

Consolidated set of questions for discussion

Chapter 1: The Australian Government sector today

1. Do you think Chapter 1 accurately captures the role of the Australian Public Service?

Chapter 1 provides an adequate, broad overview of the role of the APS, noting that the *Public Service Act 1999* specifically describes the APS as “an apolitical public service that is efficient and effective in serving the Government, the Parliament and the Australian public” (s3). The key attributes here are apolitical, efficient and effective; the key stakeholders defined as the Government, the Parliament and the Australian public.

2. What are the implications of the statistical snapshot, and of employee views and attitudes in Chapter 1 for the future of the APS?

The statistical snapshot provides a very broad view of the current APS environment but fails to provide any analysis of what the apparent trends might imply. This is consistent with the approach in many of the annual *State of the Service Reports*, where the statistical analysis consists of broad statements of the obvious but no in-depth strategic consideration of what the trend might mean for the APS in the longer-term.

Figure 1.1 does not seem to add to the discussion, except to highlight the administrative inefficiencies that accompany such a plethora of agencies, many with their own pay scales, certified agreements, IT systems and agency culture. The statistics may also be somewhat misleading, as both Centrelink and the Australian Taxation Office are statutory authorities with specific service delivery roles, whilst the other “largest” agencies are Departments of State – if “Defence” were to include the Australian Defence Force and “Human Services” to include the portfolio agencies, the numbers and order would be different. Perhaps it would be more useful to look at the numbers of people employed in various broad roles, as most agencies have employees who operate across a spectrum of job categories.

The statistical reports that would seem of the greatest potential impact for the future APS are the demographic projections that formed the basis of the 2007 *Intergenerational Report*. If, as is projected, Australia will face a tightening of the labour market over the next two decades, with a loss of experienced older workers and a more competitive environment for the recruitment of new workers, then there is clearly a need to position the APS as an employer of choice. This will involve consideration and addressing of a number of inter-related issues including:

- Pay and conditions;
- Location and mobility;
- Technology; and
- Career aspirations.

But above all, there is a need for the APS to engage in promotional activity which includes consultation with target groups.

In an environment in which skilled workers will be in demand, pay and conditions of employment may well become one of the critical factors in determining which job offer to accept. The APS has a justified reputation for well-paid, secure jobs with a considerable degree of flexibility around hours, leave, work/life balance and general conditions of employment. These could be promoted as factors

attractive to potential employees.

As part of that flexibility, the APS needs to seriously consider how much of its work needs to be undertaken in Canberra and how much could, or should, be undertaken in other locations. In the face of a government policy priority of citizen-centricity, greater consideration can certainly be given to taking the services (and therefore the jobs) to the people, rather than necessitating the people coming to where the services are centrally distributed. It is, however, acknowledged, that a critical mass of senior officers, particularly SES but also ELs, are required in Canberra to serve Ministers and facilitate cross-agency collaboration. A greater volume of entry-level recruitment in regional areas may also facilitate increased recruitment of Indigenous workers and people with a disability who are currently under-represented within the APS as a whole.

In order to support a more locationally-diverse workforce, the APS would also benefit from significant investment in emerging technologies, including reliable remote-access to computer systems, PC-based video conferencing facilities, and the ability to source customer documentation electronically from trusted third parties, such as hospitals for a proof of birth. Such an investment will, however, require significant commitment from both the Government (for financial support) and from senior public servants (for cultural change). It will also necessitate a re-assessment of the risk associated with increased technological reliance, which in turn throws into sharp relief reliance upon the professionalism of the APS and the pre-eminence of the Values and Code of Conduct.

A further issue to be considered in the context of future workforce recruitment is the need to acknowledge the differing career aspirations of the new generation of workers. Whilst it is dangerous to stereotype all members of a cohort, there is some evidence to suggest that many members of the so-called "generation Y" are unlikely to be attracted to the idea of a 40-year career with the same organisation or within the same field of expertise. The APS will need to re-invigorate and re-focus its knowledge management and succession planning strategies if it is to harness the best from its increasingly transient workforce. This will also necessitate a cultural shift, particularly amongst senior managers, that recognises that workers will leave the Branch, the organisation, the APS and that this should not be seen as a form of betrayal or as a reason for not developing and supporting them while they are there. There may be scope to consider:

- broad 'return of service obligations' for employees in whom an organisation has invested a considerable amount;
- availability of exchange placements with State/Territory, Local government or international services or academic placements; or
- greater inter-government collaboration through fluid working groups of employees at all levels rather than siloed reporting arrangements.

