Chapter 11

Devolution and the role of the APS Commission in training

- 11.1 This chapter discusses both the impact of devolution on, and the role of the APS Commission in, training across the Australian Public Service (APS). It will be recalled that Chapter 6 details the impact of devolution on recruitment within the APS. In some cases, themes common to both chapters emerge.
- 11.2 In the Committee's view, the management of training and development across the APS can be improved. Both agencies themselves and the APS Commission have responsibilities for designing and implementing training initiatives. It is therefore important that the appropriate balance between the two is achieved.

Devolution and formal role of APS Commission

- 11.3 Under the *Public Service Act 1999* (PS Act), devolution applies equally to learning and development as it does to other strategic human resource management activities. Each agency bears the primary responsibility for the targeting and effective delivery of learning and development to its employees to ensure that business and government goals can be delivered efficiently and effectively.
- 11.4 Section 41 of the PS Act sets out the following learning and development related roles for the Public Service Commissioner:
- to coordinate and support APS wide training and career development opportunities;
- to facilitate continuous improvement in people management throughout the APS;
- to contribute to and foster leadership in the APS; and
- to develop, promote, review and evaluate APS employment policies and practices.¹
- 11.5 The APS Commission told the Committee it aimed to complement and augment agency learning and development activities, with key focuses on (i) leadership development; and (ii) building the human resource management capability of agencies.²
- 11.6 The Senior Executive Service (SES) is central to the corporate leadership of the APS and the promotion and upholding of APS values. A major initiative of the

¹ APSC, Submission no. 15, p.28

² ibid

APS Commission has been the articulation of the capabilities required for high performance by senior executives. These are now applied to all SES selection processes, form the basis for the Commission's SES development products, and are used in assessing the strengths and development needs of high performing Executive Level 2 staff.³

- 11.7 With respect to human resource management, the APS Commission has developed the Human Resource Capability Model to articulate the skills required of highly effective HR people in the APS those who can effect organisational change, build agency capability and strengthen the impact of HR on business outcomes.⁴
- 11.8 The APS Commission has also stated that it provides a wide range of development products on a fee-for-service basis in response to the capability development demands of APS agencies. It also helps connect individual agencies to its panel of consultant providers who can assist with in-house learning and development programs. Training includes programs covering core skills such as financial management and policy development, a series of development offerings tailored for new graduate entrants to the APS, and a range of products for SES and feeder group learning and development, mostly on a fee-for-service basis.⁵
- 11.9 This chapter now turns to a brief commentary on:
- agencies' assessment of the impact of devolution on learning and development;
- the key issues identified by the Committee in relation to training generally; and
- specific cross-APS skills areas in which scope to further development was identified.
- 11.10 The chapter concludes with the Committee's vision of the role for the APS Commission in learning and development across the APS.

Agencies' views

11.11 As was the case for recruitment, many agencies consider that devolution has brought benefits in the form of more effective training and development delivered in an agency-specific context, tailored to agencies' specific needs and culture and linked to agency goals and outcomes. Large agencies, such as the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) and the Australian Taxation Office (ATO), stated they are also able to take advantage of economies of scale in providing in-house training to their Canberra-based workforce.⁶

