

## CLASS and data management – Where to from here?

A discussion paper prepared by CLCs Australia July 2022

### Background

CLASS has been a learning experience for us all. Underfunded from the outset, and despite the best efforts of CLCs Australia, CLASS has struggled to deliver the full range of functions that were originally envisaged. CLASS arguably promised more at the outset than it has delivered over time.

It costs CLCs Australia around \$1.3m per year to deliver CLASS and related data work. About 40% of this is paid out to the private entities that built, manage and host CLASS, with around 60% used to fund CLASS personnel (Helpdesk services and other technical supports). The income required for CLASS is almost entirely derived from State and Territory governments, with states such as NSW, Victoria and Queensland paying the most (these states having the largest populations and the most CLCs). State and Territory governments are using different approaches to making their CLASS contributions, but it does seem that the funding is all coming directly or indirectly from their CLC programs. CLCs Australia has argued that the Commonwealth should fund CLASS properly and separately from the National Legal Assistance Partnership (NLAP) funding stream. We have argued that this would be a sensible investment, particularly given the Commonwealth's increasing data demands, and because of its original failure to fund CLASS properly. The Commonwealth has so far declined to fund CLASS in this way. Similarly, we have been unable to convince States and Territories that they should fund CLASS from their own coffers, especially since they are responsible under NLAP for data reporting. CLCs Australia is acutely aware that the sector is paying for CLASS, albeit indirectly.

CLCs Australia acknowledges the historical problems with CLASS but also considers that CLASS performance has significantly improved over time. It functions reasonably effectively as a data repository system and delivers some very basic functions associated with a client management system (CMS). Despite these improvements, it is clear that CLASS will never be able to match the functionality of commercial CMSs and many centres across Australia are opting to purchase these products. This is particularly the case in Victoria and will soon be the case in NSW, with centres in both states favouring ActionStep as their preferred CMS.

It is also true that many centres across the country won't be able to, or don't want to, purchase a commercial CMS product. Some want to stick with what they know, and others fear they will never have sufficient resources to purchase a CMS or afford its annual costs.

Using the learnings of CLASS, CLCs Australia is rethinking its approach to data collection and management. At this stage we are imagining our future work will need to address the following key and related pursuits:

- Data quality and integrity through a National Data Set
- Data sovereignty through a central data repository for Australian CLCs and other organisations in our membership
- Exploring the viability of a role in supporting under-resourced centres to acquire a CMS
- Consideration of whether there may be a role in securing discounted prices for bulk purchase of ActionStep (noting work already being done in this space by state peaks)
- Continuing to support CLASS for those centres that want to continue using CLASS.

## National Data Set

It is clear to CLCs Australia that a focus of our work must be the integrity and utility of a National Data Set. We must be able to tell the sector's story, and this is significantly dependent on us being able to report data that accurately reflects the entirety of the sector's work. The sector must own this data; we cannot be reliant upon government or third parties for access to this data.

Our National Data Set needs to be improved. There are lots of issues here: some centres aren't using CLASS, there are inconsistent approaches to entering data into CLASS across centres, there is a need for a clearer Data Standards Manual and for clearer indication from the Commonwealth about how it wants work quantified. CLCs Australia has lots of ideas on how to improve the National Data Set, in terms of both data and systems.

CLCs Australia is exploring the creation of a suite of accessible data services such as quality profiling, quality dashboards and data validation rules, that would help all centres monitor the quality of their data as it comes in the door. This would add significant value - the point of entry of data is where you can make the most improvement. With CLCs Australia providing and supporting services such as these, centres will be able to input data more effectively and have more confidence in their data.

Importantly, a National Data Set is about more than compliance with NLAP. It will help us showcase the valuable work the sector does on a national scale.

We are already doing work to enhance the quality of our data. We're running training, we're interrogating our data to find problems, and we're finding ways to fix these problems. We're planning conversations with the nearly 40 centres that don't enter data into CLASS, starting with the nine of these centres that receive NLAP funding (given NLAP contemplates all NLAP-funded centres entering data into CLASS). To get a truly national picture, we need to find a way of incorporating all the work of all of our member centres.

To succeed in our data mission, we will need strong relationships with the entities making decisions about data collection. We need to have relationships of trust with the Commonwealth, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (which the Commonwealth has engaged to collect and analyse legal assistance data), and with state and territory justice departments. Our work in data will be about more than just government reporting. As centres increasingly diversify their funding sources, we need to be able to tell our data story to different audiences. This is why we need government requirements around data to not undermine our broader data work, and to have these conversations with government we will need data expertise.

Other non-government players – like state CLC peaks and other legal assistance sectors – will also be key.

Our investments here will be primarily personnel. CLCs Australia currently has two employees doing work relating to data quality and integrity – these employees are separate from the team who work on CLASS, although they obviously collaborate with the CLASS team. For the foreseeable future, we will need this level of resourcing in data. We are also upskilling our technical staff in the data skills and technology platforms that will support this data work.

