



ACADEMY OF
THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
IN AUSTRALIA

The Australia Public Service and the Social Sciences

Academy response to Inquiry into the Australian Public Service

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Overview

This submission examines the capability, culture and operating model of the APS. It makes eight practical recommendations to help ensure the APS is ready, over the coming decades, to best serve Australia in:

- driving innovation and productivity in the economy
- delivering high quality policy advice, regulatory oversight, programs and services
- tackling complex, multi-sectoral challenges in collaboration with the community, business and citizens
- ensuring our domestic, foreign, trade and security interests are coordinated and well managed
- improving citizens' experience of government and delivering fair outcomes for them
- acquiring and maintaining the necessary skills and expertise to fulfil its responsibilities

In examining these issues, the submission considers the suitability of the APS's architecture and governing legislation. It also considers how the APS monitors and measures performance, and how it ensures the transparent and most effective use of taxpayers' money in delivering outcomes.

Eight direct APS relevant recommendations emerge from this exposition and are summarised at the end of the submission.

The submission more broadly stresses the importance of a healthy social sciences education, research and analytic foundation for the effective functioning of the Australian public service in public policy formation and its implementation in Australia. The submission therefore also recommends that overall funding for social sciences education and research must match or exceed world standards if their ongoing contribution to public service capability and performance is to be sustained and enhanced. Current per student and per researcher support is limiting this pay-off. This is 'short-termism' in government.

1. Introduction

There is evidently a current commitment in the Australian Public Service (APS) to ‘evidence informed’ policy making, acknowledging the potential contribution of research expertise in this process, and the necessity of robust competition in the debate about policy options. Acceptance of such principles by the APS is implicitly based on an appreciation of and responsiveness to community perceptions, a constructive relationship between policy practitioners and research professionals, and the necessity of dialogue and debate. This submission focuses on the relationship between the policy domain and the research community.

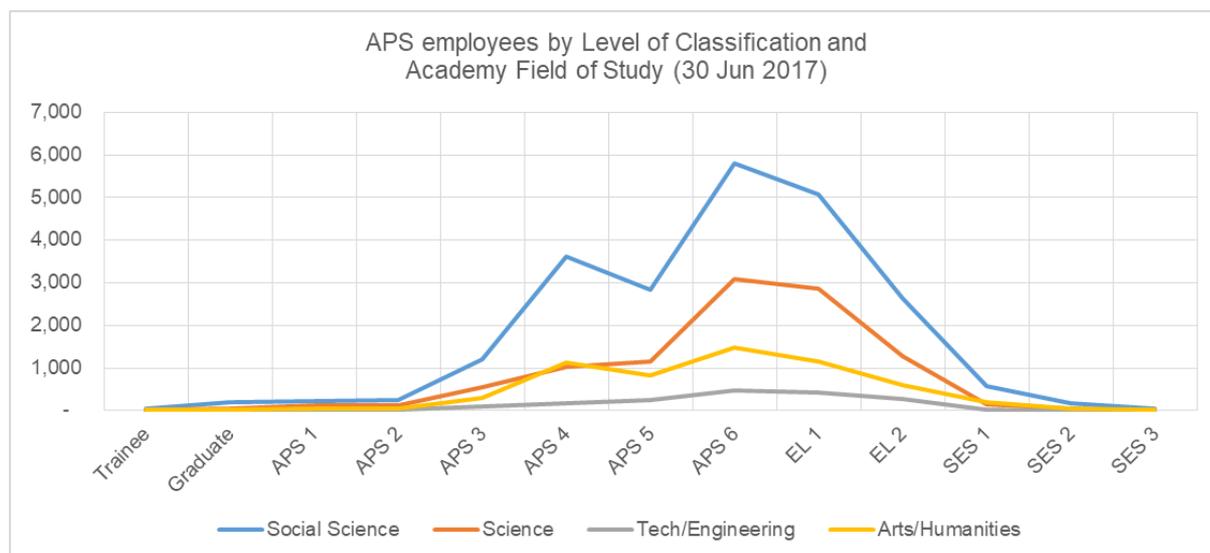
The capability of the APS depends upon its access to rigorous evidence that can strengthen the quality, innovation and productivity of its policy advice. While experience, knowledge and practitioner wisdom coming from within the APS itself are essential, much of the expertise on which it must draw comes from other sources—most importantly, we contend, either directly from major research institutions, or indirectly from them (as mediated by consultants, think tanks and ministerial staff).

