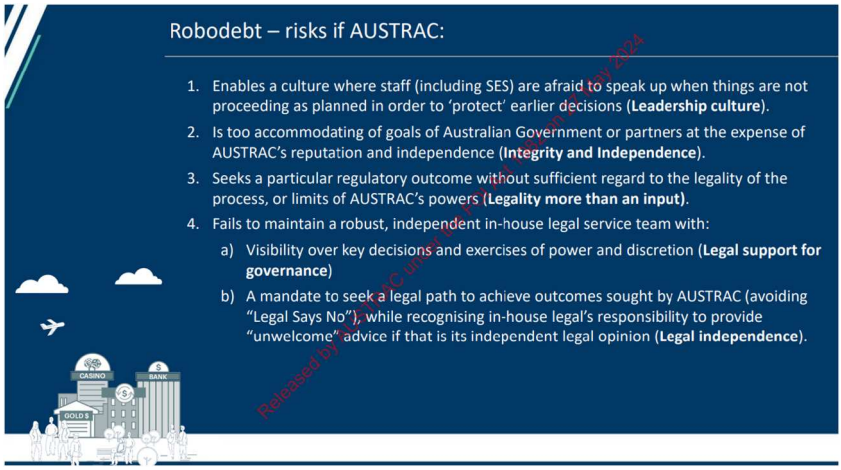

Figure 1. AUSTRAC – executive leadership group presentation.

when problematic and not provide adverse advice or unwanted news? Were there lessons about rebalancing the obligations of public servants?

Only four departments directly addressed the issue of over-responsiveness in their communications with staff: the departments of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR); Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW); Industry, Science and Resources (DISR); and Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF). DEWR conducted an online 'All Staff Insights Session' on 14 November 2023 where senior staff answered questions and spoke candidly about the Royal Commission. Departmental Secretary Natalie James said:

> On one level we could say that this doesn't really have anything to do with us … [but] the principles that the Royal Commission talked about, they absolutely are applicable … thinking what might we learn from these recommendations very specifically for us … how do we make sure the end user is front of mind … and *particularly in our conversations with our ministers*? [Our italics]

Another DEWR senior executive spoke about

> what it means to maintain integrity … our role in providing frank and fearless advice to governments and ministers … making sure our programs … don't have a cruel and crude impact on people … how do we as a public service need to shift our culture … that doesn't mean saying no all the time [to ministers] but it does mean saying … how is this ethical? How is this legal? So for me culture and courage are the big pieces [of reform] and we need to constantly … keep talking about that.

DCCEEW addressed over-responsiveness at their Executive Board meetings on 13 July and 10 August 2023. On 10 August under the heading 'Categories

of culture examined in the Report of the Royal Commission' it listed 'Failure to give frank and fearless advice was a result of the pressure on SES leaders to deliver,' and quoted an executive in the Royal Commission Report who gave evidence that 'many people were determined to achieve a particular outcome for the government, … honest inquiry … was not … fostered by that culture'.

DISR provided the most, and most interesting, documents directly addressing cultural issues. On 7 July 2023, the day the Royal Commission report was released, Departmental Secretary Meghan Quinn wrote to all staff, pointing 'a way out of the rubble' saying:

> [the Report] will be sobering reading for all. There will be insights and lessons that we will need to draw on over time. … if we hold true to our obligations through our daily actions and our systems, we will go some way to mitigating the issues raised in the report.

Two weeks later she sent staff 'Further reflections on the Robodebt Royal Commission report'. This was meaning-making with a very personal response:

> I've been asked about my reactions and I wanted to share those with all of you. We need to talk about what has happened and where to go from here, so that we learn from the situation … The findings go to the heart of leadership and culture and this should be our focus going forward … one important thing to keep in mind is that *ultimately we work for the Australian people* through the government of the day and we need to … abide by our APS values and code of conduct. [Our italics]

On 28 July DISR's Integrity Branch circulated advice to staff, reasserting the duty to protect the public interest, even if it conflicts with ministerial wishes:

> *Your decisions can affect real people*
>
> Public servants have standards of conduct to which they must adhere which include … providing the government with advice that is frank and honest. If you ever feel pressured to do or sign something you are not comfortable with, it's important you speak with your supervisors or other colleagues. … *You have the Executive's backing not to put your name to anything that is not true or not in the public interest*. [Our italics]

On 5 October 2023, the DISR Executive Board discussed a minute titled 'Lessons from the Robodebt Royal Commission' which stated:

> Public servants need to provide government with frank and honest advice, even in the face of Ministerial pressure. All staff, but especially SES, should be prepared to have robust and persuasive conversations with Ministers' offices to deliver the best outcome for the Australian people.

However, DISR is one of the few departments where senior staff confronted core issues in the Robodebt case directly. Most departments did not

discuss – or even name – the underlying cause of the failures of Robodebt: over-responsiveness to ministers.

Discussion

A critical factor in learning after a crisis is meaning-making by organisational leaders, which interprets and explains the meaning, significance and relevance of events. Stark and van der Arend (2024, p. 2078) argue that lessons do not necessarily 'speak for themselves', necessitating study of how lessons are interpreted, whether lessons travel between policy domains and organisations, and the factors that support or inhibit such travel (see Howlett & Cashore, 2009; May, 1992). While some people within every APS agency probably read the Royal Commission report, organisational learning requires that these lessons be translated and institutionalised (Deverell, 2021). The 'quality' of the translation can either facilitate or hinder the ability of lessons to travel across organisations (Dwyer, 2022; Stark & van der Arend, 2024). This study revealed that the lessons of Robodebt did not travel widely across the Australian public service.

It is hard to know why some agency heads took a proactive approach to communication and meaning-making in the early post-Royal Commission period while others (apparently) did nothing. To some degree, the patterns of communication followed our expectations: leaders of departments were most likely to communicate with their staff about Robodebt and leaders of the more independent CCEs were least likely to address it. However there were also breaks in the pattern. Leaders of three important departments apparently did not communicate with their staff about Robodebt at all in the period, while some heads of CCEs engaged in open and difficult discussions about what the crisis meant for the culture of their organisations. This points to the importance of individual leaders, with their own styles and approaches, for organisational learning. As Schein (2016) argues, what individual leaders pay attention to, and do not pay attention to, sends powerful messages to their organisations.

It might be difficult for leaders to address a culture in which they are embedded or complicit. Many of the departments that did not communicate with staff, had minimal communications, or deferred/delayed any substantive consideration, had leaders in place for long periods of time, all of whom served the previous Liberal government, which was responsible for Robodebt.

The broader leadership group in an organisation may also be relevant, particularly where executives had directly experienced Robodebt. For example, Tim Ffrench, former acting Chief Counsel at DHS who gave evidence to the Royal Commission about the poor culture at DHS, in particular the over-responsiveness to ministers (Royal Commission, 2023, p. 521), then moved

to DEWR; that was a department where executives were very active in communicating about Robodebt. Similarly, Janean Richards, former Chief Legal Counsel at DSS moved to DISR, identified as the department that engaged most with staff about over-responsiveness. If experiences of key people can enhance learning, they may also stifle learning. Kathryn Campbell, former Secretary of both DSS and DHS, who was eventually found to have breached the APS Code of Conduct over her leading role in Robodebt (de Brouwer, 2024), was employed by Department of Defence when the Royal Commission Report was released. Defence was one of the three departments that sent no communication to their staff about Robodebt. While only a few examples, this suggests the potential importance of leaders' direct experience of the crisis, and the role of personnel mobility in knowledge transfer (Argote *et al*., 2022).

While the study suggests the personality, approach and experience of individual agency leaders may affect their meaning-making after the Robodebt crisis, this is a topic requiring further, interview-based, research (cf. Broekema *et al*., 2017).

