

# **Research to government and back again: addressing cross-sectoral mobility**

Response to the consultation paper

*Meeting Australia's research workforce needs: A consultation paper to inform the  
development of the Australian Government's research workforce strategy*

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## **Summary**

In this submission we argue that the APS needs to become significantly better at using research expertise than it is at present if it is to fulfill its responsibilities as a professional and rational advocate of ideas that are in the best long-term interests of Australia. Currently, the APS has limited capacity to evaluate essential evidence from the social sciences yet it does not present itself as an employer of choice for the research experts that it so desperately needs. Three significant problems for research experts who might consider working for the APS are that: (a) there are limited career opportunities for experts within the APS, (b) experts will find it difficult to maintain their expertise, and (c) they will find it difficult to maintain a reputation as an expert within the wider community of researchers. We make recommendations addressing these difficulties.

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# 1 Introduction

The consultation paper, *Meeting Australia's research workforce needs: A consultation paper to inform the development of the Australian Government's research workforce strategy*, covers a number of issues which impinge on Australia's research workforce. One significant issue which is addressed in the consultation paper is that of mobility:

*5.311 Available indicators suggest that Australia's research workforce (like that of other countries) is highly mobile, with research careers in many cases spanning national (and in some cases sectoral) boundaries and multiple organisations of employment.*

*5.312 There is also evidence to support strong positive returns to Australia arising from this mobility....*

*5.313 In spite of these benefits and positive existing activity, however, Australian researchers cite challenges in maintaining desired levels of mobility both within Australia and internationally. Challenges fall into two areas: disincentives to transitions between sectors and into or out of the research workforce in Australia, and barriers to international mobility....*

The focus of discussion in this submission is on mobility between the public sector and research institutions. Because we are social scientists, our discussion is particularly focussed on researchers in the social sciences although the issues we raise are also relevant to other research domains.

# 2 Background

The public sector has the potential to be the largest consumer in Australia of research related to the social sciences. It is easy to see why. Consider the following policy areas and pressing research questions—questions which fall wholly or in part into the realm of the social sciences:

- **Education:** How can we improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for Indigenous children in remote Australia?
- **Early childhood:** What is the best curriculum for early childhood education?
- **Justice:** Can we predict who will reoffend and in what circumstances?
- **Employment:** How can we help adolescents to make a successful transition from school to work or further study?
- **Health:** Is there an obesity epidemic and, if so, what can we do to stop it?
- **Environment:** How can we change people's patterns of car usage?
- **Infrastructure:** How can we predict the future demographics of our cities so that we can plan for future infrastructure needs?
- **Science:** How can we identify breaking developments in science that might be important for Australia?

Collecting evidence within the social sciences is notoriously hard to do well—prompting Leigh's (2009) observation that the "soft-sciences" might more accurately be termed the hard sciences—and even the very best research comes with many caveats and difficulties in interpretation. Skill in interpreting evidence is what a researcher in the social sciences will have acquired, and ready access to such skill is essential if the APS is to provide good policy advice to governments. One might,

therefore, expect that expertise in research would be highly sought-after in the public sector, and that there would be significant movement of social scientists between research institutions, such as universities, and the public sector. But this is not so. Why not?

One answer is that, although the public sector would welcome such an exchange with open arms, it can't get researchers to engage with them. Another answer is that the converse is true—researchers have found the public sector unwilling or unable to engage with them. The truth is considerably more complicated, as we argue in the remainder of this paper.

### 3 Why aren't researchers rushing into the APS?

In principle, there are several potential gains for researchers from spending some part of their career in the APS. They include:

- the opportunity to work on substantial and interesting problems that require the translation of research knowledge into practice
- the prospect of enhancing one's reputation by personally contributing to lasting improvements in problems of national importance
- the chance to form a network of contacts within the APS that might allow one to have an ongoing influence on public policy even after one's departure from the public service
- facilitating the possibility of gaining future consultancies by developing an understanding of both government and the APS
- the opportunity to gain specific knowledge of government procurement processes—highly desirable knowledge both from the point of view of a modern university and the individual consultant researcher.

