FUTURE GOVERNMENT INSTITUTE
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FIT FOR PURPOSE, READY FOR CHANGE: **REDEFINING DIGITAL MATURITY IN QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | VOL.31 | QUEENSLAND

GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY
QUEENSLAND AUSTRALIA

IN BRIEF

The Queensland Research Council convened a multi-sector roundtable in Brisbane to address the growing urgency of digital maturity, data capability, and citizen-centred design across government services. Participants from Queensland Government departments, Griffith University, and industry partners examined how workforce capability, leadership readiness, and trust architecture are shaping the digital transformation of public services.

A dominant theme was the mismatch between government digital ambition and the system-wide readiness to support it. Participants stressed that capability building must extend beyond technology specialists to include executive decision-makers, frontline workers, and cross-agency teams. Specific gaps were identified in design standardisation, cross-agency collaboration, and executive digital literacy. Strategic analogies like the "Everest Problem"—a metaphor describing rushed transformation without foundational preparation—underscored the need for structured, incremental uplift.

Notable case examples included cross-agency AI tools for digital learning, emergency services event-response systems, and service redesign around enrolment and resource allocation. Participants also debated the limits of trust in AI and automation, noting behavioural economics, user motivation, and cognitive load as central to digital public trust. Key recommendations focused on short-course executive education, collaborative design rubrics, and performance frameworks to shift transformation from aspirational to achievable.

By **Patrick Joy** | Head of Research & Analysis | **Public Sector Network**

KEY THEMES AND INSIGHTS

CLIMBING THE DIGITAL EVEREST: AMBITION OUTPACES READINESS

The metaphor of the "Everest Problem" emerged as a powerful framing device for digital transformation gone awry: many government agencies are embarking on complex transformations without sufficient preparatory training, workforce support, or cross-functional integration. Participants warned that while projects often begin with excitement, they stall due to foundational weaknesses—especially lack of shared capability across executive, procurement, finance, and technical units.

This challenge was illustrated by legacy public service classification systems that constrain digital talent recruitment. Multiple contributors cited persistent issues with IT professionals being capped at AO8/PO6 levels, pushing experts into contingent labour. The result: a government heavily reliant on long-term contractors while struggling to incentivise internal capability uplift.

MANDATING MINDSET SHIFTS: THE CASE FOR EXECUTIVE DIGITAL ACCREDITATION

A compelling idea repeated throughout the session was the need for mandatory digital literacy and data fluency at the executive level. Participants questioned why senior roles require no ongoing accreditation in digital competence, contrasting this with other professions such as law or accounting.

A behavioural shift among leaders—from risk aversion to curiosity and capability—was positioned as vital. Rather than expecting executives to become technical experts, participants advocated for fluency in digital language, strategic use cases, and ethical decision-making frameworks.

DESIGNING FOR FIT, NOT FLASH: CITIZEN EXPERIENCE AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Despite growing focus on service digitisation, participants noted widespread inconsistency in human-centred design. Several departments recounted instances where internal tools were rolled out without usability testing, resulting in high support volumes and low adoption.

In response, agencies described their co-design model with teachers to develop AI-driven tools tailored to classroom practice. One official described the fragmentation citizens experience when interacting with multiple services, advocating for a shared design language and inclusive UI/UX patterns across government. The concept of "fit-for-purpose design" was preferred over abstract ideals of "human-centredness," particularly in technical or regulatory services.

LIFE EVENTS, CRISES AND CROSSROADS: RETHINKING GOVERNMENT ENTRY POINTS

The roundtable extended traditional "life event" framing beyond births and deaths to include crisis-driven and service-triggered events. Emergency services representatives described how floods or bushfires necessitate immediate, emotionally sensitive digital touchpoints. Others discussed the enrolment process as a life event involving education, identity, and place-based data integration.

Participants cited examples where cross-agency digital experiences faltered due to siloed funding or strategy. Despite shared citizen journeys, services often remain compartmentalised due to ministerial lines or inconsistent priorities. However, case studies on generative AI tools showed how shared priorities, strong leadership, and aligned incentives can produce breakthrough results.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

DIGITAL LITERACY GAPS AND EXECUTIVE INERTIA

A persistent barrier identified was executive-level digital illiteracy. Participants cited stories of senior leaders still reliant on printed emails and analogue workflows, resistant to adopting even foundational tools like Microsoft Teams.

A lack of structured professional development was also highlighted. Unlike regulated professions, senior government roles often have no expectation of continuous digital upskilling. This disconnect results in project sponsorship without comprehension, poor risk assessment, and suboptimal investment decisions.

FRAGMENTED DESIGN, LIMITED INCENTIVES FOR COLLABORATION

Despite acknowledgement of shared citizen journeys, participants agreed that inter-agency collaboration is often deprioritised due to budgetary silos and absence of whole-of-government performance KPIs. Legacy systems, differing strategic plans, and lack of standardised UI/UX frameworks contribute to redundant or contradictory service experiences.

PUBLIC TRUST AND SYSTEM ONE THINKING

Discussion also surfaced tensions between trust, transparency, and behavioural economics. Participants noted that while citizens may claim to distrust platforms like Facebook, their behaviour suggests a preference for frictionless experiences. Government systems, by contrast, are often designed for compliance rather than intuitive use, leading to disengagement. Without well-structured feedback loops or incentive structures, uptake of trusted public services remains limited.