5 ibid

6 DOHA, Submission no. 28, pp.12-13

³ ibid, pp.44-45

⁴ ibid

- 11.12 Some agencies told the Committee that the devolved arrangements for training has benefited agencies engaged in the traditional delivery of public services more than those whose main tasks are policy formulation and regulation. Centrelink considers that its Virtual College provides a structured, accredited training framework focused on the skills and attributes required for face-to-face customer service delivery in which 87 per cent of its staff is engaged. It considers that such an arrangement would not work as well for policy departments whose skills emphasis is more likely to be met through graduate recruitment and the associated management and leadership activities.⁷
- 11.13 The ATO considered that devolution is the 'most supportable strategy' for training. It claimed that, in the past, APS staff experienced difficulty applying learning obtained from centralised programs on return to work. It considered that the most cost-effective training is that designed and delivered at, or close to, the workplace because such work-related training is most likely to be applied on return to work. It noted, however, that this strategy presumed collaboration amongst agencies 'to ensure efficiency in the design and development of programs and processes of mutual interest, or which overlap[ped] departments'. It suggested that the APS Commission could play an important role in facilitating collaboration amongst agencies.⁸
- 11.14 The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (AFFA) considered the opportunity to design, develop and deliver training specifically to meet its own needs particularly important because of both the diverse skills and knowledge requirements of the agency and the widespread location of its employees. It advised that the technical nature of many jobs in AFFA meant that its staff are 'relatively low users' of APS Commission programs.⁹
- 11.15 It was not clear to the Committee whether devolution was in itself responsible for giving agencies these opportunities, or whether a diminished role for the APS Commission has forced agencies to be more involved in training. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, for example, commented:

As a result of the need to provide language training, DFAT-specific preposting training, consular training and a comprehensive Graduate Trainee program, the department has traditionally maintained a largely self-managed suite of in-house training programs... The devolution to departments of responsibility for training has therefore had little impact on the way DFAT manages its training.¹⁰

9 AFFA, Submission no. 19, p.9

⁷ Mr P Hickey, Centrelink, *Committee Hansard*, 14 August 2002, p.22

⁸ ATO, Submission no. 22, p.9

¹⁰ DFAT, Submission no. 4, p.12

- 11.16 Thus in at least this case, the devolution that took place in 1999 was not responsible for giving the agency the ability to customise training to meet its own needs.
- 11.17 Some agencies, while happy with aspects of devolution, were concerned about some of its impacts on training, as were many other parties that gave evidence to the inquiry. The following section deals with issues that were raised regarding devolution generally and the role of the APS Commission in training in particular.

Key training issues

- 11.18 In the Committee's view, there is a danger that the purported benefits from devolution could be outweighed by some of its limitations.
- 11.19 Witnesses both within and outside the APS highlighted concerns about some of the shortcomings of the devolved arrangements as they currently operate. These include the lack of consistent data on training expenditure (addressed in Chapter 8) and the need for minimum data sets and performance indicators (addressed in Chapter 10). Other issues are discussed in this chapter and include:
- perceived limited commitment from the SES to training;
- the fragmentation of training strategies across the APS and the related risk of duplication of programs and therefore higher than necessary training costs; and
- delivery of training to regional areas.

Engagement of the SES

- 11.20 The Committee was concerned to hear that Senior Executives were often the most reluctant to participate in training activities, despite their need to set an example to staff and indicate agency commitment to training. The APS Commissioner expressed his disappointment that 'not sufficient of the senior staff of the Public Service have been going to the courses that we run'. If true, it is also at odds with the APS Commission's focus on the SES as the lead-group for cultivating APS Values and setting a leadership example. In the senior example of the senior staff of the Public Service have been going to the courses that we run'. If true, it is also at odds with the APS Commission's focus on the SES as the lead-group for cultivating APS Values and setting a leadership example.
- 11.21 Clearly, agencies whose senior staff show a commitment to learning and development, both in terms of specific business outcomes as well as learning more broadly so as to develop individuals' and organisational capability, will have more success in establishing positive attitudes to learning and development amongst more junior staff.
- 11.22 Crucial to effective training in an organisation is commitment from senior management to a learning and development agenda. The Committee finds that, in

¹¹ Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee, *Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2003, p.478

¹² APSC, Submission no. 15, p.44

general, training has not received the priority accorded other functions, such as financial management, since the PS Act was introduced.

- 11.23 The Committee is also concerned that an apparent lack of commitment to learning and development in some agencies has resulted in undesirable outcomes both for agencies and their employees. These include training agreed through performance management assessments not taking place due to lack or funds; lack of resources, or inappropriate or unqualified personnel allocated responsibility, for human resources management; and cuts to the ostensibly dispensable training budget, especially in times of budget restraint.
- 11.24 The Committee is firmly of the view that the SES are central to the corporate leadership of the APS and the promotion and upholding of APS values. The apparent reluctance of senior executives to participate in training activities is of great concern to the Committee, especially in light of the APS Commission's focus on SES training. The Committee urges all senior staff to lead by example by undertaking training and demonstrating commitment to continuing professional development as a key factor in their employment.
- 11.25 The Committee makes further comment on leadership training later in the chapter.

