

## SUBMISSION TO ADVISORY GROUP ON REFORM OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Advisory Group. The recommendations I would like to make go to chapter 5 of the discussion paper “Reform of Australian Government Administration.”

*How can we enhance the capacity of the Australian Public Service (APS) to provide policy advice that is high quality, forward looking and creative?*

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

*What can be done to bring the workforce development approach of the APS up to the level of the best organisation globally?*

### **Recommendation 1.**

The Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) should prepare new APS job level descriptions which identify the responsibilities and required skills of each APS level. These job level descriptions would vary between job types (e.g. customer service, policy development, program implementation) but should clearly and concisely identify the core job level requirements and how these differ between levels.

### Discussion

The Integrated Leadership System prepared by the APSC provides capability development guidance for individuals and agencies. Individual agencies also have their own job level descriptions.

In general, documents of this nature are long and detailed and the core requirements of each level, the skills required, and the differences between levels, are unclear. There is a tendency for the documents to be overly generic and repetitive between levels – and this reduces the clarity and communication of different job level requirements.

Often in a job interview context the candidate is asked about their understanding of the difference between their current level and the higher level to which they wish to be promoted. In my experience the question is typically poorly answered, reflecting a lack of clarity across the APS. The advisory group might want to test this issue during consultations with APS staff.

Job level requirements and the skills to deliver on these requirements will vary across different types of roles and between different agencies. For example, an executive level 1 position in a customer service area will typically have substantial staff management responsibilities whilst in a policy position the responsibilities would be more focussed on preparing written policy advice. These differences should be documented and clearly communicated. A benefit of this will be that individuals will be able to consider the range of experience that comes from undertaking different types of roles across different APS agencies.

The core APS requirements of each job level should also be better communicated and understood across the APS. A standard APS classification structure, which is partly about cross-government employment flexibility, should have standard job level requirements. Both the core and role specific responsibilities should be able to be explained in a manner where there is no ambiguity and where staff clearly understand the expectations of moving between levels, or moving between different types of role.

### **Recommendation 2.**

APS job level requirements and training / development programs, to support staff and agencies in meeting these requirements, need to be more clearly directed to the development of particular skills.

### Discussion.

The APS is fortunate in terms of the quality of staff that it recruits including at the entry levels to the service. Often these staff are very well educated and bring with them high and diverse skills. However, like any industry sector the required skills vary from other employment sectors, and vary across job levels, and across time as the requirements of our sector and the community change.

The following skill areas are suggested as priorities for development within the APS. This list may not be complete but is put forward as a core group of skills that underpin most APS roles. Continuous improvement of the APS would benefit from targeting skill development in these areas:

- Communication skills
  - Verbal. Including the ability to effectively present an agency position within the Government, between jurisdictions or to the community. An ability to succinctly get to the key issues, to advocate and be persuasive about the issues for which you have responsibility.
  - Written. An ability to prepare final draft material that clearly conveys the key policy or management issues, the relevant risks / sensitivities, and the reasons for any recommendation.
  - General. A capacity to interact with the community so that the Government approach / position is effectively presented and/or the community position is heard and understood by the APS officer as a representative of the Government.
- Analytical skills
  - For example, the ability to draw conclusions from numerical data (such as percentage changes, rates of growth etc.) and to use these conclusions to inform advice and decisions.
- Negotiation skills
  - Including the importance of preparation for a negotiation, understanding the priority issues and the potential tradeoffs from the perspective of both sides of the negotiation, tracking a path to resolution of the issue.

- Project management skills
  - For example, knowing what the relevant stages and risks of your project are. Managing delivery so that the issues are resolved on or before the critical path – and not after these issues have affected final project delivery.
- Finance management skills
  - Including the ability to read and draw key conclusions from financial reports for your area of activity.
- Leadership skills
  - Understanding that the development of leadership skills for any individual is a progressive and adaptive process. The skills required at different APS levels, and in different environments, will vary.

The above areas of possible APS skill development will be able to be improved and expanded upon. The suggestion though is that training and development should be more directly linked to specific skills. Many APS targeted training courses are about government process or frameworks. There is not sufficient focus on skill development.

It may also be useful for the APSC to consider making available standardised testing arrangements so that individuals can benchmark themselves against APS wide results. If this occurred then individual officers would be able to receive independent assessment of how their skill levels are tracking against cohorts and therefore what priorities there are for personal skill development. Standardised tests are available in areas such as analytical writing or numeracy.

### **Recommendation 3.**

APSC reports on workforce planning should annually assess whether intake to the APS at various levels is appropriate given the demographic changes that are forecast and the changing role of the Australian Government.

### Discussion.

Past practice in the APS has resulted in there being peaks and troughs in entry level (including graduate) recruitment. When programs expand or contract in particular agencies there can be a tendency to adjust entry level recruitment to a degree that is inconsistent with the longer term agency or APS requirements. The concern is that this may result in gaps in the APS demographic / experience profile.

The best global organisations ensure that workforce planning is long term focussed rather than only responding to immediate pressures. It would be useful if the APSC was to report on the longer term perspective. Is the APS, and particular agencies within the APS, recruiting appropriately (both numbers of staff and professional disciplines) given the longer term requirements for the Government to be well resourced and adaptable to change? Given 2009-10 recruitment what do we expect the APS employment profile to be in 2019-20 and beyond?

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