

The Realities of Law Reform in a Small Jurisdiction

Insights from the South Australian Law Reform Institute ('SALRI')

The Commonwealth Association of Law Reform Agencies Conference

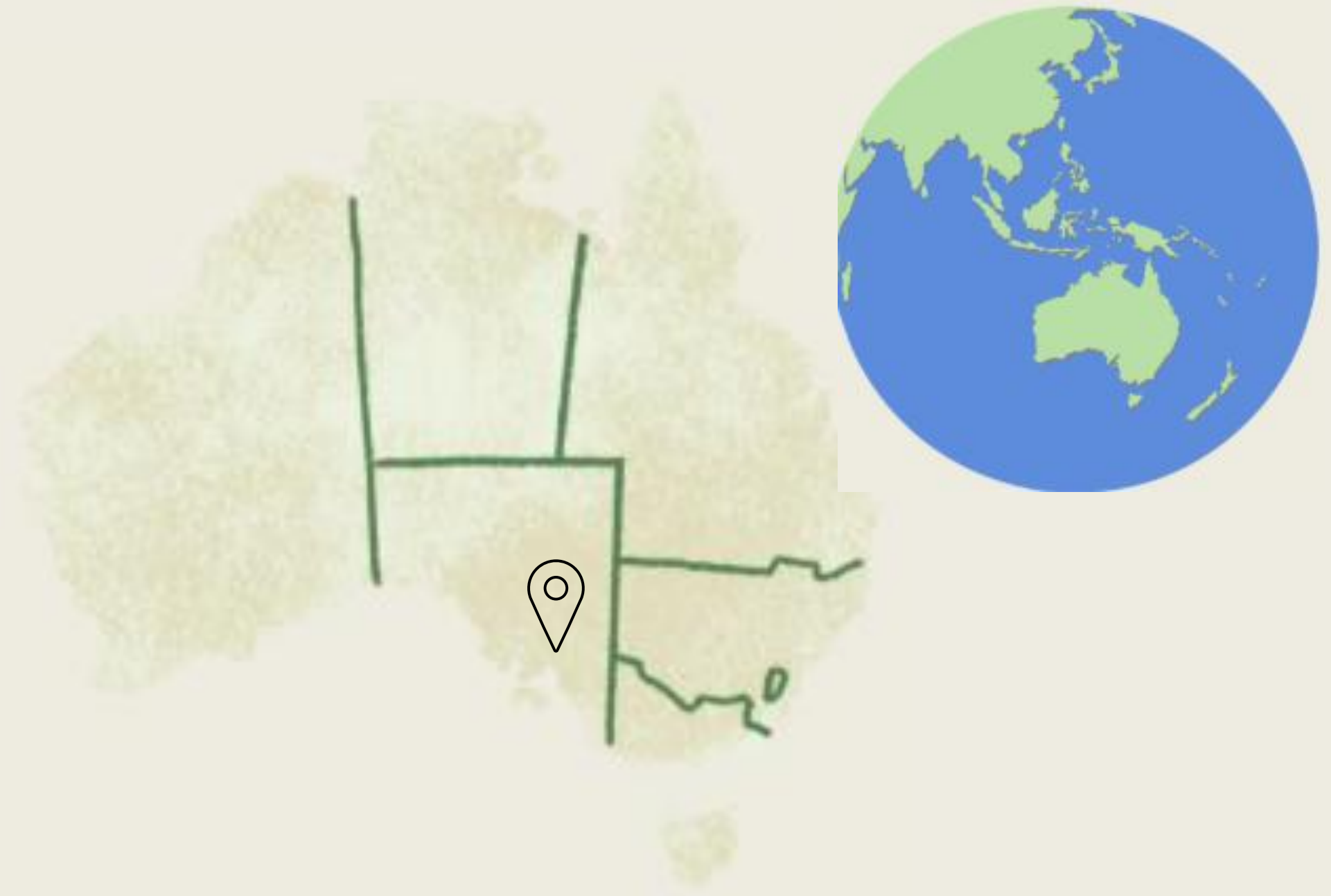
13 July 2026 - 14 July 2026

Fullerton Hotel, Singapore

Taylor Portelli
Researcher, SALRI

South Australian Context

- Estimated total population of 1,900,000 people.
- Approximately 415,000 people live regionally (16% of the total population).
- South Australia spans approximately 1,000,000 square kilometres.



