



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

**Advisory Group on Reform of Australian
Government Administration: Building the world's
best public service**

Reform of Australian Government Administration

Submission from the Australian Institute of Family Studies

Submission to the review: Reform of Australian Government Administration

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (the Institute) welcomes the current review of the Reform of Australian Government Administration.

As a statutory agency of the Australian Government, the Institute conducts, facilitates and communicates impartial policy-relevant research about a broad range of issues affecting families in Australia. The Institute communicates research findings to policy-makers, service providers and the broader community through its research publications, websites, clearinghouses, information services, presentations and the media.

The review has already galvanised thinking about the future shape of the Australian public sector. In framing public policy, the public sector needs to be creative, proactive, innovative and responsive to the diverse needs of the Australian nation in an increasingly complex global context.

The challenge of change

The review will potentially have far-reaching implications for how the public sector is organised and operates, as well as for the roles and functions of those who work in the Australian Public Service (APS). The review discussion paper clearly indicates creative thinking and innovation are required to a far greater extent than before to meet national and international challenges.

The Institute, in adapting to changing contexts over recent years, has evolved in a manner that is congruent with the approaches flagged in the consultation paper for the organisation and operation of the public sector in the future.

It has placed increasing emphasis on anticipating the directions of emerging policy and practice and undertaking the necessary research to inform and thereby refine directions that are taken. In conducting independent research, the Institute has strived to position itself to meet emerging research needs, consistent with the greater prominence of evidence in the policy-making process. In doing this, it has had considerable success in reading the direction of emerging policy priorities, and undertaking research to inform these policies.

Of particular use in this capacity are the long-term studies conducted by the Institute, such as the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, which provide a lens through which developing policy initiatives can be assessed over time, based on the actual experience and evidence of families and communities. Similarly, systematic, independent evaluations of policy and service delivery programs are essential for effective policy improvement. The Institute's capacity and experience in undertaking extensive evaluations of major policy areas, such as the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, has directly contributed to policy innovation and service improvements in a range of areas. Ensuring that this capacity is available to government, while maintaining independence from the agencies responsible for delivering services, will lead to more innovative policy directions; improved strategies for assessment of risk; enhanced transparency and accountability to the public; and increased learning from experiences to improve future policy development.

The Institute is also committed to responding to change and remaining open to feedback from internal and external stakeholders, as this helps us to monitor our progress, and thereby refine our research, internal managerial processes, communication strategies and external relations.

The challenges of openness, creativity, diversity and capacity

Responsiveness, openness to ideas from across the community and mechanisms to engage with a broader range of stakeholders are essential for good policy development. So too is the capacity to transcend silos and operate effectively across government. Staffing approaches that bring expertise from across and beyond the APS are to be welcomed. As a research organisation, the Institute has traditionally recruited from a wide pool, including universities and the service provider sector as well as within the APS, to our advantage. The diversity of disciplines represented among Institute staff ranges from economics and demographics, to statistical and analytic capacity, to psychology and the broader social sciences. The public sector will increasingly require the ‘hybrid vigour’ that diversity brings.

Recruitment processes are required that recognise that agencies such as the Institute, which operate in a contestable market and are heavily reliant on commissions and contracts for revenue, need a greater mix of non-ongoing staff than is generally promoted across the APS. This is necessary in order to match the staffing requirements of projects and commissions, with the revenue to cover salaries. Current restrictions on the employment periods applying to non-ongoing staff do not reflect the timelines for many projects, and create unnecessary anxiety for staff whose contracts are coming to an end. Attracting appropriately qualified, highly specialised research experts is also a persistent challenge, which would be considerably mitigated by recruitment processes that allowed greater flexibility in promoting/engaging specialist staff.

To achieve the desired improvements in strategic policy capacity within the public sector, the Australian Government will need to find creative ways of enabling the APS to respond effectively to rapidly changing priorities. A key challenge will be to ensure recruitment approaches that build and rebuild creative capacity. To meet current and emerging needs for higher level strategic policy advice, governments increasingly will need to recruit within and beyond the public sector to attract and retain strategic policy thinkers with the required innovative capacity.

The power of partnerships

Extending and strengthening partnerships and networks with government, research and community sectors as well as facilitating local, national and international collaborations, will be required to enhance the innovative capacity of the APS, and promote knowledge flows to those with prime responsibility for the development of policies and services. The public sector will need to engage more systematically with the broader community to foster greater understanding of policy initiatives that can prevent, minimise or solve problems affecting Australia. This community focus is also clearly flagged in the review documents.

The reforms signalled in the discussion paper challenge the APS to extend active partnerships involving the states and territories, the community sector and the private sector. University-based centres and private sector consultancy firms clearly will have a greater role to play. Furthermore, encouraging engagement and collaborative partnerships outside government will provide greater opportunities not only to tackle difficult problems, but also to capitalise and utilise existing community strengths. One challenge is to promote and draw on these strengths in our efforts to find creative solutions.

Building partnerships and actively participating in networks within and across government agencies and between the research and community sectors, is the standard approach of the Institute in the way it conducts and disseminates its research activities and findings.

A further mechanism that the Institute has used to achieve greater connection within and beyond government is to establish a range of multidisciplinary reference and advisory groups. These have

enabled the Institute to be responsive to emerging policy requirements, connect with users and influence practice. The Institute's five clearinghouses also demonstrate our commitment to knowledge-sharing and highlight the synergies that can be achieved through partnerships with policy-makers, researchers and service providers.

Increasingly, the public sector works in a contestable market for ideas, influence and strategic policy innovation. While this presents a potential challenge to some previous practices within the APS, it also provides an excellent opportunity to reconsider how the APS can maximise the value of partnerships more effectively within and outside government. Within this contestable environment, the Institute has established and maintained a broad range of research partnerships with universities, community organisations and other government agencies in order to strengthen the research agenda and generate the evidence base from which innovative policy can be developed. This model has proved effective in influencing policy outcomes and improving practice, across the broad spectrum of issues relating to families.

Thinking beyond the silos

The Institute has developed a research and dissemination focus that spans many of the areas of interest to governments, communities and the research and corporate sectors. The Institute has considerable cross-government reach in the issues it researches. It undertakes work in a range of high-priority areas, across a widening set of portfolios, jurisdictions and sectors. The imperative to work in key strategic partnerships in order to bring the required diversity of disciplinary, content and methodological specialisations aligns with the approach outlined in the review discussion paper.

We see considerable potential in the concept of policy hubs for promoting greater interaction and collaboration across government departments and agencies and the community and private sectors. These hubs can become a means of promoting shared learning across agencies, and utilising skills from a range of different areas by encouraging interdisciplinary scope, noting the views and ideas from stakeholders and service providers, and enabling access and interface with these groups. The Institute is well placed to relate to one or more such hubs that may emerge, consistent with the ways in which it currently operates.

The Institute looks forward to the outcome of the review.