Regardless of the approach taken, evidence from attempts to implement other major change programs (such as Access Card, or the Northern Territory Intervention Strategy) suggests that greater acceptance can be achieved through consultation with the target populations. The APS has a wealth of variety in terms of jobs, locations and possible career paths, but has a general reputation of being a dull and boring place to work. Promotion of the benefits and opportunities to potential applications may prove productive, but would need to be targeted in order to ensure that it addresses those issues of concern to potential employees. This will require consultation and a willingness to act upon the advice provided by the target cohorts.

With regard to the views and attitudes of APS employees, it is dangerous to argue any real point from the limited evidence presented in the discussion paper, or in

the *State of the Service Report* that is its source. The Report gathers its data from a very small percentage of current employees and participation in the report is entirely voluntary. Statistically, this is likely to skew the data, as is any perception amongst respondents that their responses can be traced and/or attributed (notwithstanding the assurances both that the data are statistically valid and that responses cannot be traced).

The paper suggests that two less positive perceptions relate to agency management and the concept of a unified APS. The first of these may well be a proverbial 'red herring'. It is almost axiomatic that employees will complain about their bosses and in large agencies in particular, unpopular decisions or those which affect a number of people are likely to be labelled as poor management. The statistic would be more useful if it could identify what is meant by 'well-managed' and why agencies were considered to be not well-managed.

The issue of a unified APS is interesting, not least because it is one of the few areas in which the authors of the discussion paper have placed an interpretation on the statistics. In the absence of other supporting evidence, it seems arrogant to suggest that because only 40% of employees identify primarily with the APS rather than their agency, there is a lack of unity. This interpretation, whilst perhaps correct, would suggest more of a concern of the authors which is particularly revealing because it is arguably the predictable result of a deliberate policy of decentralisation – a policy which Terry Moran clearly seems to support in his introduction.

The then Public Service Commissioner noted the same trend in her 2005/06 *State of the Service Report*. It would seem inevitable that devolution of pay, salary rates and conditions of employment would lead to agencies developing their own 'esprit de corps'. Coupled with the barriers that these diverging arrangements have placed in the way of mobility between agencies, it is again inevitable that employees spend more time in one agency and, as a result, come to identify primarily as an employee of that agency. A more unified APS would arguably enable the organisation as a whole to more effectively address some of the challenges it will face in the coming years, but it is unlikely that a more unified perception will be achieved without a return to parity in pay scales and terms and conditions.

Chapter 2: Challenges in the strategic environment

3. What are the most important challenges facing the public sector over the next ten years?

Of the seven challenges identified in the discussion paper, the key ones would seem to be:

- Increasing public expectations;
- Demographic change;
- Technological change; and
- The need for systemic reform.

Complex policy challenges are by no means a new issue for governments, and whilst the solution of cross-agency collaboration is obvious, the fact that it has been highlighted again suggests that either, the current approach is not working, or the authors of the paper have a particular concern with this issue. It is within the power of governments to re-arrange the APS as they see fit. If a particular issue is of high enough political priority, the government is able to create a new agency from elements of old agencies to meet the emerging policy need. With a more unified APS, both culturally and in terms of support services such as HR and

technology, the fluidity of Administrative Arrangement Orders should be less of a problem.

Globalisation is also identified as a challenge for the future, although the exact nature of this challenge and its expected impact on the APS is somewhat unclear. The main issue from the discussion paper seems to be that the APS needs to be flexible and responsive, but this is arguably true in many other contexts and addresses more the skillset that is required within the APS, rather than a major challenge in itself.

The third key challenge suggested in the paper that does not seem to be a real, new challenge is that of fiscal pressures. The APS has, for many years, been continually asked to do more with less in terms of ongoing operating costs and has had to justify through close scrutiny any request for funds to implement new policy proposals. The plight of some smaller agencies, as noted in the paper, would seem to suggest again a need to re-examine the corporate functions of agencies and to achieve the economies of scale that are available through a re-centralisation of pay teams and rationalisation of the plethora of small agencies or offices that play a role that is arguably part of a larger department of state.