At the same time, government agencies, government actions and associated policy demands have been the catalysts for large investments to generate significant data sets. This administrative and statistical data, properly managed and with sufficient transparency, should articulate smoothly with publicly funded research—a virtuous circle of benefit both to continuing research and to the policy domain.

The current review of the APS provides a welcome opportunity to examine the relationship between the APS and the publicly funded research community. What could be done to enhance that relationship, in ways that meet the specified objectives of the current review?

The Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA), since its inception, has seen its mission as being to promote “excellence in the social sciences in Australia, and in their contribution to public policy.” One of the core disciplines within ASSA, economics, was the progenitor of the incorporation of research professionals into the APS since the 1930s (Coleman, Cornish and Hagger, 2006) and has remained integral to policy deliberation. Since the 1950s, social science disciplines more broadly have been drawn into public policy circles (see e.g. Edwards et al., 2001; Head and Walter, 2015).

It is no surprise then that 56% of APS employees have a social science background and that this influence is even more prominent in senior positions, with 62% of SES employees coming from social science disciplines (APSED, 2017).



Every year, ASSA organises a national symposium addressing a significant social issue. ASSA engages interdisciplinary cohorts to report on and suggest resolutions to such issues, with potential policy impact. Direct engagement with senior public officials is often a feature of these events.

ASSA has recently charted the significance of all of the social sciences in a series of case studies demonstrating policy impacts in a report entitled *The Social Sciences Shape the Nation* (ASSA, 2017a). For instance, if reflection is given to Australia's particular global policy achievements, social science contributions are distinctive and strong across each of:

- Health, Education and Welfare, which have seen policies such as Medibank, HECS and child support.
- Economic, Social and Environment Policies, which have seen global standard policy initiatives in monetary policy setting, compulsory superannuation and water management.
- The Law, Justice and Culture scene, where Australia has developed native title, restorative justice and multicultural points system immigration.

These are only selected examples. But they show the value of past sound social science across academic and government roles.

The complexity of contemporary policy challenges, has reinforced the importance of research across a wide range of the social sciences and the integration of that in turn with other areas of analysis such as sciences, engineering and humanities, as an emerging imperative.

For example, the priority accorded to innovation is likely to founder unless there is appropriate recognition of how the social sciences have enabled us to identify the sources of resistance to innovative reforms and how such resistance can be countered (Juma, 2016). Another instance: while the science of climate change is widely acknowledged, the policy implications constitute an enormous collective action problem whose solution depends on a close understanding of many social science fields. Expertise is demanded to address dilemmas such as how to stimulate behaviour change and community commitment; how to communicate in ways that will not trigger automatic identity-based responses and cognitive closure; how to tackle institutional path dependency; and how to mobilise international constituencies—a complex web of sociology, social and cognitive psychology, communications, and political science at the very least. Even the much vaunted dedication to ‘evidence based policy’ needs to be alert to the analyses of what constitutes evidence, for whom and in what circumstances (Head, 2016).

Indeed, it is difficult to envisage any element of significant policy development that could afford to ignore the implementation challenges presented by patterns of rapid social change and its effects on community attitudes and behaviour (Juma, 2016). These include, for example, entrenched partisan belief systems (Cohen, 2003; Fielding et al., 2012); the unintended consequences of the reform era (Walter and Holbrook, 2018); the retreat to web-based ‘echo chambers’ diminishing our capacity for national conversation (Lanchester, 2017; Wu, 2017); and the transformation of political parties, executive behaviour and public sector advisory channels themselves (Strangio, ‘t Hart and Walter, 2017; Tiernan, 2011, 2016). These are all the terrain of the social sciences: hence complex and intractable policy problems will not be resolved without the incorporation of the social sciences (APSC, 2007; Head and Alford, 2015).

