

Academic Fellows Program

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Developing a framework for trauma-informed policy-making and policy leadership capability

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What are the issues?

Physician and global trauma expert Gabor Maté has famously said that "[t]rauma is not what happens to you... It is what happens inside you because of what happened" (see Maté and Maté 2022, 16). Trauma is sometimes conceived as an "unhealed wound" that can have physical, psychological or even spiritual effects (Maté 2022, 16). Public policy and its implementation often deal with issues that are traumatic by nature. This may range from policies related to sexual violence, to the experiences of First Nations people, victims of modern slavery, or welfare recipients. Citizens suffering under addiction may also exhibit various forms of trauma that coexist alongside the manifestations of the addiction.

Public sector studies are increasingly focusing on ethical policymaking and governments are placing more emphasis on the role of empathy in generating integrity in public administration and leadership (Ball 2025; Mussagulova 2024; O'Flynn 2025), including through the concept of "positive public administration" (Lucas et al 2024). Policymaking and leadership models need to be not only more empathetic but also more trauma-informed but this second area has received less attention. Clearly defining "trauma-informed policy-making" and linking it to leadership models are core considerations of the Fellowship.

Public sector leaders at both state and federal levels of Australian policymaking must develop policies that are responsive to, and address, the needs of traumatised populations and traumatic events. Possible responses include changes to modes of service delivery, substantive policy development and the management of teams at risk of vicarious trauma themselves. Leadership frameworks that are not trauma-informed raise ethical, work health and safety and employment law risks for these leaders.

At the same time as trauma is a vital consideration for public administrators, the concept of “trauma-informed” is defined in conflicting ways, creating uncertainty. My earlier work (Boucher 2025) identifies substantial variation in the concept of “trauma-informed” as defined across major Australian policy documents, sometimes inconsistently with one another, although many drawing from the work of the United States Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA 2014, 10-11). In reviewing these documents (i.e. AHRC 2020; 2022; 2023; 2025; SafeWork Australia 2022; SafeWork NSW 2023) and extending them to generate more detailed definitions of the concept of “trauma-informed,” I draw upon research from social work and social science interviewing methods.

This preliminary policy analysis that focuses on trauma-informed policy delivery to survivors of workplace sexual violence has attracted the attention of public sector leaders from a variety of Commonwealth agencies and departments. This Fellowship intends to follow up on this interest with agencies to support capability.

Why does this matter?

The growing attention to trauma-informed policy-making observable in recent APS policy documents substantiates the intention of the Fellowship to investigate in collaboration with policymakers how governance and leadership capability frameworks can be extended to support public sector leaders in achieving trauma-informed approaches. The Integrated Leadership System (ILS) SES profile of the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) will be examined through a trauma-informed lens and exemplars of best practice developed among public service leadership to build capability to identify and manage vicarious trauma among staff working with and for vulnerable citizens. The APSC has expressed interest in assisting with the Fellowship.

This project resonates with the *ANZSOG 2030 Strategy* (ANZSOG 2025) to craft public sector capabilities, deal with policy complexity (trauma-intensive policies are thematically complex) and draws in the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait people who have deep knowledge in trauma-healing practices. In fact, First Nations research globally emphasises the role of group and social conditions, particularly the role of the state, in achieving trauma-healing processes, as opposed to focusing narrowly upon the individual (Linklater, 2014, 22).

The approach

The Fellowship combines a mix of policy and non-academic engagements and outputs that are used to engage ANZSOG, the APS, the APSC and the APS Academy in this programme of research. The policy engagements and outputs include:

APS engagement and outputs

- Interviews and focus groups in Canberra and Sydney with senior APS officials across a range of departments and agencies on their approach to trauma-informed leadership and areas for future improvement.
- Masterclass presentation to the APS Academy on this topic.

ANZSOG engagements and outputs

- The Fellowship will offer a range of engagement activities and related outputs across ANZSOG, the media and the academy.

Academic engagement and outputs

- Presentations at relevant conferences: i.e Australian Political Studies Association 2026; Public Policy Network Conference 2027; American Political Science Association General Meeting 2027.
- Academic engagement in ANZSOG's academic community with other fellows and ANZSOG staff
- 2 x academic journal articles on trauma-informed public sector leadership
- Master Class with the APS Academy.

Bringing impact into practice

Fellowship “Success” can be measured as delivery of all proposed outputs. Longer term, “success” would see a broader discussion of trauma-informed concepts within government policy-making and the adaptation of trauma-informed leadership frameworks at both state and federal levels, as well as potential offerings on this topic to the APS Academy.

The Fellowship brings a variety of benefits. The first mutual benefit is **relational**. ANZSOG's outstanding relationship with state and federal Australian governments will support the Fellowship in developing and broadening these relations to a wider array of policy holders and leaders.

Second, **intellectually and substantively**, the work will extend from sexual violence to a wide array of policy subsystems in Australian Commonwealth policy domains, and to broader questions of leadership capability and administrative processes that cut across multiple departments and agencies. In this regard, ANZSOG's outstanding reputation across government will be essential and

the work will build upon and model itself on some existing ANZSOG reports, such as Breckenridge and collaborators (2021) “*Organisational policies and responses to employee disclosures of domestic and family violence and sexual assault.*”

Working with and alongside the APSC and APS government officials will assist in **developing best practice options in leadership capability frameworks** and policy-making from the perspective of **those dealing with these issues every day in their work**. This will ensure that the Fellowship is practical and grounded in real-work challenges that policy-makers currently face in their work.

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