

**HOW AND WHY DO GOVERNMENTS FORGET?**  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR ALASTAIR STARK, PROFESSOR HEATHER  
LOVELL AND PROFESSOR RODNEY SCOTT

**TO MAKE THE MOST OUT OF THIS SCRIPT, YOU COULD:**

- Stick it in your book as a record of watching Alastair, Heather and Rodney's animation
- Pause the animation and make notes as you go
- Add your own illustrations to the sheet
- Create your own animation to accompany it
- Add notes from classroom discussions
- Make notes of areas you will investigate further
- Make notes of key words and definitions
- Add questions you would like answered – you can message Alastair, Heather and Rodney through the comments box at the bottom of their article:  
[www.futurumcareers.com/how-and-why-do-governments-forget](http://www.futurumcareers.com/how-and-why-do-governments-forget)

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## SCRIPT:

Institutional memory is the knowledge of the past held by organisations. This includes both formal knowledge, archived in documents and files, and informal knowledge held in people's heads.

It is much harder to study informal memory, as it does not exist in any physical form, while formal reports of an organisation's past actions are recorded and filed away.

Informal knowledge commonly involves stories of an organisation, perhaps discussed in meetings or shared as gossip over lunch. However, this method of transferring knowledge is not always reliable, as stories are constantly changing as they get passed from person to person.

One factor affecting institutional memory is the turnover of staff, known as 'institutional churn'. When staff members leave, they take their memories of the organisation with them. Once all the employees who remember the past have left, these stories will no longer be told, and that knowledge will have faded from institutional memory.

When institutional memory is lost, it can result in 'institutional amnesia', causing organisations to forget knowledge of the past. This causes a problem, as it is important for organisations to learn from their past successes and failures. Associate Professor Alastair Stark, Professor Heather Lovell and Professor Rodney Scott are part of a team investigating the impact institutional memory can have on policymaking in government departments.

They believe that both formal and informal memory influence the decision-making process when governments create public policies.

These policies form the backbone of a nation, by setting the rules to support and protect the country and its citizens. Public policies cover everything from healthcare to housing, energy use to the environment.

Al, Heather and Rodney and their team are investigating the effects of institutional churn on institutional memory in government departments in Australia, New Zealand and the UK.

They are surveying and interviewing government employees to discover how staff turnover has affected the ability of the departments to remember the past in relation to current policy, and to determine how storytelling influences institutional memory in different departments.

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The team expects to find that institutional churn may have both good and bad effects on policymaking. While it can cause a loss of institutional memory, it can also bring new ideas to an organisation. When staff move between different departments, they take knowledge with them and so spread key insights across the government.

The team also expects to find that stories from the past have a strong impact on government behaviour and decisions in the present, and that these stories can have both positive and negative effects on policymaking.

Al, Heather and Rodney hope the results of their research will help advise policymakers and government departments on how to effectively manage institutional churn and use stories of the past in beneficial ways.

By working closely with government departments, the team will ensure they learn from the successes and failures of past policies, helping nations make better decisions for their citizens.

What could you achieve as a public policy researcher?

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