The South Australian Law Reform Institute ('SALRI') Model



- An independent non-partisan Law Reform body in South Australia, based at the Adelaide Law School.
- Formed by an agreement in 2010 between the Attorney-General of South Australia, the University of Adelaide and the Law Society of South Australia.
- Based on the Alberta (Canada) and Tasmania (Australia) Institute model.
- Small in size and resources, but a considerable output and impact.

See generally: David Plater and John Williams, *'The South Australian Law Reform Institute a Decade On: "May You Continue Well into the Future"'* (2022) 43(1) *Adelaide Law Review* 37.

SALRI's Model and Contributors

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graph TD; A[SALRI's Model and Contributors] --> B((The Law Reform Class and Other Students)); A --> C((Contracted Research Assistants)); A --> D((Expert Advisory Board)); A --> E((Permanent Staff)); A --> F((Local Lawyers, Experts, Interested Parties, Academics and the Community));
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**The Law Reform
Class and Other
Students**

**Contracted
Research
Assistants**

(usually former or current
law reform students)

**Expert Advisory
Board**

Permanent Staff

Director: Professor John Williams

Deputy Director: Associate

Professor David Plater

Admin: Louise Scarman

**Local Lawyers,
Experts,
Interested Parties,
Academics and
the Community**

The Small Jurisdiction Challenge

Every project competes for
the same limited pool of
resources



Capacity – limited staffing and no full time employees



Funding – finite resourcing and running on the fumes of an oily rag



Outreach and Visibility – the magnified risk of consultation fatigue in a small jurisdiction



Output – capacity to produce, publicise, and inform on the institute's work

Rationale of the Law Reform Class

‘It was largely believed that as SALRI is based at an educational institution there was an obligation to ensure we were both informed by current research and we taught the next generation of law reformers.’

It made no sense to be a university-based institute without students.’

- Professor John Williams AM



The Value of the Class

- Collaboration enhances SALRI's capacity and impact.
- Student research can - and does - feed directly into SALRI reports.
- Increased partnerships and multi-disciplinary input.
- Fresh perspectives, valuable insights, and innovative solutions.
- Source of skilled and motivated researchers familiar in law reform context, modern consultation, and objective analysis.



Partnership, Not Placement

Benefits for SALRI

- ✓ Enhanced research capacity
- ✓ Increased capacity and output
- ✓ Community engagement
- ✓ Increased public visibility
- ✓ Future planning



Benefits for Students

- ✓ Professional growth
- ✓ Engagement with complex issues
- ✓ Unparalleled early career opportunities
- ✓ Skill development
- ✓ Real impact

Personal Reflections

“During my time with SALRI, I have co-authored various reports, and organised and attended consultation trips, roundtables, and engagement meetings with professionals, community members, and Aboriginal leaders. These relationships have developed into genuine connections

Through SALRI and the opportunities offered by virtue of my involvement with the law reform course, I developed a deeper understanding and respect for the vital importance of engaging in meaningful consultation. The true value of the law reform course cannot be fully understood until one has had the opportunity to participate in it. The course provides students with an opportunity to research deeply and meaningfully, contribute to discussions with leading experts, have conversations with the public about how laws are affecting them on a day-to-day basis, and then bring these experiences together to draft recommendations to be put directly before the government. The law reform course is an unparalleled experience as a component of any law degree, and one that I am privileged to have had the opportunity to be part of.

