



POTENTIAL EVIDENCE ASYMMETRY ACROSS AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT PORTFOLIOS: FEASIBILITY OF SOCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT AS A BRIDGING FRAMEWORK FOR REAL-WORLD EVALUATION



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^{1,3}Lee L, ¹Byrnes J, ²Stewart M, ²Snoke M, ^{1,3,4}Kim H

¹Faculty School of Medicine and Dentistry, Griffith University, Australia
²Roche Products Pty. Limited (Australia)
³Faculty of Health Sciences and Medicine, Bond University, Australia
⁴Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, Australia

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Background

- ❖ Australian Commonwealth portfolios face different evidentiary expectations when justifying expenditure.
- ❖ Health (AU\$70.8 billion projected for 2025-26) is subject to rigorous formal evaluation^{1,2}.
- ❖ However, Education (AU\$72.5 billion) and Defence (AU\$83.2 billion) rely predominantly on narrative justifications without validated or publicly transparent methodological benchmarks^{1, 3-5}.

Objectives

- ❖ This study aimed to compare evaluative standards applied to major Australian portfolios.
- ❖ We used publicly available budget documentation and assess the feasibility of applying Social Return on Investment (SROI) principles as a real-world-evidence compatible framework to extend proportional evaluative standards beyond Health.

Methods

- ❖ Structured cross-portfolio analysis of Commonwealth Budget papers, portfolio budget statements, and central agency guidance.
- ❖ Identified decision relevant variables shaping funding allocation and evaluation practice.
- ❖ Seven variables were defined a priori: portfolio size, governance mechanisms, program structure, post-COVID adjustments, external pressures, evaluation methods, and integration with the Measuring What Matters wellbeing framework.
- ❖ A screen across five Federal (Health and Aged Care, Social Services, Defence, Education, Infrastructure) portfolio documents then classified each variable as identifiable, partially implied, or absent.

Results

- ❖ All portfolios reported clear data on fiscal size and internal governance, but transparency of evaluation methods, post-COVID adjustments, and explicit reference to Measuring What Matters varied substantially¹⁻⁶.
- ❖ Health and Social Services showed the strongest alignment with formal evidence-based evaluation, while Defence and Infrastructure relied on strategic narratives, external risk framing, and performance indicators with no explicit evidence standards¹.

- ❖ Health and Aged Care had the most explicit publicly documented methodological requirements, despite comparable or smaller fiscal scale than Education and Defence. ^{1, 3-5}.

No apparent link between portfolio scale and evaluation rigor

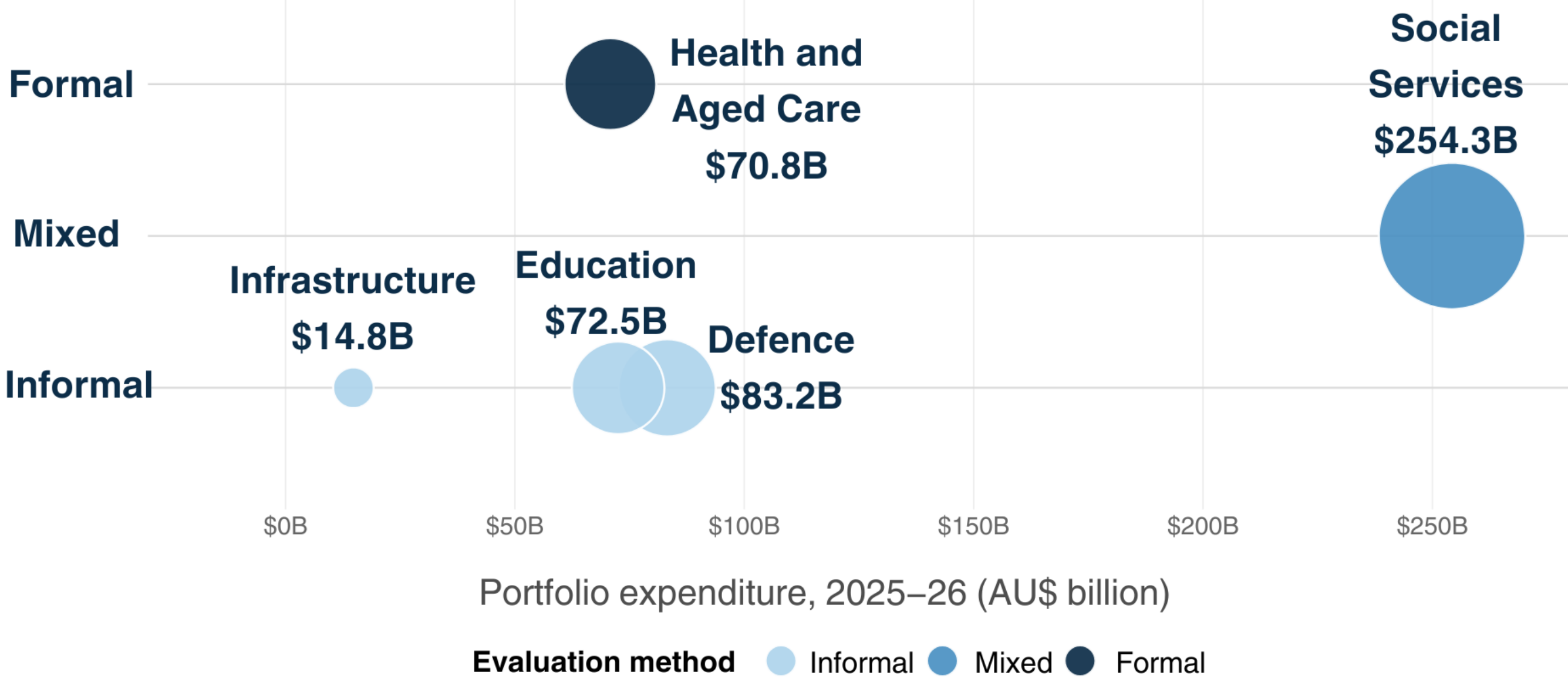


Figure 1. Portfolio scale has no apparent link to evaluation rigor. Health is the only portfolio with formal evidence-based evaluation, despite comparable or smaller spend than Education, Defence, and Social Services.

