The focus of this submission is on the APS’s capability to provide high quality policy advice, now and into the future.

My comments are informed by experiences working in the APS, but also outside it. I am currently an APS employee but have spent the majority of my 25 year career working in service delivery, academia, and the non-government sector. Although the comments I make in this submission are informed by my experiences in the APS, I believe they are applicable more broadly. They primarily concern the challenge of trying to forge a career working across sectors.

I believe the APS needs some staff within its ranks that span boundaries (or sectors) throughout their careers. People that move between sectors over time are able to bring new skills, experience, knowledge and ideas to the APS that will help it innovate and respond to the complex policy challenges facing the nation. I believe it is more common in other countries to have such people working in the public/civil service.

The current staffing profile of the APS is, in my view, too heavily skewed towards career public servants with generalist skills. These staff are vital because they have strong capability in public service administration and management. However, most generalist public servants do not have a deep knowledge of the policy area they are working in, and do not remain in an area long enough to acquire technical or policy expertise.

People with technical or policy expertise are needed to address complex, multi-sectoral challenges. Many of the policy problems facing governments are deemed ‘wicked problems’. Governments here and overseas have often been attempting to solve them in various ways over many years, sometimes without much success. Corporate knowledge within the APS on what has been tried before, and why, is important for addressing these complex problems, but so are fresh are ideas generated from a deep knowledge of the issues, the sector or overseas experiences.

Introducing reforms to encourage people with expertise to join and stay in the APS is important if we are to improve our capability to provide high quality policy advice. While there are no formal barriers to entry for people with expertise, there are some attitudinal and operational factors that make it difficult to recruit and retain these people.

The attitudinal factors are more difficult to address. In my experience, there is a bias (conscious or unconscious) against recruiting ‘outsiders’. There is an assumption that outsiders do not have sufficient knowledge of government processes and cannot learn it quickly. As a result, people who have spent most of their career outside the APS can be disadvantaged in recruitment processes.

One solution to this problem to consider ways of encouraging long-serving APS staff, particularly at the executive and senior executive level, to spend some time working outside the APS. Arrangements could be put in place to make it easy for APS staff to do short-term secondments (between 3 or 6 months, for example) to relevant non-government, academic or private sector organisations. There may be programs along these lines already, but I do not know anyone who has participated in one. Giving long-serving APS employees the opportunity to work in another sector would give them a much greater understanding of and respect for the skills and experience people outside the APS can bring to it. it would also make them more open to considering ‘outsiders’ as potentially suitable candidates for APS jobs.

Retaining staff with expertise is also an issue that needs to be addressed to ensure the APS has ability to deliver high quality policy advice in the future. Currently, there are few promotional opportunities for policy or technical experts beyond the EL2 level. Strong applicants for SES jobs are thought to be generalists who are capable of moving within and between departments with ease. A lack of policy knowledge or technical expertise is rarely considered to be a disadvantage. It is assumed that people will gain the necessary knowledge quickly, or do not need it because they can rely on more junior staff.

In contrast, many people with expertise (who tend to have gained their knowledge outside the APS) are not considered strong contenders for SES roles because they do not have broad experience in the APS. For career advancement, people with expertise need to go to (or return to) academia, the private or non-government sectors.

I would like the APS review to consider ways of retaining people with expertise in the APS at more senior levels. One option is to increase the number of advisor roles at the SES level.

Advisor roles are common in some departments, but not all. Treasury, for example, has SES-level policy advisors. The Department of Health has SES-level advisors for medical professionals, but not for people with other skills. In an increasingly complex policy environment, it would be worth considering moving away from the system where advisors are recruited based on their professional qualifications (e.g. legal, economic, and medical). Instead, they should be recruited based on their specialist skills and expertise. Examples might include recruiting people with expertise in data analytics and modelling, service delivery and implementation, program evaluation, or policy research and analysis. The APS does not need large numbers of specialists SES advisory positions, but some would be an advantage because these people would supplement the strong capability in public service administration that currently exists. They would also reduce the need to have expensive consultants on long-term contracts in departments (sometimes for several years at a time), and would help build capability within the APS.