### 4 Why so little researcher mobility?

Why do so few researchers spend a part of their careers within the APS? The consultation paper touches on some of the reasons:

*5.314 With respect to disincentives to workforce transitions, a frequently cited obstacle to transition out of the academic workforce (whether for a temporary period of unemployment or movement to another sector) is publishing track record — a key factor for researchers in keeping pace with research activity in their chosen field and maintaining required levels of output to compete for grants and career progression opportunities. More broadly, a lack of portability of superannuation arrangements and prohibitive pay differentials are perceived to encourage unidirectional rather than more fluid transitions between areas of research employment, such as between academia and the business enterprise sector.*

These are fair points, but, with regard to ease of bidirectional movement between research institutions and the APS, they are not the only ones and they are open to being misconstrued.

#### ***Publications, track record***

If social scientists are to be attracted into the APS then they must be able both to: (a) maintain and develop their expertise, and (b) maintain a claim to recognition of

that expertise within the wider community of scholars. Although these two points are interlinked they are not identical, and both are related to publishing.

For most social scientists the process of researching, writing, and publishing is one that significantly contributes to them sustaining and developing their expertise—but APS agencies are renowned for not publishing. The reasons for not publishing are many and various but the end result is the same: little is published, and working in the APS can turn out to be an efficient method for transforming expert researchers into non-experts, or into experts who cannot substantiate their claim to expertise. An in-house expert who fails to maintain and develop their expertise will be of ever decreasing value to the APS. On the other hand, an expert who cannot maintain an ongoing claim to expertise will continue to be of value to the APS but will run the very real risk of being unwanted by any other employer. Understandably, researchers who are considering a move to the APS see this as a non-trivial problem.

### ***Remuneration and reward***

Reward is more than money. One glaringly obvious problem that the APS must overcome if it is to succeed in attracting researchers into its workforce is the lack of commensurate structures of remuneration and responsibility in universities and the APS.

The education of a social scientist is directed towards developing independent mastery of their domain of expertise. The ability to think independently, and to make and be responsible for their own judgements, is central to their expertise and effectiveness. Independence of thought is also highly valued by researchers. But while the remuneration offered to APS staff at Executive Level 1 (EL1) is broadly commensurate with the remuneration offered to the top end of the academic Senior Lecturer range, the duties and responsibilities of EL1s are not commensurate with those of their academic colleagues; they are very much less significant. Transferring into the APS from a university at the same level of remuneration will considerably reduce the individual responsibility and independence of a social scientist. This difference in the way that remuneration and responsibility are interlinked in the APS and the way they are interlinked in universities is likely to be a severe disincentive for many researchers who might otherwise consider joining the APS.

### ***Research expertise is not understood or valued***

Gary Banks, Chairman of the Productivity Commission, noted in his address to the Australia and New Zealand School of Government in February 2009 that:

*Any agency that is serious about encouraging an evidence-based approach needs to develop a 'research culture'. Establishing dedicated evaluation units, achieving a critical mass of researchers, strengthening links with academic and other research bodies, are all integral to this. (Banks 2009, p 21)*

Banks is correct, but there are significant impediments to developing a research culture, not least of which is that APS generalist staff often do not understand what research is, or what evidence is, or why either are necessary. The APS is not alone in having this problem.

In November 2005 an inquiry into the UK Government's handling of scientific advice, risk and evidence in policy making was launched by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee. The tenor of comments in the report of the Inquiry is revealing. For example:

*Experts in the civil service (and from outside) need to work closely with civil service generalists if scientific advice and evidence are to be effectively incorporated into policy. William Solesbury, Senior Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice, told us that it was in this area—the competence of the generalist staff—that the civil service's weakness lay: "I do not think there is, as yet, very much, or at least not a very sophisticated understanding of the occasions when evidence is useful, the sort of evidence to be obtained, how to evaluate evidence when it is available, how to interpret it, and how to weigh it."* (Scientific Advice, Risk and Evidence Based Policy Making, paragraph 48)

The conclusion of the Inquiry was that while scientific knowledge and expertise was essential for evidence-based policy development, the UK Civil Service had significant problems in understanding and evaluating evidence, and in valuing and incorporating expertise within the Service.

Is the situation any different in the APS? We think not. Although the APS could gain from having more in-house research expertise, it is in the paradoxical position of lacking the very expertise that would enable it to understand its own need.

