

Submission to Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration

2. Challenges in the strategic environment

Increasing complexity of policy challenges, increasing public expectations and technological change

The increasing complexity of policy challenges requires departments and agencies to work together with each other, state and local governments, the not-profit and private sectors. To address the challenges identified by the Advisory Group, departments and agencies need to be supported to work together by introducing:

- Citizen databases that can efficiently and accurately transfer information between departments and agencies. This will enable citizens to interact with the government as a whole regardless of the department or agency they contact. For example, if a customer notifies Centrelink that their address has changed an automatic notification could be sent to agencies that hold the address information of this citizen. This would cut down the time that individuals, businesses and organisations take to interact with government and the accuracy of the information that the government uses.
- A secure, online workspace where employees from different departments can share information and collaborate on documents. These workspaces should have the potential to include other levels of government, and non-government groups and individuals (such as academics).
- Standardised, efficient and easy-to-use video-conferencing facilities to reduce travel expenditure and increase the ability of departments and agencies to de-centralise functions to other parts of Australia. This will assist in broadening the size and diversity of the labour market that the APS can attract, put APS employees more in touch with the communities that they serve and increase the movement of people between employment sectors.
- Shorter timelines for staff recruitment. This could be encouraged through the requirement to report recruitment performance milestones in annual reports and supported through an advice line for APS employees engaged in recruitment activities.

4. A values driven culture that retains public trust

The following initiatives will improve the quality of the future leadership group of the public service:

- Support for leave without pay when staff wish to return to study, undertake a secondment within government or gain work experience in other sectors in tandem with a 'keep in touch' program so that staff return to work in the APS with a broader range of experience.
- Delegation of work to lower levels of the APS and increased mentoring of executive level staff by senior executive service officers so that staff are in a better position to take over from the SES when they retire. Recognise the value of delegation and mentoring in the performance agreements of SES staff.

5. High quality, forward looking and creative policy advice

These suggestions are likely to improve the quality of APS policy advice:

- Adequately resource citizens groups so that they are able to provide advice to the standard required for government to incorporate into policy advice.
- Produce a whole-of-government equivalent to the portfolio budget statements to reduce the financial and accountability barriers to collaboration.

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

To improve the standard of service that the APS offers to citizens, it could provide:

- Improved desk-top guidance to APS customer service staff so that they are able to operate effectively in one-stop shops and in outreach services. This guidance could take the form of customer databases that guide staff through the steps they need to undertake to successfully complete a customer transaction and prompt them to refer customers to appropriate organisations.
- Coordinated roll-out of new customer service approaches in all government agencies. This would ensure that the APS develops together and provides citizens with the same standard of service regardless of the agency.
- A single phone line and website portal for citizens to access government. The portal could allow citizens to access tax statements, HELP invoices, child support assessment notices, amongst other things, in one location.

7. Flexibility and agility

To systematically improve efficiency and effectiveness across the APS at a whole, the APS could:

- Increase the number of APS employees that do not work in Canberra to access a broader pool of employees with a more diverse range of experiences than the ACT labour market. Support this initiative through the technological changes mentioned earlier.
- To encourage movement of APS employees between departments and agencies standardise employment conditions and formalise exchange programs.
- Systematically assess skill gaps in the APS. Use this assessment to identify employees who have relevant skills that are in shortage and not used in their current position and offer re-deployment where the skills can be used. Also, link study support to the extent to which these gaps will be addressed.
- Encourage APS employees that are studying to use the APS in case studies for assessment projects to generate and test innovative solutions to problems.
- Ensure that diversity of experience is recognised as valuable in recruitment selection criteria.
- Introduce APS Awards, in parallel with the Honours system, to recognise the contributions of employees at all levels of the APS as well as cross-agency efforts. This could facilitate a greater APS identity amongst employees.
- Place a greater emphasis on public policy studies in undergraduate university courses. This could be facilitated by greater participation of APS employees as guest lecturers to introduce students to opportunities that exist within the public service.