4. What are the key implications for how the public sector will need to operate?

The challenge of 'increasing public expectations' could perhaps more accurately be expressed as 'greater public demand for effective, accessible services'. This is very definitely a challenge for the public service and governments into the future, as it will require focus on customer preferences for interaction with government, customer expectations of service levels and integrated technology, and customer requirements for access and accessibility. Work is being done on several fronts to address issues of service delivery reform to position the APS to a more 'citizen-centric' approach. Key challenges for the operation of the APS relate primarily to cultural change, necessitating a greater commitment in reality to whole-of-government rhetoric and a willingness to accept that there may be new and different ways of doing things. Cultural change needs to be driven from the top, and may require a less risk-averse mentality. It will also require significant investment by government in the technological upgrades required to support a more integrated service delivery, and a recognition that such fundamental change will be expensive and will not be achieved in the immediate term.

As noted above, demographic change should be a fundamental driver for change within the APS in terms of how people are recruited, where the work is located, and effective succession and knowledge management.

As also noted above, fundamental change to support a more targeted customer-focused service delivery and a more flexible APS will of necessity entail harnessing the emergent technologies. This will require commitment of money, time and effort to obtain and maintain the infrastructure and train employees to be able to use it effectively. However, in the rush to be technologically advanced and to meet the 'globalisation' challenge identified in the discussion paper, it is necessary to not lose sight of the fact that technology should only ever be a tool or support for policy development and service delivery. It cannot, in and of itself, be a substitute for considered, evidence-based decision-making and the APS and government need to avoid the temptation of the proverbial 'knee-jerk' reactions to events (domestic or international). There is a difference between 'timely' and 'rash' and the APS needs to be the former without being the latter.

The apparent seventh challenge identified in the paper is arguably more a solution to address the other six. There is no doubt that whatever reforms are put in place need to be systemic and need to be upheld and ascribed to by the

entire APS leadership cadre. It hinges upon the concept of a single APS. As noted above, if this can be achieved systemically, it may facilitate greater flexibility for the APS to meet evolving priorities.

Chapter 3: An aspiration for Australia's public service

5. What do you think is an appropriate aspiration for the Australian Public Service?

In creating an aspiration for the APS, care needs to be taken that the statement does not become either a de facto value statement or so bland and clichéd that it loses all meaning. No statement is going to please all public servants and it seems somewhat redundant to spend time on devising such a piece of rhetoric, when the *raison d'être* for the APS is already clearly articulated in s3 of the Public Service Act. In addition, care needs to be taken to ensure that any development of a 'new' aspirational statement is and is seen to be (in the best Westminster tradition) apolitical and not resulting from the view and opinions of a particular Prime Minister. Whilst the APS has to be mindful of and responsive to the policy priorities and imperatives of the government, and whilst the Prime Minister certainly has every right to tell Agency Heads what his expectations are, this interplay needs to take place within the broader context of the ongoing roles of the APS and successive governments. The current government can certainly have a vision for the APS, but care needs to be taken that that vision does not become interpreted as an enduring job description, for successive governments may well have different visions and any attempt to entrench any one of them will undercut other efforts to increase the flexibility and responsiveness of the APS.

6. Do the five key characteristics outlined in Chapter 3 adequately encapsulate what you would expect from a high performing public service?

The five characteristics seem reasonable, but contain a large number of 'buzz' phrases that need to be decoded and defined before they actually can be taken to mean anything real:

- What is a values-driven culture?
- Who determines the values?
- Who decides when public trust has been lost?
- Who determines that policy advice is high-quality, forward-looking or creative?
- Who decides if citizens are being put first?
- Who is responsible if the APS delivers well programs and services that are ill-defined?
- What makes responses flexible and agile?

In the search for the characteristics that determine a high-performing public service, it is necessary to not resort to management clichés or "bureaucratese" if the suggested aspirations are to be understandable and achievable. To this end, the five characteristics that arose from the UK National Audit Office study would seem to more effectively and concisely encapsulate the qualities expected of a public service.

An additional concern with the proposed five characteristics is that they are actually a lot more than five. Each one encompasses more than one quality or characteristic and it is the plethora of aspirational statements that contribute to them being less memorable and therefore less likely to be widely espoused.