An important contextual factor was the limited meaning-making by central public service leaders. Their messaging was contradictory: while stressing their strong commitment to address the Royal Commission's 'findings', they were not courageous enough to name those findings. They sent mixed signals about the urgency to address problems they could only hint at. Despite committing to 'work[] through the findings in an open and constructive way' (Davis & de Brouwer, 2023a) with APS staff, there was no evidence of this in the FOI data. They never discussed explicitly the systemic nature of the failures, or their causes. They implicitly delegated to individual agency leaders the substantive meaning-making after the crisis. Was the failure of central public service leaders to openly discuss over-responsiveness because they feared offending ministers? Or due to a lack of courage to call out serious cultural issues? It can be hard for senior public servants to openly name problems which 'touch sensitive nerves' (Boin *et al*., 2016, p. 129). The focus on 'integrity' as the lesson to be learnt in central communiques may serve as a code: representing a return to an appropriate balancing of public service norms and restoring eroded values. Yet it assumes public servants can understand what lies beneath such coded language.

The Royal Commission created a lot of attention, criticism and even outrage – but our findings indicate it is unlikely to generate substantive learning across the public service, due to limited and inconsistent meaning-making by agency leaders. Unfortunately this is in line with the existing literature, which shows that the APS has been slow at adopting internal reforms (Podger & Kettl, 2024); recommendations for systemic changes from Royal Commissions and other inquiries have regularly been ignored (Stark *et al*., 2023); and the APS is often stuck in single-loop learning, due to a controlling and hierarchical culture (Stark, 2021). While this might make our findings

unsurprising, the failure of a disaster of this size to stir public service leaders into action demonstrates the difficulty of double-loop learning travelling across organisations.

Conclusion

This research began with a desire to know what, if anything, the Australian public service learned from the dramatic and disturbing events known as Robodebt. Because learning from a crisis depends on the meaning-making done by leaders in its aftermath, the article explored whether and how Australian public service leaders communicated with their staff in the six months following the release of the Robodebt Royal Commission report. Rather than focus only on the 16 departments of state, we examined communication across all 113 public service agencies, tracking whether lessons travelled across public sector agencies that, while far from the scene of that crisis, could still benefit from learning its deeper lessons.

Our analysis is based on a simple premise – if leaders do not communicate about lessons, then no lessons can be learnt. If leaders do not recognise cultural failings, there can be no cultural learning (Deverell, 2021). Our analysis revealed that of the 113 agencies, single-loop learning was evident in 27 agencies, mainly focused on legal services and record-keeping. Only 29 agencies engaged with the underlying cultural issues that Robodebt revealed. Some of these leaders responded with genuine introspection and engaged with the challenge to public servants' sense of identity that Robodebt represented. However, only four of the 16 departments directly addressed the problem of over-responsiveness in their meaning-making communications with staff.

Using Robodebt as a case study to consider communication and learning after a crisis makes several original contributions. Other studies have explored post-crisis learning within the organisation involved in the crisis, or how lessons have travelled across jurisdictions, travelled across time or travelled between policy areas. This study focuses on how lessons were communicated across the entire Australian federal public service, arising from one crisis, within one jurisdiction, within a short period of time.

Additionally, while most crisis management research focuses on political leaders, we contribute to the literature by exploring the meaning-making and lesson-drawing undertaken by administrative leaders. Robodebt involved multiple serious administrative failures, but at their heart was a difficult and extremely sensitive cultural cause: over-responsiveness to ministers. This is an issue of concern across Westminster political-administrative systems, but how public service leaders communicate with their staff about the problem is rarely examined, and is difficult to detect. Using the rich source of internal emails, transcripts of meetings and discussion documents

we are able to reveal how public service leaders grappled with this challenging subject in their internal communications, or, alternatively, avoided addressing it. We contribute by demonstrating how some public service leaders found it difficult or dangerous to address directly, while others communicated with openness and courage. Over-responsiveness is a concern not publicly named by Australian public service leaders; our documents provide a rare glimpse into the dialogue between leaders and their staff about this fundamental cultural problem.