In the face of such complexities, both researchers and public servants have raised the question of whether the current political and advisory arrangements, arguably developed in relation to social, economic and political patterns that have irrevocably changed, remain fit for purpose (IPAA-ACT, 2018). This is not a novel question, and has been raised repeatedly in past reviews of the APS (see e.g. Lindquist, 2010). It would be apposite now to assess the extent to which the recommendations of these previous exercises in self-reflection have been implemented, and the reasons for both successes and failures. **[Recommendation 1]**

It is also clear to those of us who observe policy processes that major policy challenges demand not only interdisciplinary expertise, but also multi-level or multi-jurisdictional responses; they cannot be resolved solely by the APS. The formation of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) foreshadowed this necessity: it should be seen as a fundamental vehicle for Australian governance. We believe it currently lacks the support systems and the strategic focus needed, including a relevant research base, to address the challenging tasks that the country requires. COAG needs structures, processes, and advisory capacity that are more independent of the Commonwealth government, and administrative heft to match the importance of its role.

[Recommendation 2].

From the perspective of the research community, the challenges of contemporary social complexity in highly contestable domains of policy deliberation mean that the APS cannot afford to operate in isolation. It is far from being the sole voice (and in some instances, perhaps not even the preferred voice) informing the political executive. We strongly endorse point 3 of the current review's terms of reference, which recognises this. On one side, the APS must enlist community input and participation. On the other—the dimension with which this submission is concerned—it must utilise reliable research networks and the highest quality evidence. The next section provides some mechanisms for doing that.

Hence, there must be more inter-sectoral co-operation. This could sustain jointly-created and broad-based intellectual eco-systems, and 'encompassing groups' that might serve as advocacy coalitions for practical policy development. Practitioner wisdom *and* research experience can assist in determining how to create such encompassing groups. It is imperative for the boundaries of policy discussion to be more porous. That in turn will depend upon three things: the nature of *access*; effective *relationships*; and better understanding (among all parties) of *context*.

2. Access, Relationships, and Context

A recurrent impediment in the relationship between policy makers and researchers is the failure of the latter to appreciate the imperatives and the constraints influencing the work of policy makers. Too often, researchers expect to gain access to influence solely on the basis of expertise. They regard the significance of their findings as self-evident, needing little further argument or justification and heedless of context. It is hoped that changes to research and higher education policy incorporating impact measures, which enjoin researchers to work more closely with partners in industry, the community and the public sector to gain impact, will provide ongoing incentives for more consistent social engagement, including deeper relationships with the APS.

The experiential deficit of researchers concerning the policy sector might also be addressed by collaboration between Universities and the APS—perhaps facilitated by both ASSA and the APSC—to facilitate secondments of relevant experts to particular departmental policy teams for a period. By the same token, secondment of individuals from within the APS to identified research teams within Universities for a period might provide hands-on research experience, valuable thinking time and ‘over the horizon’ perspectives. **[Recommendation 3]**

Further, it has been the experience of some involved in authoring this submission that intensive training programs on understanding policy contexts and how to pitch policy proposals to public agencies (programs developed jointly between public policy academics, with former politicians and public servants), can be very effective in addressing the experiential deficit of our academic peers (see Laing and Wallis, 2016). Such initiatives until now have been short term and confined to particular partnerships (in this instance, a sector specific Cooperative Research Centre). Could such an initiative be extended? The possibility that the ANZSOG model—currently oriented towards academics training public servants in institutional and organizational dynamics and policy case studies—might be extended to offering training to academics in how to engage with policy agencies should be considered. **[Recommendation 4]**

At the same time, it is clear that current incentives for researchers, not only through impact measures, but also in the utilization of funding schemes such as the Australian Research Council’s Linkage and Cooperative Research Centre Programs, place the onus on researchers to find appropriate partners for socially engaged research. Yet they are at a disadvantage in identifying potential avenues for collaboration. In the public sector, at present, despite ad hoc appeals for submissions to particular inquiries (which ASSA makes considerable efforts to disseminate via its Fellowship network) there is no systematic means for researchers to see what the current needs of departments and agencies are. It would assist research/policy engagement if APS departments

were encouraged to maintain an updated register of immediate priorities and emergent issues in their domains with which researchers could match their research interests. **[Recommendation 5]**

Two contextual features that hinder sustainable research/practitioner relationships are the increasing rapidity of staff turnover and churn within both Universities and the APS, and the intensification of partisanship in the political domain. Career incentives in both spheres encourage individuals to make rapid progress within constrained timelines (for academics—some of these on limited term contracts—within the term of a specific grant; for public servants in a particular policy team) and to move on. This is inimical not only to institutional memory (Tingle, 2015) but also to the generation of trust that depends on continuity in relationships.