One characteristic that may be implied by several of those that are proposed, but which could benefit from being identified more clearly, is that the APS consists of

skilled people who are appropriately trained and supported to do their jobs.

Chapter 4: A values driven culture that retains public trust

7. Should the APS Values be streamlined? What values do you consider should be included in a revised set of APS values?

The current set of Values, enshrined in legislation, were debated and considered at some length before reaching their final version in the 1999 act. The Discussion Paper states that they “have not been updated since 1999”, implying that this is a bad thing. However, in the discussions that led to the development of the Values in their current form, it was acknowledged that articulating the expected values of the APS within the enabling legislation would assist in the reformation of an ‘APS culture’. Cultural change is by its nature slow and incremental, so it is to be expected that any element that is designed to assist cultural change will take some time to reach its full effect. 10 years is not a particularly long period of time to allow the Values to effect cultural change and the evidence of the “recent reforms” cited in chapter 4 can be interpreted as further enhancements to the Values, rather than a filling of the gaps, as the discussion paper seems to be suggesting. If any attempt is made to revise the Values, there is a risk that this will be seen as a political stunt – an attempt by a new government and/or senior executive group to make their mark. There is also the associated risk that frequent changes to the organisation’s values-statement will be seen as evidence that the APS is unsure of what it’s supposed to be doing and is subject to management fads and fashions.

It would therefore be interesting to know who is ‘driving’ this push for a revision of the Values.

The Values as they stand seem to effectively meet their purpose and are well-supported by the explanatory material available through the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC). If the aim is to make them more memorable, then the same principles will need to apply to any revision here as were noted in response to question 6.

8. How do we ensure that APS leaders fulfil their responsibilities to promote and uphold the values?

The most obvious way to ensure compliance is the two-pronged approach of education and prosecution.

The APSC has a range of products available to assist employees and their managers to understand what the Values mean in practice. This educational role is vital and will be required, no matter how the Values are framed. There will always be the need for a resource that helps to turn the theory into practice and to apply both to highly individualised cases. There may be some value in developing an induction module for all new APS employees that focuses on the nature and culture of the workforce that they are entering.

The Values are a legislative provision within the *Public Service Act 1999*, under which most APS employees are employed and to which they are therefore subject. Prosecution of employees who do not act in accordance with the Values and the associated Code of Conduct is therefore a legitimate outcome. If the APS as an organisation were more prepared to prosecute, and to protect those who would be witnesses in such litigation, then there is a greater likelihood that APS employees will consistently act in accordance with the Values. This goes beyond cases of the Centrelink or Medicare Australia officer who ‘browses’ records or fraudulently siphons Commonwealth benefits. It could and should include senior

officers who provide false or misleading information to government enquiries.

9. Do you think the APS engages appropriately and actively with government on an apolitical basis?

Further work could be done to clarify the relative roles and responsibilities of public servants and Ministers' Offices. The APSC has some general advice in its suite of publications and resource related to embedding the APS Values and Code of Conduct, and has an advisory service for those facing particular issues. There may also be some value in Ministerial offices more clearly articulating who in the office is responsible for what and how the relationships work with the Minister. The provision of apolitical advice is a difficult area, as Ministers by their nature have a political agenda and may not always appreciate the value of negative apolitical advice unless it is couched as, to quote Sir Humphrey Appleby, "courageous".

10. Are further reforms needed to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the APS when dealing with ministerial offices?

Rather than further reforms, there may be value in developing educational and other supporting material to assist APS employees who have a relationship with their Minister's office to manage that relationship confidently and effectively. This may include assurance that there is help available and that if the relationship is managed in accordance with the Values and Code of Conduct, the employee will be supported. Consideration could also be given to ensuring that this is a two-way relationship – APS employees are sometimes put into the position of feeling that they have no 'room to move' with their Minister's priorities and that they are forced into agreeing to something with which they are not comfortable. An educational program with Ministerial staff may help to identify potential clashes and areas of commonality which can be mitigated (in the first instance) and built upon (in the latter) for mutual benefit.