Recommendation 23

11.26 The Committee recommends that the Senior Executive Service in all APS agencies lead by example by undertaking training and demonstrating commitment to continuing professional development as a key factor in their employment.

Fragmentation

11.27 A number of agencies raised concerns about the negative impacts of decentralization and fragmentation of training. One issue was that the loss of cross-APS standards and skills might decrease mobility of the workforce. The Department of Veterans' Affairs submitted:

There is ... a risk of duplication in some of the work undertaken by the PSMPC and by agencies, particularly in development programs. PSMPC programs provide a good option for smaller agencies who do not have the resources to provide their own development programs. However, agencies that have their own development programs may become out of step in development opportunities thus reducing mobility across the APS. ¹³

11.28 The idea that devolution may disadvantage smaller agencies was taken up elsewhere. The Commonwealth Ombudsman indicated he wanted:

Department of Veterans' Affairs, Submission no. 13, p.5

to draw to the Committee's attention the problems involved in providing adequate training to staff from a small agency's perspective.¹⁴

11.29 Other agencies were concerned that devolution, while providing better flexibility, had also increased costs:

It must be acknowledged that devolution has in places increased costs because there is a reduction in economies of scale and through the inevitable duplication across agencies eg. Graduate recruitment, generic APS training.¹⁵

11.30 Even agencies supportive of devolution thought there could be improved coordination in certain areas:

Improvements to training and development in the APS that could be considered include:

- Improved coordination of training and development across areas of common interest in the APS, such as administrative law, record keeping, financial management, relationship with government etc. 16
- 11.31 The ANAO, in its audit of the *Management of Learning and Development in the APS*, found that there was scope for the APS Commission to promulgate better practice in learning and development in the APS, suggesting that 'greater collaboration between agencies in the provision of training could be one such area'.¹⁷
- 11.32 Griffith University, which is engaged in several public sector training initiatives, observed that devolution has had unintended consequences for *both* the APS and those providing training and development services:

While generally supportive of the principles of devolution of decision-making authority to agency heads, Griffith's experience suggests that a fragmented approach to education and training can have some perverse consequences. Lack of information sharing and coordination between agencies can lead to duplication and overlap in professional development initiatives. Moreover, the practice of individual agencies tendering training contracts to university and other providers inhibits the kind of collaboration that could produce genuinely innovative programs that would serve the needs of the public services more broadly than just one agency. ¹⁸