- ❖ We propose Social Return on Investment (SROI) as a bridging framework that extends, rather than replaces, existing evaluation standards.
- ❖ Health’s existing evaluation structure positions it to pilot SROI first.
- ❖ Public budget documents support mapping a SROI-aligned framework, though no accepted Australian standard for SROI currently exists, and benefit valuation may be subjective.

SROI as a bridging framework

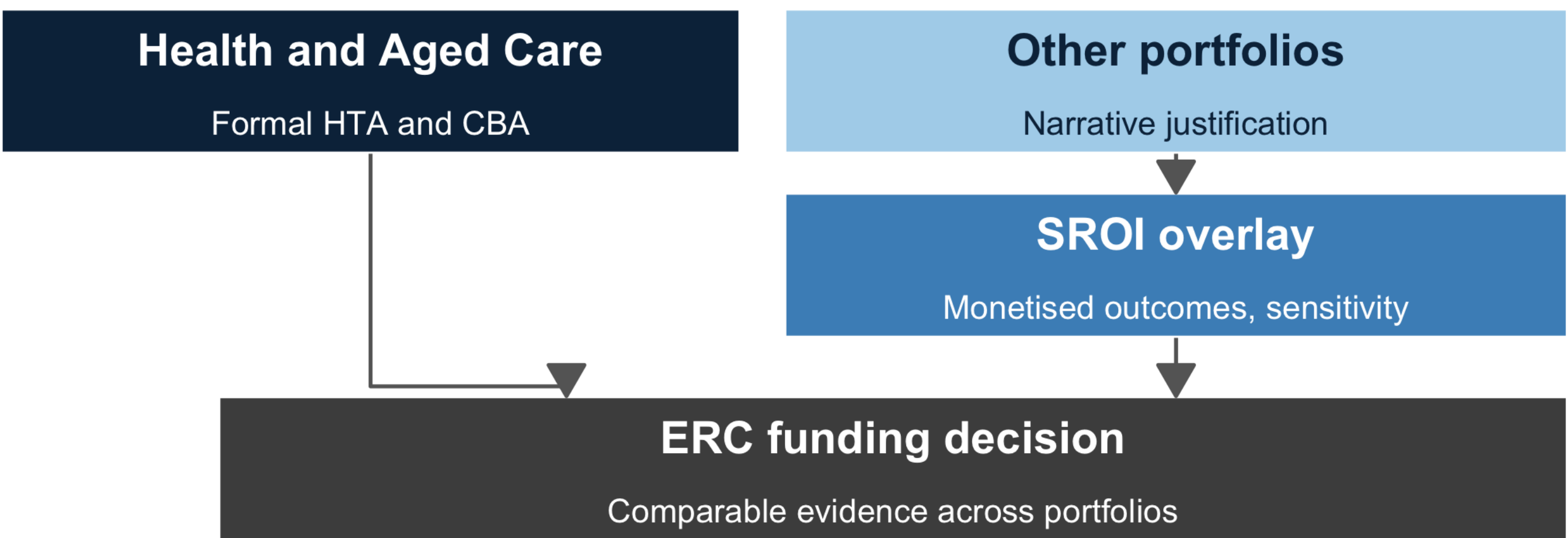


Figure 2. Proposed SROI pathway.

Conclusions

- ❖ Evidence asymmetry across portfolios may limit transparent cross-portfolio comparisons of social value under fiscal pressure.
- ❖ Our study found sufficient information in public budget documentation to map a SROI-aligned evaluation framework, although explicit integration with Measuring What Matters was limited amongst the portfolios reviewed.
- ❖ SROI may offer a pragmatic bridging framework that complements cost-benefit analysis and health technology assessment, supporting more consistent recognition of social value across government spending.

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Comparison of domestic portfolios	
Portfolio	Evidentiary basis
Defence	Informal. Strategy documents and performance targets; no explicit evidence standard referenced.
Health and Aged Care	Formal. Explicit evidence-based health policy; performance metrics tied to measurable objectives across defined timeframes.
Social Services	Mixed. Formal evidence-based policy and metrics in some programs; informal stakeholder engagement in others.
Infrastructure	Informal. Performance indicators and stakeholder surveys; no explicit evidence standard referenced.
Education	Informal. Performance indicators and progress reports under statutory agency oversight; indirect evidence only.

Classification key — *Formal*: evaluation methodology explicitly named, with outcomes tied to measurable, time-bound objectives. *Mixed*: formal evidence-based elements present in some programs, informal in others. *Informal*: strategy documents, performance targets, or narrative reporting with no named evaluative methodology.

Extracted from Budget Paper No. 1, No. 4, and each portfolio's budget statement.

Table 1. Evidence of quality, evaluation methods, and fiscal scale across five Commonwealth portfolios (2025-2026).

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