Creating a separate statistical office

Under the *Statistical Returns Act 1896 (Qld)*, the Registrar-General was given authority to collect statistics. The position of Government Statistician, created under the Act, was gazetted in 1904. Thornhill Weedon became Government Statistician and Registrar-General in that year on an annual salary of £430 or $860. This compares with average wages for tradesmen of the time (without board and lodging) of 3s to 5s (30 to 50 cents) a day, or roughly $100 a year.

The office of the Government Statistician was formed in 1904. This office and the Registrar-General’s office employed 19 staff and were part of the Home Secretary’s Department. The Government Statistician’s office had a chief compiler, seven clerks and a typist. In the Registrar-General’s office were a chief clerk, four clerks, a messenger and office-keeper, and four district registrars.

Meanwhile, the *Census and Statistics Act 1905 (Cwlth)* transferred responsibility for the census and certain other statistics to the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics (CBCS) was set up in 1906. Each state retained its statistical office and continued to collect and compile general statistics, but under a common method and according to uniform categories, and these data were forwarded to the national body. National uniformity wasn’t easy and the Commonwealth ended up doing much of the actual compiling in areas such as shipping and demographic statistics.

Norman Macleod took over as Government Statistician and Registrar-General in 1915. The *Queensland Government Gazette* of 17 September 1921 announced that the positions of Registrar-General, Government Statistician, Deputy Registrar-General and Chief Clerk would be abolished from September 1922. The position of Registrar-General was to be re-established and George Porter was appointed in that role in 1922.

Macleod and Porter continued the work of Weedon and pushed for uniformity in data collection and output. However, uniformity between the states was continuing to prove difficult. Prime Minister Stanley Bruce, and the May 1923 Premiers’ Conference, wanted the state-based statistical offices to become the responsibility of the Commonwealth. This was favoured at the Conference of Statisticians in October 1923 by Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania, but in the end, only Tasmania agreed, with its Government Statistician’s Office transferring in 1924.
Connection with Registrar-General’s Office broken

The Bureau of Economics and Statistics Act 1930 (Qld) established an office by this name and James Brigden was appointed as its Director. This broke the connection with the Registrar-General’s Office, which continued its functions separately, and is now called the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. The Bureau of Industry Act 1932 (Qld) replaced the 1930 Act and amended the Statistical Returns Act 1896 to identify more clearly the statistics to be collected. In 1936, under the Statistics Act 1935 (Qld), Brigden became Queensland’s Government Statistician.

Colin Clark took over as Government Statistician and Director of the Bureau of Industry in 1938 until 1947. Clark established the importance of statistics to the economic management of government. He pioneered the development of the major economic accounting aggregates and provided the State’s and nation’s first economic accounts in September 1940. The bureau operated out of ‘a pokey office in the old Danish Association rooms’ (Sunday Mail, 28 June 1942) at 108 George Street, where the Executive Building now stands (100 George Street).

Merger with Commonwealth statistical office

Only a year after the formation of the Queensland GSO, Prime Minister Ben Chifley and the premiers wanted to amalgamate the Commonwealth’s and all state statistical offices. Wartime measures had resulted in increased powers for the Commonwealth and less powers for the states, and this extended to statistics.

After protracted negotiations between the Commonwealth and state governments, a merger of statistical agencies into a single national body to serve all levels of government and other users of statistics was agreed upon, resulting in the Statistics (Arrangements with States) Act 1956 (Cwlth). In Queensland, the arrangement was ratified under the Commonwealth and State Statistical Agreement Act 1958 (Qld), establishing the Integrated Statistical Service on 6 January 1958 to:

• continue to compile and publish statistics that were compiled and published previously, such as publication of the Queensland Year Book and compilation of statistics on interstate trade, sickness in public and private hospitals, traffic accidents, criminal cases, prisoners, and herd testing records;
• continue to provide other statistical services provided previously;
• compile and publish other statistical material required for the purposes of the State or Commonwealth; and
• provide an exchange of statistical information between State and Commonwealth.

Consequently, the GSO and its 150 staff were merged with the Queensland office of the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics in 1958. Solomon was appointed Deputy Commonwealth Statistician as well as continuing as Government Statistician. Others to share this dual position were Austin Mumme from 1969, Francis Sayer from 1971 and Osmonde May from 1975.
By the time of the merger, the office was located at The Mansions, 42 George Street. The ABS publication *Informing a Nation: the Evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905 to 2005*, p. 303, reports that:

The Queensland office was initially located in The Mansions on George Street. The building was in a bad state with holes in the walls that the staff would stuff with old newspapers. There was even an instance of someone falling through the floor.

In the early 1960s the Queensland Office moved to the Taxation Building in Adelaide Street. In the early 1970s it moved several times before finally relocating to Statistics House in Ann Street in May 1975. The floors all ‘leaned’ towards Ann Street, so the compactuses would close themselves at night if they faced the street.

The establishment of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 1974 out of the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics further centralised statistics in Australia. However, ‘... the task of assimilating the various state offices and the Commonwealth office into one organisation took many years. In practice it was probably not completed until the late 1970s ...’, according to the ABS booklet, *Building a National Statistical Agency: From the CBCS to the ABS, 1905 to 2005*.

**Government Statistician’s Office reformed**

In December 1984, the Government Statistician’s Office (GSO) was re-established under the provisions of the *Statistical Returns Act 1896* as an entity within the Queensland Government.