Chapter 5: High quality, forward looking and creative policy advice

11. How can internal and external collaboration be strengthened to improve policy development and implementation?

The proposed establishment of policy 'hubs' would appear to be worth pursuing further as a practical way of bringing together a range of stakeholders and potential contributors. Care, however, will need to be taken to clearly identify relative roles and responsibilities and to ensure that these hubs do not degenerate into unproductive 'talkfests'. It is assumed that, unless there is a radical change to the underlying concept of employees being attached to specific agencies for HR purposes, these 'hubs' will operate as a form of secondment. Consideration will need to be given as to the most effective HR arrangements to put in place for these employees; currently, employees on secondment continue to be paid and to accrue and take leave via their 'home' agency. This means that the 'home' agency will need to backfill the position, but can only offer the role on a temporary basis and often is not in a position to know how long the secondment will last and, therefore, how long the temporary position will be available. In addition, the 'home' agency has limited visibility of the employee's use of leave, even though they continue to be responsible for approving leave requests and attendance records. The issue becomes more complex and onerous the longer the secondment continues, and if it is envisaged that similar arrangements are to become more widespread, then this is an area that will need to be carefully

considered.

12. What should be done to continuously improve the capability of the APS workforce in policy formulation and implementation?

Presumably this question arises from the Prime Minister's comments in his 30 April 2008 speech to the SES. In order to address what appears to be the Prime Minister's concerns, it is necessary to determine what he means the "strategic policy capability" of the APS. "Strategic" has become one of the key definitional words of the APS over the last decade, and almost all job descriptions include a selection criterion seeking a 'strategic' capability. However, the meaning and implication of this requirement is by no means common or consistent and a good starting point for an APS capability in this area is to foster a common understanding of what is meant by being 'strategic'. This is perhaps a prime candidate for effective on-the-job training, providing that the more senior officers in the organisation have a clear and common understanding of what it means, and that their understanding aligns with that of the Minister(s) and Prime Minister.

13. What can be done to bring the workforce development approach of the APS up to the level of the best organisations globally?

The concerns expressed in the discussion paper around the lack of broad expertise amongst some policy makers are not new and are somewhat limited in their expression. The lack of mobility, particularly at the executive level, has previously been an issue of concern for the Public Service Commissioner, and is critical if the APS is to address a need for more integrated, whole-of-government public policy development. But the need for breadth of experience is not limited to the concerns of the Secretary of PM&C, that all public servants should have come experience of front-line service delivery. The current silo mentality of many agencies means that employees can rise to the executive levels with experience in only one or two agencies. This can severely limit their ability to think in a whole-of-government way, when they have not been in a position to experience the culture and priorities of different agencies. Encouragement of greater mobility leading to a broader experience of different government priorities would assist in workforce development. This could be effected in a number of ways, ranging from mandatory moves to greater opportunities for secondments, short-term placements and work in the proposed 'hubs'.

14. How do you think a stronger culture of innovation can be fostered?

There may be some value in fostering a greater interaction between the APS and other sources of policy advice, such as 'think tanks' and universities. However, the more diverse the sources of advice, the more there is a need for an arbiter or co-ordinator to ensure that the various advices are compared and analysed. This in turn contains the risk of an additional level of bureaucracy and red tape and associated time frames. It is critical that the APS develop this capability in-house rather than relying on outsourced contractors, which is both costly and inherently risky.

15. What approaches to engaging with risk are most appropriate for the APS to provide high quality, forward looking and creative policy advice?

The statistics cited in the discussion paper suggest that SES employees tend to be more likely than non-SES employees to suggest that their agencies (and by definition, themselves) are innovative in their thinking and approaches to work.

To some extent, this may be a political response to the question, which by its presence suggests that this is a quality that is valued. There may also be some discrepancy arising from different definitions of what it means to be 'innovative'. SES officers may have a broader definition, which in turn leads to a wider interpretation of things that can be considered to be innovative. Non-SES employees may well have a stricter interpretation, requiring something to be substantially more different from the norm before it is considered to be 'innovative'. The paper also notes, quite rightly, that the authority to be innovative within the public sector is somewhat more restrictive than that available in the other sectors due to the accountability and transparency regimes imposed upon public sector decision-making.