16 AFFA, Submission no. 19, p.9

17 ANAO, Answers to questions on notice, p.3

¹⁴ Commonwealth Ombudsman, Submission no. 23, p.2

¹⁵ AES, Submission no. 24, p.1

¹⁸ Griffith University (Brisbane), Submission no. 16, p.2

- 11.33 In Griffith University's view, fragmentation not only impedes collaboration within the APS and training industry but might also raise barriers within the APS as agencies customise their skills to particular portfolio needs at the expense of developing service-wide 'core skills': 'Rather than supporting whole-of-government approaches, this specialised, fragmented and uncoordinated approach may reinforce silos'. ¹⁹
- 11.34 Open Learning Australia had a particular concern with the impact of devolution on training in regional areas. The frequent need for more than one trainer to deliver training in regional areas resulted in greater costs and possible loss of quality due to a high turnover of trainers. It considered that, with centrally led training delivery, specific regional training needs could be addressed within a framework of shared resources. Locally based presenters could maintain dialogue with metropolitan institutions, for example, through OLA Approved Learning Centres. Advantages included not only financial savings but improved standards of presentation due to linking to centres of learning such as universities, and greater retention of knowledge in regional areas if presenters remain locally based. The use of common learning materials and common presenter's guides, provided either online or in printed formats provided 'quality benchmarks' and a firm basis for such an approach.²⁰
- 11.35 The Committee is persuaded that a range of difficulties resulting from a lack of coordination and information-sharing amongst agencies has put increased pressure on training delivery in agencies. These include:
- duplication and overlap in training between agencies;
- losses in economies of scale;
- the need to spread 'the training dollar' across individual organisations;
- an extra layer of costs (for example, to fund a human resources provider as well as trainers); and
- replacement of corporate or organisation-wide initiatives with more piecemeal, smaller scale training programs to address localised needs.
- 11.36 The Committee is concerned at the claim by Public Service Education and Training Australia (PSETA) that good quality human resource management expertise existed in Australia, 'but not in [APS] agencies'. This is discussed in more detail later in the chapter. PSETA was also concerned at the potential for a breakdown in communication between training practice and research due to devolution. It noted that innovative programs that served the needs of the whole APS rather than just one agency were less likely to result from individual agencies tendering training contracts

21 Ms Andrews, PSETA, Committee Hansard, p.143

¹⁹ Griffith University (Brisbane), Submission no. 16, p.2

²⁰ OLA, Submission no. 7, pp.6-7

to university and other providers. It considered that high quality training is critical to improved APS performance.

- 11.37 The Committee also takes the view that, to the extent that agencies are developing their own programs relating to broader skills and knowledge requirements rather than those needed for specific business outcomes, devolution has gone too far.
- 11.38 Some agencies are much more advanced in their development and delivery of structured training frameworks than others. It appears to the Committee that there is an urgent need for more collaboration between agencies to ensure more consistency and quality in training at the level of individual agency, as well as a greater corporate APS focus profile in individual agencies. Of particular concern to the Committee is the possible trend to 'silos' and the raising of barriers within the APS as agencies customise their skills to particular portfolio needs at the expense of developing service-wide 'core skills'.
- 11.39 The APS Commission argued that 'some degree of duplication and fragmentation...is unavoidable and, indeed, necessary if individual agencies are to maintain the level of independence and agility required of them to deliver on their organisational objectives'.²² It considered that the cost of infrastructure required to monitor duplication and fragmentation and the PS Act limitations would be too great and, moreover, not in keeping with devolution.
- 11.40 The Committee accepts the APS Commission's view that some degree of duplication and fragmentation was unavoidable and even necessary. But it considers that much more should be done, especially in relation to core cross-APS skills, to coordinate training amongst agencies, encourage collaboration between agencies and monitor duplication and fragmentation with a view to improving cohesion across the APS and consistency in learning efforts and standards.

Recommendation 24

11.41 The Committee recommends that the APS Commission provide greater leadership to facilitate coordinated cross-service training. Its aim should be to ensure efficiency in design and development of training programs, particularly for core APS-wide skills.

Training in regional areas

11.42 There were different views expressed about training for regional PS employees. As noted above, AFFA suggested that the widespread location of its staff is a reason to support the agency choosing to develop its own customised training activities. The AFP²³ and ATO²⁴ indicated that devolution had not disadvantaged their

24 ATO, Submission no. 22, pp.8-9

Answers to questions on notice, Q.9, p.24

²³ AFP, Submission no. 31, p.10

regional staff in terms of training. Both agencies said that regional staff enjoyed the same access to training opportunities as staff in central locations.

11.43 On the other hand, regional staff were also identified as potentially benefiting from an expansion of APS Commission operations. The Department of Environment and Heritage has even more decentralized staffing than AFFA. They argued:

DEH would like to see the PSMPC extend its current activities to provide more opportunity for training and career development for regional staff. Increased online learning and development opportunities would be very valuable in helping to minimize the isolation and reduce the time and cost of accessing learning and development in the APS.²⁵

- 11.44 On balance, the Committee considers that the provision of training for employees in regional areas should be a key focus of the APS Commission. It welcomes programs developed by individual agencies for their regional employees and notes that some programs allow for flexible online delivery in conjunction with online support, including the redeveloped Public Sector Management (PSM) course.
- 11.45 However, it considers that centrally led training has advantages financially and, more importantly, in relation to quality and standards of presentation. Agencies with identified concerns in their regional training activities should seek to work with the APS Commission to develop remedial strategies. Where scope exists for collaboration with other APS agencies with similar concerns, the Committee urges the APS Commission and agencies to work together to identify common training needs and develop joint strategies to address them. Links with centres of learning such as universities are also important.