Such problems are compounded by heightened partisanship (Cohen, 2003) that tends to drive policy discontinuity. Abrupt policy cycles make it more difficult to align research timelines and implementation of evidence based initiatives, and tend to ‘disqualify’ researchers who have formed policy relationships under the auspices of one government from continuing under another (see e.g. Walter and Laing, 2018). One means of working around such impediments is for peak research bodies (such as ASSA) to identify and to build relationships with relevant policy champions in the bureaucracy, and for bureaucrats to alert researchers when a policy window emerges relevant to their interests. The latter could be facilitated if APS departments themselves formally developed research champion roles within their management teams. **[Recommendation 6]**

Ensuring continuing dialogue between the research and policy domains is also integral to sustained relationships. We would stress the importance of roundtables or forums initiated by the APS on policy issues of concern to the service. Should the introduction of departmental research champions in the APS proceed, they could unite with research professionals in facilitating such engagement. For its part, ASSA has sought to promote dialogue not only through its annual symposia, but also through its workshop program; through policy roundtables under the aegis of its Policy and Advocacy Committee; and through cooperative endeavours with the Institute of Public Administration Australia (e.g. IPAA-ACT, 2018).

3. Data Infrastructure

The APS would be enhanced by investment in research infrastructure. This submission particularly highlights the necessity for a major investment in an integrated national data infrastructure for humanities, arts, and social sciences (HASS).

The Academy has in the past and continues today to advocate for investment in a HASS Data Platform. It notes the 2016 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap explicitly identified need for investment in national scale infrastructure which would support HASS research. This would improve the ways researchers discover, access, curate, and analyse social and cultural data.

Researcher in HASS disciplines in Australia use a wide range of data in their researches. This data is currently not integrated. Instead, it is dispersed throughout the public sector, organisations, collecting institutions, and individual researchers and projects. Large amounts of the relevant data is hidden in various ways, or lays in unstructured forms, including as texts, maps, audio documents, and so on. Only a small fraction of these data relevant to HASS research exist in an easily accessible, digital form. For this reason, even accessing the relevant materials presents difficulties, before the hard work of interpretation and analysis can even begin.

The HASS infrastructure which already exists tends to be project-based or operate at an institutional level. This is in part because of the fact funding has been limited and inconsistent, which has caused much of the existing effort put into developing this infrastructure to be directed to individual researcher and institution-level priorities. The result is overall uncoordinated activity, small scale efforts, and minimal integration of research infrastructure.

Other countries, particularly the US and Europe, have taken a different tack: they have invested heavily in data infrastructure and coordinated it at national levels, usually by publicly funded national centres. Australian HASS research infrastructure is not up to these international standards. There remains no national point of contact for international collaboration—indeed these collaborations are often ad hoc and contingent. A national approach to planning and coordinating is needed in this connection.

This submission proposes the development of HASS infrastructure in order to support the needs and priorities of HASS research at a national scale.

An Integrated Platform for HASS will:

- transform data discovery, access, mining, curation, retention, re-use, analysis and interpretation through platform interoperability, integration, collaboration, and coordination of tools
- exploit existing investment and build towards networked platforms and facilities through a staged process
- drive efficiency, productivity, and quality across disciplines by enabling data comparability and a coordinated approach to metadata standards, data management standards, and shared protocols (including licences)
- promote innovation in research practice across HASS and into other domains through skills and workforce development
- build strategic connections with other areas of the 2016 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap
- support research outputs which are findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable
- ensure accessibility of data, with open data where possible but with strong protocols for data protection and security where required
- provide a coordinated approach to international engagement, in order to optimise the benefits of international memberships and partnerships.