In order for the APS to be able to be more innovative and creative in designing policy and service delivery, there needs to be a mutual understanding with the government about possible impacts on outcomes. Consistency in policy outcomes, strict control of outlays and accuracy in decision-making require a certain level of control which cannot be abrogated in the interests of innovation. Where some changes can be made, such as self-assessment for low-risk benefit customers, the APS and the government need to engage in open dialogue about risks and impacts, including in practical terms how to handle the political fall out of administrative error or over-expenditure.

16. How can agency performance management processes be amended to maximise the focus on the attainment of outcomes?

The phraseology of this question pre-supposes that the 'attainment of outcomes' is the agreed primary focus of the APS. Whilst the need for the APS to achieve the required outcomes is not in question, the concern arises from the apparent emphasis on this as a key priority. There is a risk that the message that will be received is that the achievement of outcomes is the primary (if not sole) goal of all that the APS does, leading to a perception that the ends justify the means.

Chapter 6: High quality, effective programs and services focused on the needs of citizens

17. How do we embed a citizen centred philosophy in all aspects of program and service design and delivery?

Any attempt to embed a citizen-centred focus in APS operations will also need to take into account the broader strategic goals of connected government service and red-tape reduction. For customers, 'joined-up' government often means the reduction of unnecessary or burdensome reporting requirements and the expectation that the provision of information to 'government' for one purpose will automatically, or with little difficulty, be used for other similar purposes.

On the basis of a 'provide once, use often' platform, customers should only expect to have to provide their 'story' to the government once and then that information can be used to assess their entitlement to a range of benefits and services, which may require limited additional information. With the principle of informed consent, customers can then be given the opportunity to elect to have their information shared as appropriate between agencies, if they are made aware of what this means. However, experience with concepts such as the Australia Card has shown that there is also a point (which differs amongst individuals) at which customers consider that information sharing between agencies is not appropriate, and that privacy and secrecy provisions need to be invoked.

18. How can we better bring together service design, delivery and policy formulation processes—within individual programs and across all of government?

One of the most effective ways to ensure that these processes are brought together and considered jointly is to undertake open and collaborative policy development processes. New policy proposals currently suffer because they are developed by one agency in secret and isolation. The paranoia around budget proposals has become so strong that relevant agencies sometimes do not know that a proposal is being considered until the last moment. This is ineffective, divisive and (ironically) highly risky. Policy and service delivery design is much more effectively developed when all relevant agencies are aware of the proposal and are brought together to discuss it and its implementation well before any announcement is made. Where there are significant entrenched disagreements in terms of implementation timeframes or policy application, a more 'independent' agency could have an arbitrator's role, responsible for negotiating an agreed APS position which can then be taken back to government.

19. What options could be pursued to ensure citizens, especially those with higher needs, can access government information and services that they need?

The number of times and the way in which a customer needs to contact the government about their payment can impact on efficient service delivery. For a range of reasons, including payment integrity and program assurance, customers are required to advise in a timely fashion changes in circumstances that may materially affect their payment. This may be done by in person, by phone or online, or via a form, although the number of available channels varies between payments and for different situations.

The nature and frequency of customer contacts highlights a broader consideration of how customers interact with government service delivery agencies. In a majority of situations, customers seeking a payment are required to complete and submit a form and the agency responds with a letter. There is scope to further support and to some extent direct customer channel choice by making a range of service channels available and accessible to customers applying a risk profiling approach so that lower risk customers utilise lower cost channels.

In opening up the possible channels of interactions between customers and the government, and in particular directing lower risk customers to lower cost channels, government may be in the position to significantly enhance the provision of a more tailored service to high-risk and/or high-need customers.

20. How can we ensure performance management frameworks focus on the attainment of outcomes for citizens?

The discussion paper suggests that "more widespread employment of citizen satisfaction surveys" could be used to benchmark performance and quality assure outcomes. Whilst there may be some merit in this, care would need to be taken to ensure that the nature of the surveys did not include an inherent bias. Any voluntary survey risks only capturing those at the margins – those who are very dissatisfied and want to tell everyone about their bad experiences and those who are very satisfied and, again, want to let people know. Conversely, the only way to get a full picture is to ask everyone, but that is time consuming for both

customers and the APS, costly and annoying.

There is also a significant risk with surveys about customer satisfaction, that they will capture attitudes towards the policy, rather than its application – a customer with a six-month family income of \$76,000 with 5 children will understandably be annoyed that they are ineligible for Baby Bonus, but a customer with an income of \$74,000 and 1 child will be eligible; but this is a policy decision made by the government in an effort to target welfare payments and has nothing to do with service delivery design or performance management.