Recommendation 25

11.46 The Committee recommends that the APS Commission, in consultation with agencies, review the availability of training programs and opportunities in regional areas to ensure consistency with those available for APS employees in urban areas.

Cross-APS skills

- 11.47 In addition to the general concerns about APS commitment to training, and the fragmentation of the learning and development framework, particular areas of cross-APS skill needs were discussed by participants in the inquiry, with suggestions being made that they are areas in which the APS Commission can and should play a greater role.
- 11.48 The AFP suggested that there are some types of training better centrally delivered, others devolved:

Centralisation of the development and delivery of 'core business' training activities promotes national standardization and consistency in outcomes.²⁶

11.49 The ABC made a similar suggestion:

The ABC business has much in common with many areas of the APS and would welcome the opportunity both to participate in and to work on the development of commonly available programs, including the development of competency frameworks. Areas of common interest include management development covered by the Public Service Training package, finance, administration, archives and library service and other areas which support the ABC core business areas.

However, in many areas of the ABC, including all the core business areas, radio, television, new media and broadcast technology, the ABC is best placed in Australia to develop amd deliver appropriate training programs ²⁷

11.50 This chapter therefore turns to the areas that were identified during the inquiry as needing further cross-APS development.

Leadership development

- 11.51 The Committee is particularly concerned that devolution appears to have resulted in a fragmented and uncoordinated approach to leadership development. The report has already emphasised the importance of good leadership to good governance, management capacity and organisational performance. This issue is highlighted in the literature both in Australia and internationally.
- 11.52 The Committee is persuaded that more centralised and better quality training in leadership and management is needed to ensure employees across the APS develop core skills and a whole-of-government perspective. It is not convinced that existing programs such as the Public Sector Management (PSM) course and opportunities for articulation into graduate and postgraduate level qualifications described by the APS Commission meet this need.
- 11.53 The Committee considers that the UK's Centre for Management and Policy Studies (CMPS) provides an excellent model. In its view, the recent establishment of the Australia New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) is pertinent and timely, and has discussed this in more detail in Chapter 9.
- 11.54 The Committee considers that the APS Commission should encourage greater agency use of its assistance to identify high-performing staff (through the Career Development Assessment Centre) with a view to enhancing future leadership in individual agencies.

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²⁶ AFP, Submission no. 31, para.47

ABC, Submission no. 32, p.11

11.55 Several witnesses suggested that the APS Commission could play an important role in facilitating collaboration amongst agencies to ensure more efficient design and development of programs and processes of mutual interest, or which overlapped departments. The Committee agrees. This should include a focus on applying learning obtained from centralised programs back in the workplace.