An Integrated HASS Platform will maximise the value of existing Commonwealth investments in data, the digital transformation agenda, and the advantages of the big data revolution. It is not only academics and researchers who would benefit from enhanced HASS platforms. Other beneficiaries include government agencies of many kinds, business, industry—including creative industries, ICT, life sciences and health—not-for-profits, community organisations, and the public at large. This submission emphasises the following crucial point: APS in particular would be a major beneficiary of improved investment in an integrated HASS Data Platform, and enhancement of HASS infrastructure goes hand in hand with enhancement of the APS.

This submission notes the limited recognition of the social sciences in the government's response to the infrastructure framework report. It therefore recommends the establishment of a comprehensive integrated HASS Data Platform, in order to drive transformations in the way researchers discover, access, curate, and analyse social and cultural data¹. **[Recommendation 8]**

¹ The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia recognises the input of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, with whom the points made in section four of this submission were formulated, as part of a proposal put to the National Research Infrastructure Roadmap. Material from section four is derived from a previous Academy submission (ASSA, 2017b, pp. 8-11)

4. General Reflections

We here elaborate on the arguments above by drawing attention to a series of questions that were generated in discussion at a recent inter sectoral ASSA workshop. They were proposed as issues for further consideration by both researchers and policy professionals. However, we see them as especially relevant in the context of the current APS review. They might be directed to participants in the review's consultation process.

The Policy Reform Challenge

In relation to policy thinking, a leading issue is the idea settings within which policy is conceived. In times of policy equilibrium, when parameters are agreed, attention tends to focus on short term, tactical issues. It now seems that the 'big ideas' that have constituted policy orthodoxy for the past thirty years have run their course as even champions of the reforms of the past 30 years, such as Paul Keating, now concede (see Bramston 2017). We are arguably at the end of a policy cycle where what had become the norm – deregulation and market 'solutions' to societal problems – is in question.

This shift is behind the demand for inter-sectoral and inter-governmental engagement and for fresh approaches to long-term strategic thinking. Practitioners and academics have a responsibility to address these problems, that is, to conceive and refine the ideas necessary for the next policy phase:

- What *institutional settings* need to change to promote inter-sectoral and inter-governmental engagement and minimise the mismatch between those settings and complex policy challenges?
- How can we get *big ideas* into the policy process, while engaging both practitioners and academics?
- How can we shift the focus from *tactics and political risk management* to *policy development*?
- How can public servants be given more reflective time to assist them to move from day to day imperatives to *thinking over the horizon*?

The Capacity Building Challenge

On the supply side (policy generation), the public service must pay close attention to the costs and benefits of outsourcing, its impact on policy capacity, on institutional memory and the means of honing its message in the competition for government attention (Kirkpatrick et al., 2018; Tingle, 2015) **[Recommendation 7]**. And, as noted, researchers wishing to have impact need to identify and to build relationships with champions in the public sector, and to learn to speak to the needs of

the policy community rather than assuming that 'evidence' speaks for itself.

Capacity will be enhanced by more inter-sectoral co-operation. The tasks of practitioners and researchers working together might include the following:

- What is the best way to ensure the public sector (public servants *and* politicians) has the *relevant skills* and the collaborative competencies to create partnerships to deal with relationship across sectors?
- How can the gap between the rhetoric around public access to *administrative* data and its lack of availability in reality be bridged?
- How can the *policy/implementation* gap be improved both in terms of organizational arrangements and other ways of gaining maximum connection (including from outside in and inside out)?
- How can the public services do better with their *evaluations* so that the longer term benefits of complex initiatives are given time to be seen and so that collective learning can occur?
- How can we create *governance architectures* that balance control and flexibility?
- How can *institutional memory* best be preserved and harnessed?

The Legitimacy and Engagement Challenge

On the demand side of the policy equation, there is little researchers and practitioners can do to recalibrate the 'professional' career paths into politics, or to spark the institutional reform of parties. However, the historical and organisational factors that have led to the current deterioration of trust in and respect for politicians and parties can be identified, brought to the attention of political leaders and publicly disseminated as a possible influence on practice. Both parties and parliaments should consider how the skills politicians need as policy advocates, managers and implementers can be developed and encouraged—researchers and policy professionals should seek to be catalysts for such developments.