The discussion paper also suggests a greater focus on building APS capability. Any move towards this goal should be applauded. However, the development of a core skills set, which is what seems to be being suggested, needs to occur in a strategic, long-term context and not focus solely or primarily on what are considered to be the current priority needs. Experience in other areas has shown that an exclusive focus on the 'fad' needs of the moment has the inevitable outcome that the core skills are disregarded, leading to a lack of core skills in the future. Skills and capability assessments and training should be mandatory for all public servants, and should be adequately provided for in departmental budgets. Consideration also needs to be given to who are the most effective providers of the required training and development of public servants. Most training is outsourced and many of the providers offer a popularist 'exciting' range of courses which provide an opportunity for participants to spend a day or two out of the workplace but often do not provide any new, concrete, or useable outcomes. Training, by its nature is not tailored to individual needs or, despite the rhetoric, learning styles. Perhaps an organisation such as the APSC could take on a more enhanced role in terms of assessing the value of external courses for APS needs and providing an advisory service for APS-specific training and development.

Chapter 7: Flexibility and agility

21. What is the optimal rate of mobility between APS agencies and other parts of the labour market? What could the APS do to encourage and support greater mobility?

This question presupposes that there is an optimal rate of mobility. This is not necessarily the case, although it is clear that a certain level of mobility is required if the APS is to retain its ability to leverage from groundbreaking work in other jurisdictions and/or sectors.

Permanent and temporary moves at level (ie transfers) amongst agencies could be facilitated through a reconsideration of standard APS recruitment processes. Currently, vacancies are advertised as such either in the Gazette (all permanent vacancies and some longer-term or specialist temporary vacancies) or internally to agencies. All applicants, whether they are at level or seeking a promotion, apply through the same process. However, whilst there is a requirement to ensure that the vacancy is filled by the applicant whose skills and experience best match those required in the role, it is possible for an employee to be transferred to another job at their substantive level without going through the full selection exercise. Greater use of this provision would not only speed up selection exercises, but would arguably encourage greater mobility at level if people knew that they didn't have to go through the lengthy full process. The APSjobs website has started this process, but it still seems to be fairly limited in its application.

In terms of obtaining experience from outside the APS, consideration could be given to joint ventures and temporary exchange programs both between jurisdictions and amongst sectors and other national public services.

22. What practical mechanisms could be used to foster a more unified public service culture?

As the discussion paper notes, arguably one of the greatest contributing factors to the fragmentation of the APS is the devolution of responsibility for human and financial resources. Differing employment conditions and differing pay scales have created a barrier to employees moving amongst agencies – it is common knowledge, for example, that Centrelink doesn't have a Christmas close down, that the EL 2 pay rates in some agencies actually overlap with the SES 1 pay rates in others, and that movement between agencies can sometimes take several months for leave accruals and other personnel details to be transferred across. When pay and conditions were consistent across agencies, there was less disincentive to move as there was no perception that an employee would 'lose out'.

In addition, and possibly partly in response to the devolution agenda, many agencies have deliberately developed an agency-centred culture amongst their employees. To re-establish the concept of a unified APS, it will be necessary to redirect this cultural perception. Consideration could also be given to the role and position of other Commonwealth government agencies vis-à-vis the APS itself. It is difficult to consider the APS as a unified organisation when there is a plethora of non-APS agencies to which a transfer or promotion is even more problematic, even though the work and often the selection criteria are very similar.

23. How could recruitment practices be enhanced within Australian Government entities? What are the strengths of current recruitment processes?

As noted in the discussion paper, current recruitment practices are overly time consuming. They are also, despite efforts to the contrary but partly due to the removal of appeal rights for certain decisions, very subjective. On the positive, the current recruitment exercises are flexible and have the potential to deliver high quality outcomes, but work needs to be done in many cases to realise these potentials. Many employees are not given training in how to conduct selection exercises and are given responsible for one as a development opportunity. They are also usually expected to undertake what may be a large volume of work in addition to their usual duties. As a result they may feel overwhelmed and less than enthusiastic about the exercise and may not give it their full attention. There may be some value in having selection exercises undertaken centrally by an agency such as the APSC who can apply a greater degree of consistency and impartiality. Alternatively, greater use could be made of Joint Selection Committees to obviate perceptions of bias or favouritism.