Contract management

- 11.56 For contract management, APS employees need to be able to negotiate and liaise with potential contractors. They also need to understand risk management and have a sound knowledge of the accountability, transparency and information disclosure requirements regarding contracts. The ANAO emphasised that the 'solid' pace of change within the APS over the last few years placed even greater pressure on APS managers to ensure that staff were equipped with appropriate and adequate skills, especially in the spheres of contract management and accounting.
- 11.57 The inquiry elicited considerable criticism of the ability of relevant APS staff to design and manage outsourced contracts and therefore to deliver required products to government. IEAustralia suggested that a lack of contract management skills could lead to a focus on contractual *terms* rather than *outcomes*; risk allocation with a view to minimal agency risk rather than to the most able risk manager; choice of the lowest priced option rather than that offering the best value for money; increased risk for contractors in the absence of relevant information in tender documentation; and exploitation by contractors that take advantage of lack of knowledge amongst APS negotiation teams.²⁸
- 11.58 Citing a 2001 survey that revealed that about 25 per cent of APS officers involved in IT contract management lacked sufficient technical expertise to develop and assess tenders effectively, IEAustralia suggested that the APS would become 'less of an informed regulator, purchaser or policy developer' in areas requiring technical expertise unless these skills deficits were addressed.²⁹
- 11.59 In a similar vein, the Australian Institute of Purchasing and Materials Management Ltd considered that, because of the lack of procurement skills amongst APS staff, standards of procurement are declining and would continue to decline, unless mandatory rules are in place. It opposed the decision in 1998 to downgrade from 'mandatory' to 'best practice' the requirement for staff undertaking procurement functions to meet 'appropriate Commonwealth procurement competency standards'.³⁰ It repeated the recommendation of the Joint Statutory Committee of Public Accounts

29 Mr B Crews, IOEA, Committee Hansard, 14 August 2002, pp.36-37

²⁸ Institution of Engineers Australia, Submission no. 38, p.4

³⁰ Mr D Messer, AIPMM, Committee Hansard, 15 August 2002, pp.118-119

and Audit that this decision be reversed and called for mandatory competency standards to be reinstated.³¹

11.60 The Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia (APESMA) also expressed concerns about the capacity of relevant APS staff to manage contracts effectively, in particular, those relating to technical areas. Noting that the government is a large purchaser of materials and services, it is concerned that 'a reasonable proportion' of those managing technical contracts in the APS did not have engineering qualifications and stressed the importance of 'informed buyers', particularly in relation to engineering services and projects.³²

Human Resource Management

- 11.61 Crucial to improving the APS image with a view to attracting and retaining high quality staff is a commitment from senior management to better human resource management strategies that are more integrated with corporate goals and business planning.
- 11.62 In terms of the major shifts in culture and practices undergone by the APS over the last two decades, the inquiry was told that human resources management had received little attention. Learning and development has not received the priority afforded other business drivers, especially in APS agencies having senior managers from specialist backgrounds.³³
- 11.63 The Committee was also told that, under devolution, the role and demands made of human resources managers had changed and that there was an urgent need for better skills and training for these staff. In 1998, Davis had noted that a consequence of devolution would be the need for line managers to become skilled in areas once handled by professionals, including many human resource management functions. He referred to the likely contraction of the role of human resource professionals to that of providers of 'internal consultancy services' comprising advice on process and indirect rather than direct support.³⁴
- 11.64 PSETA noted that, because human resource management staff had often joined the field from the payroll or personnel strands of agencies, they often lacked the knowledge and skills relevant to training and recruitment. It was suggested that loss of recruitment skills in the APS has led to the involvement of inexperienced staff

34 'A Future for Public Service? Human resources management in a shrinking sector', G Davis, *Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration*, No. 89, August 1998, p.24

³¹ AIPMM, Submission no. 14, p.7. See also Joint Committee, *Report 369 - Australian Government Procurement*, June 1998, p.49.

³² Mr J Vines, APESMA, Committee Hansard, 11 November 2002, p.225

³³ Ms J Andrews, PSETA, Committee Hansard, 15 August 2002, p.143

in interviewing and recruitment and that this had been compounded by lack of advice from agency human resource management areas.³⁵

- 11.65 This means that, in practice, while financial management disciplines and other drivers considered essential to delivering an agency outputs are closely adhered to, there can be a lack of will to ensure an appropriate focus on learning and development.
- 11.66 Davis noted that even the former Finance Secretary Michael Keating, an advocate of the 'corporate management' approach to the APS, conceded that there was a 'risk that some traditional personnel functions, such as staff training and development, might be lost amid the emphasis on financial management'. 36
- 11.67 The Committee heard that in some areas of the APS 'training' is considered 'a soft skill' that could be targeted in times of budget cuts. This lack of understanding of human resources management issues may lead in turn to a misunderstanding of the strategic importance of learning and development for agency productivity and retention of staff.³⁷ It is vital that human resource management skills are developed across all APS agencies. The APS Commission, with its focus on values-based management, is well-placed to be involved in ensuring this takes place.