The study makes a methodological contribution in its use of FOI requests to find evidence of both action and inaction. Seeking documents from all agencies demonstrates a way to identify inaction, which is often methodologically difficult. Using this innovative method, we provide clear evidence of an absence: that more than a quarter of public servants did not receive any internal communication from their agency leaders about Robodebt in the crucial first six months after the Royal Commission Report. We found further examples of inaction in the form of refusing to acknowledge the lessons of Robodebt or in offloading those lessons to other actors. The absence of communication by agency leaders is likely to inhibit learning because by failing to communicate, their implicit meaning-making is that there was no crisis for us, it was not relevant for us, and therefore there are no lessons to be learnt.

There are limitations inherent in our method. Practicalities limited the scope of the period studied. The distress and concern felt by public servants was at its height in the first six months following the release of the Royal Commission report, yet it is possible some agency leaders undertook meaning-making with their staff after the period studied. We also relied on public service agencies to release relevant documents and not to redact information critical to understanding meaning-making. Nevertheless, the large trove of documents obtained provided original and very valuable data for our research.

While citizens expect public organisations to learn from failures, crisis-induced learning is difficult to achieve. While many of the errors in the Robodebt case can be solved through new procedures and rules, changing culture is a much bigger learning project. It requires a shift in norms and a reweighting of the competing duties and obligations of public servants: they must serve elected ministers but equally they must serve the public and the public interest through ensuring probity, fairness, and legality. The Robodebt crisis illustrated the harms that arise from the balance tipping too far towards ministers and away from the public interest. That this was rarely part of the early meaning-making by public service leaders does not bode well for important lessons being learnt from the crisis.

Notes

1. The process was piloted in September/October 2023, with 14 different agencies, to determine that the request was likely to result in the types of documents we were seeking.
2. Although some required new requests, or a narrowing of the scope.
3. The Attorney-General's Department took approximately a year to finalise the request.
4. The redactions were mainly under section 22 of the FOI Act, which allows for irrelevant material; and names/contact details of junior staff to be redacted. Many agencies released weekly all staff emails, which included a range of irrelevant material (senior staff changes, other topics across the agency, etc.). Similarly, meeting minutes had names and/or emails of junior staff redacted. It is possible that relevant information was redacted, but the document itself was still released (even if completely/overly redacted). The existence of a document, even if redacted, provides evidence that communication occurred, and was coded as such.
5. There is also one Commonwealth Company that employs staff under the PS Act, and it was included in the CCE category.
6. Examples include the Australian Taxation Office (ATO), the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) and the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA).
7. Examples include the National Library of Australia (NLA), Tourism Australia and the Clean Energy Finance Corporation.
8. However the roles of bureaucratic leaders and the distinction between organisation types is different in Denmark and Australia.
9. APS-wide emails are not common, across the previous three years (2020-2022), there were only 10.
10. Management of the public service is highly devolved in Australia compared to other Westminster countries.

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Appendix

Text of FOI request

I am seeking the following information either under FOI or administrative release. The time period of the request is 1 July 2023 to 31 December 2023:

- Any emails or other communications (e.g., meeting invitations/speeches/ videos/ transcripts/memorandums/revised chief executive instructions or equivalent) directed at all staff about either the Royal Commission on the Robo-debt Scheme ('the Royal Commission'), or the government response to the Royal Commission
- Any emails or other communications (e.g., meeting invitations/speeches/ videos/ transcripts/memorandums/revised chief executive instructions or equivalent)

directed at all SES (or equivalent) staff about the Royal Commission on the Robodebt Scheme, or the government response to the Royal Commission
- Any brief prepared for Senate estimates in October 2023 relating to how the agency was responding to the Royal Commission or the government response to the Royal Commission
- Any brief, agenda paper, submission (or similar) to the agency's executive leadership group/senior leadership group (or however named in your agency) about how the agency was responding to the Royal Commission or implementing the government response to the Royal Commission
- Any document relating to changing training modules/induction (or similar) (whether internally or externally delivered), to incorporate information about the Royal Commission or the government response to the Royal Commission.

The following are excluded from the request:

- Any document that solely deals with adverse findings relating to individual members of staff of that agency.