Selection panels also often do not seem to be aware of, or are reluctant to employ, the flexibilities available to them in the selection process. As a result, many still rely on the process of shortlisting, interviews and referees, which contributes in large part to the length of time taken to complete the process. More creative processes can be used, and there is actually no need to interview. Perhaps some work could be done on educating potential panel members with regards to all aspects of recruitment.

24. What are your top three ideas to encourage the pursuit of continuous improvement across the public service?

- Externally-based assessment of skills and capabilities against an agreed benchmark, such as the Integrated Leadership System, coupled with robust training and development programs that meet the identified needs of individual employees.

- Standard and uniform recruitment to levels with consistent pay scales and expectations, utilising the expertise of the Australian Public Service Commission or the Office of the Merit Protection Commissioner to operate independent joint selection committees.
- Facilitate exchange programs at the EL and SES levels between Commonwealth and State/Territory public services, the APS and universities/think tanks, and amongst national services in like countries such as New Zealand, Canada or the UK.

Chapter 8: Efficiency in all aspects of government operations

25. How can Australian Government policy departments improve their own efficiency?

In attempting to address the apparent 'inefficiency' of policy departments, there is a need for the government to determine what, fundamentally, it requires and expects from these agencies. It is notoriously more difficult to measure efficiency in policy development and advice, and arguably outsourcing and competition would help to achieve this, but there has historically been an argument that governments need a dedicated resource of skilled and adaptable employees who are able to provide the apolitical advice that balances the partisan advice available from other sources. As suggested in the discussion paper, overall efficiencies can arguably be achieved by re-aligning and re-centralising HR functions of 'the APS' (or even, 'the Commonwealth public sector') and by re-evaluating the role of the very small agencies.

26. How can Australian Government service delivery agencies improve their own efficiency?

This is the subject (in various guises) of a number of reviews and reports that have been commissioned by the government. Service delivery can be made more efficient through a greater use of available technologies and a willingness on the part of both policy and service delivery agencies to approach risk management, fraud and compliance in a more strategic manner. Elements of this include:

- Enabling customers to tell 'the government' their story once and have it used by all relevant agencies to access all relevant benefits.
- Reducing the need for a physical signature on forms so that they can be completed and submitted on line.
- Simplifying communications from agencies to customers, including the option for email and SMS contacts.
- Aligning income tests for payments and benefits.
- A standard proof of identity regime.
- The government being able to access a range of information via trusted third parties, eg hospitals for proof of birth, real estate agents for rental details.

27. What mechanisms should be used to systematically improve efficiency across the public service as a whole?

28. What skills and capabilities are required to drive efficiency throughout public sector organisations?

One of the most important skills required by a public sector manager is the ability to manage – manage time, resources, people and information. Unfortunately, this skill is not as common as could be expected and this may provide a useful first step in supporting a service-wide move towards greater efficiency. Effective time and resource management contributes to overall efficiency gains through reduced wastage and greater targeting of resources. Effective information management similarly helps to focus attention on what needs to be done by providing the right information to the right people at the right time. But underpinning these efficiency measures is the skill of effective people management. This is one of the more difficult, and in some ways the least formally recognised, areas of effective management, not least because those who do it well give no cause for concern and for those who don't, there is usually an accompanying skills gap that is easier to identify and target. However, effective people management is key to turning work groups into effective teams and effective teams contribute significantly to workplace efficiencies. Not only do they work towards achieving outcomes while minimising wastage and duplication, but they also reduce personal and interpersonal stress and the amount of time dedicated by the team leader to working through personnel 'issues'. It would therefore seem prudent that the public sector invest strategically in people who demonstrate strong management skills. This is not necessarily an easy criterion to demonstrate in the standard job application and interview process, as it is often something that manifests over time in line with the specific group dynamics and is difficult to precisely identify and quantify. Perhaps one option may be to routinely seek referee comments from people whom the applicant has previously managed, to undertake 360° feedback sessions, or for an organisation such as the APSC to run a Career Development Assessment Centre process for anyone aspiring to a management role.