Reasons for re-establishing the office were to:

- strengthen the statistical expertise within the Queensland Government;
- improve the statistical information flow to State Government departments; and
- provide advice to state agencies on statistical matters

while maintaining close liaison with the ABS on statistical matters affecting Queensland.

**Growth and development of the new office**

The re-established office started with four staff and was part of the state Department of Employment and Industrial Affairs, housed at the State Law Building, Ann Street, Brisbane. Under Secretary of this department, Graham Swan, became Government Statistician. The *Statistical Returns Act Amendment Act 1986 (Qld)* defined Government Statistician and increased the penalty for not providing statistical information or for divulging information. The *Statistical Returns Act Amendment Act 1987 (Qld)* clarified what statistics the Government Statistician could collect and publish.

In 1988, the office became a semi-autonomous branch of Queensland Treasury, moving to the Executive Annexe Building in George Street. The role of Government Statistician fell to the Under Treasurer of the time, firstly Edward (John) Hall and then Henry Smerdon. In 1990, the office comprised three sections: Client Services, Statistical Coordination and Technical Support.
The first publication by the modern GSO was the *Index of Retail Prices in Regional Centres, Queensland, February 1990*. The office was soon publishing a range of documents on topics such as labour force, exports, prices, women, crime and deaths, as well as input-output tables, a *Compendium of Queensland Statistics* (now a series of tables on our website at http://www.oesr.qld.gov.au/publications/tables/index.shtml) and an *Inventory of Statistical Collections: Queensland Government Departments and Authorities*.

Following a review of the office by the Public Sector Management Commission, the office introduced a ‘user pays’ policy in October 1990. As a result, the office started managing administrative statistical collections and conducting surveys for paying clients. Paid work was conducted under QStats, the office’s commercial arm.

The office established a Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system in 1993-94 to improve its efficiency in conducting surveys. A regional presence was established in July 1994, with a resource centre at James Cook University in Townsville. This centre soon became the Townsville office of the Government Statistician’s Office and moved to the central area of the city. A Crime Statistics Unit was set up in July 1995. David Smith was appointed Government Statistician in 1995, having been with the office since its inception in 1984, firstly as Manager of Statistical Services and then Director of the office.

In 1996, the GSO employed 37 permanent staff and about 30 temporary staff. Its functions included designing and conducting surveys, statistical and economic analysis, provision of statistical information and advice, and maintaining administrative statistical collections, primarily for Queensland Government departments and agencies. A formal quality assurance system began to be developed in 1996. The GSO moved to larger premises on level 16 of 61 Mary Street, Brisbane in January 1998.

**Establishment of the Office of Economic and Statistical Research**

In January 1999, the Office of the Government Statistician and QStats (which had become two separate offices in 1997) were combined with Treasury’s economic research and analysis function to form the Office of Economic and Statistical Research (OESR) under the Treasury portfolio, and Dr Peter Crossman was appointed as Government Statistician.

From the start, OESR developed a team-based structure. It initiated an Activity Information Management System (AIMS) and made further enhancements to its quality assurance system. The *Queensland Treasury Annual Report 1998-99* states that:

> OESR delivers intelligence, advice, data, research and development, and coordination services to enhance Queensland Government decision-making and planning, assist its agencies in providing competitive, cost-effective infrastructure and social services throughout Queensland and encourage a more informed and involved community.

Total number of staff employed in the office was approximately 100 in 2001-02. OESR moved to new premises at 33 Charlotte Street, Brisbane in April 2004. OESR opened a Rockhampton office in July 2000 and a Cairns office in 2001-02. It works extensively with government agencies and other bodies around the State and has developed a range of regional data.

Since its inception, OESR has conducted a wide range of research, modelling, survey work, economic analysis, data processing and analysis, information services, and statistical strategy and
policy work. The office has undertaken many departmental consultancies and has worked in collaboration with several universities. User-pays consultancies for government departments include integrated survey solutions from conception through to final reporting, for example, the biannual Queensland Household Survey. Data processing and analysis is provided; for example, the Queensland Road Crash database is maintained on a user-pays basis for Transport and Main Roads. Increasingly, OESR is developing statistical information systems which allow agencies to interrogate both public and agency data against various themes and localities, thereby providing agencies with significantly valuable business decision support tools. OESR’s major client is the Treasurer and Queensland Treasury, providing economic analysis, macroeconomic and microeconomic modelling, research and briefing on current economic conditions to the Treasurer and Under Treasurer.

OESR’s statistical publishing program continues, with the medium increasingly changing from paper-based to primarily web-based output. The References section provides a link to OESR services.

OESR is the only official state-based statistical agency in Australia. It provides a statistical coordination role for Queensland providing a statistical and research service to Queensland Government departments, as well as working closely with the ABS on statistical priorities for the State and nation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References</th>
<th>Details of statistical services by OESR are available at <a href="http://www.oesr.qld.gov.au">www.oesr.qld.gov.au</a>.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OESR services</td>
<td>For a fuller account of conducting censuses in Australia, see pp. 73-110 of this publication, available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics website at <a href="http://www.abs.gov.au">www.abs.gov.au</a>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informing a Nation: The Evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1905 to 2005</td>
<td>A copy of this publication was made available under the Q150 Statistical Collection at <a href="http://www.oesr.qld.gov.au">www.oesr.qld.gov.au</a>. See chapter 1 of the publication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q150 Statistical Stories</td>
<td>For Australia-wide information, see this Year Book article and separate publication on the Australian Bureau of Statistics website at <a href="http://www.abs.gov.au">www.abs.gov.au</a>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>