## Data sovereignty through a central repository

Regardless of what happens to 'CLASS' (as we currently understand it), we will need to have a centralised and sector-owned central data repository beyond 2025. This might be CLASS or might be something else – perhaps an off-the-shelf product customised with the assistance of a different provider. Whatever it is, it must be a database into which CMSs like ActionStep (but not limited to ActionStep) can easily export data.



The emphasis will be on a repository that is fit for purpose and that is highly accessible, functional, and capable of generating great reports. We (and State Program Managers) must be able to pull all the reports that might be required, without CLCs Australia needing to negotiate every minor detail with another provider/vendor. The system will not have the functions of a CMS, and CLCs Australia is intending to stop development on CMS functions attached to CLASS. While this will disappoint some users of CLASS, it is just not possible for CLCs Australia to meet people's expectations here at reasonable cost. We anticipate that CLASS 2.0 will be better and cheaper to run than CLASS. As part of our strategy to reduce costs, we will consider working with a different provider.

When we think about this national data repository, we need to appreciate that data doesn't manage itself. We will need personnel to ensure compliance with NLAP and DSM standards, to deliver training and to develop resources to promote data consistency, and to participate in discussions with government about counting rules and the like.

NLAP reporting requirements could change over time, but with a data repository that we control and with sufficient expertise in-house, we will be able to respond to the changing demands with minimal fuss. Dashboards can be developed as required.

Our CLASS costs comprise provider and hosting costs (about 40% of the overall cost) and staff costs. We will be seeking more efficient provider and hosting services which will have the effect of driving down costs. This potentially frees up funds, enabling us to deliver more for centres in other areas. And a cheaper CLASS means State Program Managers can be charged less, freeing up some of the CLC funds they are using to pay for the program. State Program Managers could decide to return these savings directly to CLCs.

## But what about CMSs?

CMSs are key to improved productivity across CLCs. They are also likely to have a workforce impact: workers want to work in environments where they are properly supported by technology, and we will struggle to attract and retain workers where this support isn't offered. CMSs can be pitched to government as productivity and workforce initiatives, and there has been an increase in recent years (largely as a consequence of COVID-19) in the availability of funding for digital transformation.

Given the value of CMSs, CLCs Australia is concerned that less resourced centres – those that can't afford commercial CMS products - will fall even further behind in terms of technology capacity. CLCs Australia is interested in exploring whether we might be able to source a CMS for centres that cannot afford programs like ActionStep. At this point we do

not have any particular product in mind, although we do have some expertise in Microsoft products.

We don't imagine that CLCs Australia will ever again seek to be in the business of developing software. (We never sought this role in the first place but were pushed into it by the Commonwealth when it decommissioned CLSIS.) But it *is* arguably our role to do what we can in the ICT space to provide technology, data and advocacy support and leadership, helping the sector to make use of the right technology to further the sector's aims. We might be able to help source an off-the-shelf CMS product that, with minimal customisation, might benefit centres at a modest cost to these centres. It would be an opt-in programme with no pressure for centres to take it up. This initiative would be designed as self-funding: centres would have to buy in, but at a lower cost than would be incurred if they purchased their own CMS.

This activity would involve personnel who would develop up a proposal for consideration by centres.

## Next steps

The new Attorney-General will expect us to be able to tell the sector's data story, but he has also spoken of the need to reduce administrative and bureaucratic burdens on the legal assistance sector. Now is a good time to be refining our approach to data collection and analysis.

We need to begin communicating to the Commonwealth the critical importance of a National Data Set, and our expectation that this will be owned by the sector. We should start work on CLASS 2.0, noting that it will be data repository system and not a CMS. Our budget will need to reflect the scaled-down expectations of the system. We need also to start asking the Commonwealth how it envisages centres reporting data beyond June 2025, and through what system. We also need to start consulting our sector about the sort of system they would like to use. What vision for CLASS 2.0 do centres have?

CLASS 2.0 needs to be configured to better capture some of the data that is currently missing, such as disaster-related services. But these new recording options need to be subject to an overarching framework to build data quality.

We need to give governments, members and centres a clear picture of our current ICT-related outlays, and our vision for our future work.

We need to work out what if any role we can play in helping centres achieve a discounted price for bulk purchases of ActionStep (taking care not to duplicate or undermine efforts



being taken by state CLC peaks). We also need to do more thinking about whether there is any role for the national peak in helping centres that are not able to, or do not want to, purchase ActionStep, to access a CMS.

This paper is being shared with centres across our network. We want to know what you think of our proposed approach.

Comments on this paper would be very welcome. Please send feedback to [tim.leach@clcs.org.au](mailto:tim.leach@clcs.org.au) by Friday 12<sup>th</sup> August 2022.