### **Creating career paths based on expertise**

If Australia's public service is to benefit from in-house expertise, and Australia's research workforce is to benefit from greater options for mobility into and out of the public sector, then the APS must develop career paths which recognise and reward expertise. Such a development would require creating the circumstances where internal experts can use and maintain their expertise, can continue to make a public claim to expertise, can influence decisions, can make judgement calls, and can think independently. It will not be straightforward but there are relevant, successful, Australian models, the Reserve Bank Service<sup>1</sup> being one such example.

In addition to building expertise in the APS by direct recruitment, another avenue would be to improve the exchange of ideas and people between the APS, universities and other research institutions. Academics could be seconded into the APS. Similarly, postgraduate researchers could be encouraged to undertake their PhD research on topics of importance to the APS thus yielding doctoral graduates who are 'tailor-made' to fit the APS's need for research expertise.

### **Attracting research expertise to the APS**

The issues we have discussed in this submission have generally been addressed as part of researcher mobility. However, the opportunity to work on applied problems and in organizations other than universities might well prove attractive to potential candidates for higher degrees by research (HDR) candidates, particularly given the demographic changes noted in the consultation paper:

**4.31** *The changing nature of its HDR student cohort also presents some challenges to Australia. The average age of HDR candidates in Australia has increased over the last decade,*

<sup>1</sup> The Reserve Bank Service, established under Part VII of the Reserve Bank Act (1959), is the employer of staff at the Reserve Bank of Australia.

*with a significant proportion of students now commencing their degrees in the 30-39 year age bracket and above. These demographic changes are reflected in the changing circumstances under which students are approaching studies, with many students having family and financial responsibilities that require more flexible modes of engagement with their degree...*

We note that there are already some resources available to support mobility of researchers between research organizations, including universities, and business.

*2.37 Through the Enterprise Connect Researchers in Business Program [ECRBP], the government supports the placement (through support for up to 50 per cent of salary to a maximum of \$50,000 for each placement) of researchers from universities or public research organisations in businesses for a period of two to twelve months. The scheme's objectives include breaking down cultural barriers between sectors and speeding the dissemination of expertise.*

We suggest that something similar to the ECRBP be set up to encourage researchers to spend some part of their careers in the APS. This would foster the development of a research culture within the APS and engage researchers in directing their research efforts towards addressing significant policy issues. Such engagement between researchers and the APS would further the development of evidence-based policy in Australia.

## 5 Recommendations

Fostering greater mobility of researchers in the social sciences between universities and the APS would be beneficial to researchers and universities and would enhance the APS's ability to provide evidence-based policy advice to government. These are potentially great gains for Australia, but there are significant impediments to this mobility. We make the following five recommendations.

### Recommendation 1

That the APS be encouraged to establish and use career paths based on expertise.

**Comment:** Section 35 of the Public Service Act 1999 (Cth) establishes the Senior Executive Service of the APS, the function of which is to provide a group of APS employees, each of whom, within his or her Agency, provides one or more of the following at a high level: professional expertise, policy advice, management. Although some APS agencies (such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics) clearly recruit staff because of their professional expertise and then utilise that expertise, such is not the case with many other agencies where the norm appears to be that SES members are appointed on the basis of management skills.

### Recommendation 2

That the careers of experts within the APS be structured so as to facilitate both the maintenance of expertise and the maintenance of a public claim to expertise.

**Comment:** By permitting Agency staff to publish research reports under their own name and under the banner of the Agency (but disclaiming representation of the Agency's views), APS Agencies could greatly increase the likelihood that professional staff could retain their public claim to expertise. The Research Discussion Papers of the Reserve Bank of Australia (which commenced in 1969) provide a good model for such publications.



### Recommendation 3

That the APS be encouraged to foster a culture of research and to develop a genuinely evidence-based approach to policy development.

### Recommendation 4

That candidates for higher research degrees be encouraged to consider undertaking their research with the context of the APS; and that the APS be encouraged to house and support such undertakings.

### Recommendation 5

That an equivalent program to the Enterprise Connect Researchers in Business Program be set up to facilitate mobility of researchers into the APS.

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## **Background of the Authors**

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