FUTURE FOCUS AREAS

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION AS A STRATEGIC LEVER

There was strong consensus that Queensland should explore mandatory digital capability frameworks for executive roles. Microcredentials, modular sprints, and short-form programs delivered in partnership with institutions like Griffith University and Public Sector Network's Academy Training could bridge the literacy gap at scale. These offerings would not only improve governance but also reduce reliance on external expertise.

COMMON DESIGN RUBRICS AND USER EXPERIENCE PRINCIPLES

Participants called for a whole-of-government approach to service design standards. Rather than enforcing uniformity, the focus would be on shared principles that enhance discoverability, accessibility, and cognitive simplicity. This could include a centrally curated pattern library and guidelines on behavioural insights in digital service delivery.

BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE IN TRUST-BUILDING FRAMEWORKS

Several contributors advocated for behavioural economics approaches to service design and policy delivery. Incorporating system-one thinking, nudges, and motivational design could reduce the friction between intent and engagement, particularly in high-stress or high-emotion contexts such as emergencies, bereavement, or financial stress.

INNOVATIVE IDEAS AND CASE STUDIES

1. REIMAGINING DIGITAL ACCREDITATION FOR EXECUTIVES

One of the session's most supported ideas was introducing mandatory digital and data fluency accreditation for government executives, akin to CPD requirements in law or medicine. Griffith University was proposed as a key partner, already delivering executive micro-credential programs and partnering with Queensland Treasury Corporation to build data evaluation dashboards. Participants viewed this as both a cultural and structural fix to executive capability gaps.

2. DIGITAL ENROLMENT AS A LIFE EVENT: EDUCATION SECTOR INNOVATION

The Department of Education shared insights from its digital learning initiative, including a co-designed generative AI tool for teachers. Described as both technically complex and emotionally sensitive, this work redefined enrolment as a "life event" requiring multiple agency touchpoints, including identity verification and regional placement data. The project succeeded through shared leadership, aligned business needs, and early stakeholder buy-in.

3. EMERGENCY SERVICES EVENT DESIGN AND RESILIENCE INFRASTRUCTURE

Queensland Fire and Emergency Services outlined how it is using incident-centred design to manage crises more holistically. Service design includes community touchpoints, such as emergency information delivery, evacuation support, and digital kiosks. Crucially, they described how cross-agency failure in digital infrastructure—like Telstra deprioritising monitoring networks during floods—can cause life-critical service gaps, reinforcing the need for anticipatory, collaborative design.

4. BUILDING FOR EMOTIONAL CONTEXTS: DEATH AND DISASTER AS DESIGN ANCHORS

Several participants argued for embedding emotional context into digital public service design. From the death of a parent to natural disasters, high-stress events create cognitive overload, which public services often exacerbate through complexity. Behavioural economics, critical user journeys, and emotionally literate digital environments were all suggested as underutilised design lenses.

STRATEGIC OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- **Develop a cross-agency executive digital literacy program** in partnership with Queensland universities, focusing on micro-credentials, short courses, and strategic technology fluency.
- **Initiate a Queensland Government-wide service design pattern library**, grounded in accessibility, inclusivity, and behavioural principles.
- **Pilot collaborative digital transformation teams** that include business users, frontline officers, IT professionals, and behavioural experts.

MEDIUM-TERM GOALS

- **Incentivise digital leadership through performance frameworks** that embed digital KPIs into SES recruitment and performance plans.
- **Standardise cross-agency service journey maps** for recurring life and crisis events (e.g. school enrolment, flood recovery, business closure).
- **Build trust frameworks for public sector AI**, ensuring transparency, explainability, and opt-in models for high-risk applications.

LONG-TERM VISION

- **Establish a centralised Public Sector Design and Capability Hub**, tasked with codifying best practices, enabling peer learning, and governing multi-agency digital standards.
- **Institutionalise cross-department strategic alignment**, embedding shared KPIs into budget processes to foster collaborative infrastructure development.
- **Position Queensland as a national leader in behavioural digital government**, leveraging academic partnerships to create human-centred, ethically sound digital services.

ABOUT THE FUTURE GOVERNMENT INSTITUTE (FGI) RESEARCH COUNCIL

We've been able to engineer a new program antithetical to the classical red tape, administration, and risk-aversion that impedes innovation.

Public Sector Network has recently launched The Future Government Institute (FGI), a global hub for forward-thinking public sector leaders, innovators, and practitioners dedicated to shaping the next era of governance.

Our mission is to empower government professionals with the tools, insights, and networks needed to drive meaningful transformation - https://publicsectornetwork.com/future-government-institute/

Leveraging our extensive connections, we are uniting the sharpest minds from government, academia, and industry via monthly research-driven roundtables, hosted at esteemed national centres of research, courtesy of university partners across Australia and New Zealand.

ABOUT PUBLIC SECTOR NETWORK

Public Sector Network is a research company that represents public sector professionals across Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the USA. It develops roundtables, seminars, and conferences to suit current areas of interest to government agencies and their suppliers.

PSN's growing community spans across federal, state, and local government departments, healthcare, and education, allowing members to share information, access the latest in government innovation, and engage with other like-minded individuals on a secure and closed-door network.

AUSTRALIA / NEW ZEALAND
P +61 2 9057 9070
E INFO@PUBLICSECTORNETWORK.COM.AU

USA
P +1 (647) 969 4509
E HELLO@PUBLICSECTORNETWORK.COM

CANADA
P +1 (647) 459 8904
E CONTACT@PUBLICSECTORNETWORK.CO

Public Sector Network (Australia) Pty Ltd
ABN - 46 617 870 872 20-40
Meagher Street, Chippendale, Sydney NSW 2008, Australia