Having worked and volunteered in various roles within government, private practice, and non-government organisations, I can see the true value of SALRI’s work in law reform. I am proud to be part of SALRI’s ongoing and meaningful relationship with the community, creating a tangible impact on South Australia’s laws and practices.”



Parliamentary Acknowledgement

“Thanks for their contributions ought go, firstly, to Professor John Williams and to Dr David Plater, both of whom are longstanding and well-recognised leaders of SALRI. Also, over the course of those years significant contributions have been made by [...] the law reform class at the University of Adelaide. [...] David Plater's leadership of that class, and the way he therefore engages those who are coming through with areas of reform that can be focused on, is an extension of SALRI and a tremendous one.”

- South Australia, Parliamentary Debates, House of Assembly, 28 September 2023, 5552 (Mr Teague, Shadow Attorney-General)

Recent Examples of SALRI's Work

Recent Work:

- Communication Partners (2021)
 - David Plater, **Holly Nicholls**, **Simone Basso**, Anita Brunacci, Jemma Holt, Jennifer Jacobs, Anisa Leaver, Geoff Muecke, Melissa Oxlad, **Olga Pandos**, Martine Powell, Natalie Wade and **Brooke Washusen**
 - Funded by the **Law Foundation of South Australia**.
- Ageing and Adult Safeguarding Act Review (2022)
 - David Plater, **Divya Narayan**, Anita Brunacci, **Holly Nicholls**, Jemma Holt, Michaela Okninski, **Olga Pandos**, **Taylor Portelli**, **Rachel Tan**, **Kim Tran**, Sylvia Villios and John Williams
- Mental Health Act Review (2023)
 - **Olga Pandos**, John Williams, David Plater, Anita Brunacci, Michaela Okninski, **Elaine Marinas**, **Isabella Quek**, **Rachel Tan**, **Divya Narayan** and **Sofia Arlotta**
- Suppression Orders (2024)
 - Jemma Holt, David Plater, John Williams, Geoff Muecke, Yasmin Ilhan, Lisa Cooper, **Olivia Gerhardy**, **Taylor Portelli**, **Gemma De Nichilo**, **Sarah Klimek** and **Elaine Marinas**

- Supported Decision-Making (2025)
 - Sylvia Villios, David Plater, **Emily Conroy**, Mark Giancaspro, Beth Nosworthy, Peta Spyrou, John Williams, Simon Headland and **Brooke Washusen**
 - Funded by the **Law Foundation of South Australia**.
- Real Property Act Review (2025)
 - PT Babie, David Plater, **Brooke Washusen**, Sylvia Villios, Anita Brunacci, John Williams, Peter Burdon, **Michail Ivanov**, **Kane McAskill**, **Anh Caprile**, **Taylor Portelli** and **Michelle Neumann**

Current and Upcoming Work:

- Indigenous Jury Participation
 - Funded by the **Australian Institute of Judicial Administration**
- Bail Act Review
 - Referred by the Attorney-General

All of SALRI's reports are accessible [here](#).

SALRI's reports on:

- Adult Safeguarding (2022);
- Forfeiture Rule (2020);
- Decriminalisation of Abortion (2019);
- Surrogacy (2018);
- Provocation and Domestic Violence Defences (2017-2018); and
- Succession (2013-2017)

**have all been
accepted and
implemented by the
South Australian
Government.**



Successes of the Student Model

- Unique skills and perspectives;
- Maximisation of resources, capacity, and output;
- Broader promotion of the law reform institute; and
- Genuine and reciprocal relationships.

Other Considerations

- Student contribution is not a replacement for a fulltime employee;
- There is a need for ongoing supervision;
- Balancing educational outcomes with the institute's project timelines; and
- Ensuring the relationship remains mutually beneficial.

Lessons from a Small Jurisdiction

- Partnerships magnify capacity.
- Students are an investment.
- Small jurisdictions require adaptability to overcome specific challenges.



Thank you



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