The causes of contemporary devaluation of experts and expertise need to be understood and addressed if credence is to be given to evidence based policy. The gulf between 'official knowledge' (the effectiveness of past reforms) and vernacular experience (the public trust deficit in relation to politics and policy) is testament to the failure of the policy community to engage sufficiently on the community level (Davies, 2017).

Further, it is evident that good policy needs not just an evidence base, but also a values base. The explication and implementation of policy must convey not only the problem it will address and the evidence on which it relies, but also the values it seeks to realise:

- How is the utilisation of *experts and evidence* in the public policy process to be managed and articulated alongside deeply seated *values*?
- How can public servants be encouraged to drive *participatory democracy* and *community engagement* in an environment of a sense of public disempowerment?
- How can the bureaucracy be encouraged to move from the *transactional* to the *participatory* way of dealing with key stakeholders, especially in a cost constrained environment?
- What creative ways can be pursued, and by what organisations, to *promote dialogue* across and more widely outside the public service on alternative policy options (role of dialogue, brokering)?
- Can the key elements of *experimentalist governance* be more systematized across the public service, especially in a risk averse political climate?
- Which non-government organisations are best able to work on these issues with officials – what might we demand of bodies such as *ASSA, ANZSOG, IPAA* and *APSA*?

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In the light of what has been said, this submission makes the following eight **particular recommendations**:

1. Given a series of earlier reviews of the APS, the review panel should assess the extent to which the recommendations of these previous exercises in self-reflection have been implemented, and the reasons for both successes and failures.
2. Researchers perceive the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) as currently lacking the support systems and the strategic focus, including a relevant research base, needed to address the challenging tasks that the country requires. We recommend that COAG structures, processes, and advisory capacity be augmented to give it more independence of the Commonwealth government, and the administrative heft to match the importance of its role.
3. There should be consideration of how to promote inter-sectoral research-policy co-operation, and better understanding on each side of the imperatives to which the other must respond. This could be the catalyst for jointly-created and broad-based intellectual eco-systems, and 'encompassing groups' to serve as advocacy coalitions for practical policy development. We suggest (a) the secondment of relevant research experts to particular departmental policy teams for specific projects; and (b) the short-term secondment of individuals from within the APS to identified research teams within Universities for a period.
4. The ANZSOG model—currently oriented towards academics training public servants in institutional and organizational dynamics and policy case studies—should be extended to offering training to academics in how to engage with policy agencies.
5. APS departments should maintain an updated register of immediate priorities and emergent issues in their domains with which researchers could match their research interests.
6. APS departments should introduce 'research champion' roles within their management teams. Such research champions should (a) identify and develop relationships with relevant external experts; and (b) initiate roundtables or forums for the APS on policy issues of concern to the service, in collaboration with external research professionals.
7. The APS must pay close attention to the costs and benefits of outsourcing, its impact on policy capacity, on institutional memory and the means of honing its message in the competition for government attention.
8. The government should establish of a comprehensive integrated HASS Data Platform, in order to drive transformations in the way researchers discover,

access, curate, and analyse social and cultural data.

Finally, the Academy adds the **general recommendation** that overall funding for social sciences education and research must match or exceed world standards if the contribution to public service capability and performance is to be sustained and enhanced. Current per student and per researcher support is limiting this pay-off. As indicated in the introduction, the social sciences play a distinctive role in support of the APS.

About the Academy

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia promotes excellence in the social sciences in Australia, and in their contribution to public policy. It coordinates the promotion of research, teaching, and advice in the social sciences, promotes national and international scholarly cooperation across disciplines and sectors, comments on national needs and priorities in the social sciences, and provides advice to government on issues of national importance.

The Academy is an independent, interdisciplinary body of elected Fellows. Fellows are elected by their peers for their distinguished achievements and exceptional contributions made to the social sciences. It is an autonomous, non-governmental organisation, devoted to the advancement of knowledge and research in the various social sciences.

The Academy is available at any time to further discuss this submission.

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