

Academic Fellows Program

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Developing Policy Acumen in the Public Sector

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What are the issue/s?

Across liberal democracies, the public sector faces new and emerging challenges in the 21st Century. In Australia, for example, foundational principles underpinning the Westminster public service, such as possessing the expertise and capacity to provide policy advice to the government of the day, are under strain. The continuing influence of New Public Management has meant that the public service may no longer be the dominant source of expertise and advice on policy (Grube and Howard 2016), while the rise of political advisers and private consultancy firms have implications for the public service's ability to design and deliver policy programs (see Tiernan and Holland n.d.:16; Craft and Halligan 2016). The need to develop the capacity of public policy workers to navigate this complex policy terrain and deliver public value has never been greater.

Within this context, this project will focus on how public servants develop the skills and knowledge required for policy acumen. It will do so by paying particular attention to the professional development programs targeted for entry level policy practitioners that aim to build their knowledge and understanding of the institutional and non-institutional context in which policy is made.

There is growing interest in understanding the preparedness of public sector staff and leaders to bring about policy change in complex settings. Early studies highlighted that being 'political savvy' was an important variable for individual leaders (Bryson and Kelley 1978: 715). More recently, research has focused on the key policy skills required by practitioners to undertake policy work, and that 'political nous remains a core part of a political-administrator's craft' (Rhodes 2015:644). Additionally, the need to be able to craft policy programs within complex political and administrative contexts has been identified as being crucial for contemporary public sector policy practitioners. As Yates and Hartley (2021:562) note, managing 'diverse and sometimes competing interests' was an important skill for effective leadership.

The existing research sets the context for the current project. Having the knowledge to initiate policy ideas, and understanding the principles and structures in which policy is made, are characteristics of policy acumen (see Wu et al. 2017:20). An understanding of the broad social, economic, and political environment in which policy is being made is crucial for practitioners to formulate and implement effective public policy (Pal and Clark 2015). As Head (2008: 1) reminds us, 'Policy decisions emerge from politics, judgement and debate, rather than being deduced from empirical analysis'.

Building workforce capacity and a public sector equipped with the know-how to design and deliver effective policy is an aspiration of bureaucracies around Australia and abroad. This can be seen in emerging attempts to build the policy acumen of policy staff. In Australia, the Independent Review of the APS (DPMC 2019:8) concluded that there was greater need for the APS to 'strengthen its expertise and professional skills to become a high-performing institution'. In Canada, the Association of Municipal Administrators (which is a not-for-profit organisation for senior managers) has invested in developing the Political Acumen Toolkit as they acknowledge that 'political acumen' was 'a core competency for CAOs, their direct reports, and the next generation of municipal leaders (CAMA ACAM n.d.: 1). Similarly, having an understanding of the policy terrain was identified as being a critical skill for those who work in policy roles in other jurisdictions. In the UK, for instance, 'understanding and supporting good governance', is one of three pillars in the Policy Profession Standards framework and expects policy practitioners to be able to understand

and support ‘good governance and accountability through the production of robust and challenging advice to inform decisions’ (UK Government, Policy Profession Standards 2021: 4).

While many public services have invested in capability frameworks and professional development programs, less is known about how policy practitioners develop policy acumen in practice and which learning experiences are most effective in preparing them to operate in complex policy environments.

Why does this matter?

The development of policy acumen for policy staff is important in several key ways. First, despite the skills, knowledge, and preparedness of public servants to design and deliver policy being of critical importance, the research topic is under-researched. Second, there are many frameworks (such as the APS and UK examples cited above), but there are gaps in understanding the skills currently in the public service. Third, the findings of this project will inform how governments and agencies allocate resources and invest in supporting the development of their staff.

Despite growing investment in capability development across the public sector, there is limited evidence about how policy acumen is developed and sustained in practice. This project seeks to help fill that gap by identifying the learning experiences, organisational supports and professional development approaches that best prepare policy practitioners for complex policy environments.

The approach

The research project has four main phases. Phase 1 will examine the background and planning opportunities for professional development; Phase 2 will seek to collect data from graduate program participants in Queensland and Victoria, as well as gain insights from public servants who manage new recruits; Phase 3 will draft the findings and involve roundtables with researchers for feedback; Phase 4 will involve the dissemination of research findings.

Impact into practice

The success of this fellowship will be seen across several key dimensions. First, it will produce a conceptual framework that will be bolstered by empirical evidence. It is hoped that this will become foundational to the work done by other researchers exploring similar questions about professional learning in public sector environments. It is intended that this will be made accessible through conference presentations and publications to maximise its reach and utility. Second, the project will assist public sector leaders with evidence-based insights to inform their decisions about professional development and learning pathways for their staff. This will help them move towards more sustainable investment in staff capability and avoid ad hoc approaches. Third, it will stimulate broader conversations about the capacity of policy work in Westminster systems and how to better support individuals and agencies to build policy skills over the long term.

It is hoped the findings will contribute to ongoing discussions about how public services can support the development of policy capability and professional learning.

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