INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

**Introduction**

This short submission responds to the APS Review by focusing on **point six** identified in the Scope of the Review Terms of Reference:

* ***Acquiring and maintaining the necessary skills and expertise to fulfil its responsibilities***.

Point six underpins effective delivery of the other five points highlighted. An APS that invests, maintains and shares its skills and expertise in its future settings will place it in a better position to respond to the complex needs of Australia and its citizens. This is no different to other private, community, academic and public sector organisations, which may be small and large, and that exist in an increasingly interdependent environment.

This submission raises some suggestions to **strengthen, clarify and introduce** to the APS so as to enhance **point six.**

**Acquiring and maintaining the necessary skills and expertise**

**Strengthen:**

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| The flexibility and encouragement to move readily across the APS, private, community, academic and public sectors to enhance firsthand understanding of policy and program issues in different settings |

For example, former Fraser period Indigenous Affairs Minister, Fred Chaney, highlighted in a recent interview[[1]](#footnote-0) the improvement in indigenous outcomes that came from people working directly in these communities and afterwards taking those learnings with them into indigenous policy and program delivery in the APS and beyond.

This is not suggest APS staff become advocates for particular interests, but that they must have opportunities to grow their understanding of the complex perspectives involved. This will help come up with better-informed policy advice that boosts the effectiveness and responsiveness of related programs.

The positives of this flexibility have also been highlighted previously in the APS review[[2]](#footnote-1) in 2010, particularly through APS exchanges and linkages with research bodies and academia.

Support for flexibility is currently impeded by some APS practices. For example, agency certified agreements that differ in salary and other conditions discourage movement between APS agencies, let alone other private, community, academic and public sector organisations. While many agencies accommodate flexibility by special funding arrangements that top up salaries and facilitate other employment conditions for staff that are moving, like these arrangements are more piecemeal than sector wide.

Setting aside individual career objectives, the quest to retain talent and skills in an agency also seems to overshadow the perception that staff moving to other agencies or organisations is a loss or negative. It could better be seen as a broader investment for maintaining an informed APS, opened to alternate approaches and ultimately delivering improved outcomes for the public, as well as the staff involved.

It is likely some of this work is being addressed by the Australian Public Service Commission, but there would seem some justification for additional service-wide and interagency focused initiatives that encourage and support APS staff mobility at all levels. There are also implications here for the APS environment that is increasingly using consultants and contract staff to undertake some of its work.

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| Support for the enhancement of analytical APS staff by resourcing for specific skill development to use data optimally for policy and program delivery, implementation and evaluation. |

In most APS agencies some specific skilled staff are recognised by special employment arrangements (eg, IT, legal and communications APS staff come to mind). In the future, additional and larger datasets (‘Big Data’) and record digitization (eg, My Health) will be common to all agencies. This will make skills in data analysis and the capacity to extract, quantify, interpret, integrate and present meaningful information from this data critical.

While some staff in the APS have these quantitative skills now, they could increasingly be consolidated as a specific skill through an added focus of agencies on them. This could occur via specific recruitment (eg, cadetships, mobility and interchange (identified as above under box one)), staff development and recognition.

**Clarify:**

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| The important role in policy and related program delivery settings of Ministers and their offices and staff with the APS.  |

Since the Hawke-Keating and subsequent governments, political staffers have increased in number and taken a more direct role in policy and programs, often blurring responsibilities with the APS.

This development needs to be highlighted for those directly involved in the political process in their relationships with the APS, where each’s role and long and short-term objectives diverge. Practices need to be consolidated in an enhanced accountability framework for all involved in this relationship, one that supports balance by placing clear and mutual responsibilities between the APS and the political environment and its staff.

It is expected this aspect will be raised by other submissions to the APS Review and also be relevant to increased use of consultants and contractors by the APS.

**Introduce:**

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| An APS alumni of previous staff  |

Establishing an APS alumni in some form would enable the APS to capture the knowledge of interested former APS staff that have moved to other roles outside the APS into other organisations, less formal work or retirement.

Involvement would be voluntary and could fit into ‘virtual’ through to structured arrangements. An APS alumni might also be organised along loose portfolio/agency lines or by some theme, such as service delivery or working in a federal system. The overall aim would be to maintain a constructive, forward looking and engaged network of people that would otherwise not have the opportunity to reflect and provide insights of their new roles when combined with their previous APS experience.

While there are a number academic and other think tanks (eg, Institute of Public Affairs, Australia Institute etc) committed to and producing critiques of the APS and public administration generally, these largely focus on ‘macro’ issues. An alumni network would add value to important but local level and time driven issues that are not covered by these areas.

An alumni network of some form may also provide a source for coaching and mentoring of citizens, communities and businesses that are unfamiliar in dealing with the APS. This would help bridge knowledge gaps.

**To conclude**

The above are some observations[[3]](#footnote-2) based on an interesting and diverse APS career across policy and program delivery in industry and people-based portfolios.

I appreciate being able to contribute to the Review.

**Peter Stanistreet**

**31 July 2018**

1. ABC radio interview with Fred Chaney, Big Ideas, Self-determination and respect for remote indigenous communities, 18 July 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for the Reform of Australian Government Administration , March 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Some other reading: Moore, M. (1995). Creating Public Value – Strategic Management in Government. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)