Procurement training

11.68 Another area in which the APS Commission should play a useful role is coordination of procurement and acquisition training, including links to accredited programs and providers. The Australian Institute of Purchasing and Materials Management (AIPMM) suggested that establishment of a framework of training for these functions would address the present variation between agencies concerning this type of training.

...the acquisition of training services seems to be very much on a department to department or agency by agency basis. As such, there is no coordination role and you will get variances in quality in terms of the training. If the commission was to look at establishing an agreed framework for training systems for acquisition training so that there would be registered courses in the VET sector and competency standards working through RTOs and allowing departments to make a decision as to the relevance of that training that would address the variations we get. So it could establish a framework, basically relying on the VET system for the provision of

³⁵ PSETA, Submission no. 43, pp.2-5

^{36 &#}x27;A Future for Public Service? Human Resources Management in a Shrinking Sector', *Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration*, No. 89, August 1998, p.24

³⁷ Ms J Andrews, PSETA, Committee Hansard, 15 August 2002, p.143

training and qualifications arising from that but allowing the departments to make a decision on the detail of it.³⁸

- 11.69 AIPMM considered that procurement training is a critical issue for the APS because of the volume of purchasing occurring and contracts being let in the new public sector environment. It recommended the urgent establishment of a clear framework and mandatory rules for the functions of procurement and acquisition needed to be established urgently if competency standards were not to continue to decline.³⁹
- 11.70 It claimed that there is considerable variation between agencies concerning procurement training and that an agreed framework that included registered courses in the VET sector and competency standards achieved through RTO would address this variation. It suggested that the APS Commission could coordinate such a framework, stating:

...the acquisition of training services seems to be very much on a department to department or agency by agency basis. As such, there is no coordination role and you will get variances in quality in terms of the training. If the commission was to look at establishing an agreed framework for training systems for acquisition training...it could establish a framework, basically relying on the VET system for the provision of training and qualifications arising from that but allowing the departments to make a decision on the detail of it.⁴⁰

Freedom of Information and administrative decision making

- 11.71 A focus on greater accountability, performance and transparency has seen the workings of government come under increased scrutiny through a raft of administrative changes including through parliamentary committees, freedom of information legislation and broader and more accessible means of judicial review of administrative decisions. Scrutiny by specialist bodies such as the Auditor-General and the Ombudsman's Office as well as the media, has also substantially increased in recent times.⁴¹
- 11.72 The Ombudsman told the Committee that many investigations and systemic reviews conducted by his office had found that there is 'a lack of training and awareness of good administrative procedures by Government officials...across most agencies'. 42

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Mr T Williams, AIPMM, Committee Hansard, 15 August 2002, p.120

³⁹ Mr D Messer, AIPMM, Committee Hansard, 15 August 2002, pp.118-119

⁴⁰ Mr T Williams, AIPMM, Committee Hansard, 15 August 2002, p.120

^{41 &#}x27;Public Service: A Secretary's View', A Hawke, *Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration* No. 105 September 2002, p.21

⁴² Commonwealth Ombudsman, Submission no. 23, p.1

- 11.73 He noted that training in Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation is one of the areas needing attention. Interviews conducted for the June 1999 report *Own Motion Investigation into Freedom of Information (FOI) Act in Commonwealth Agencies* found that only half of the FOI practitioners surveyed had undergone some form of formal FOI training. A more recent review of DoHA's Complaints Resolution Scheme found that 'the lack of appropriate training was a major factor in the scheme's poor handling of complaints'.⁴³
- 11.74 The Committee notes that a revised version of *A Good Practice Guide for Effective Complaint Handling* is in preparation. Significantly, the report [Guide?], which aims to provide a framework of the essential elements of an effective complaint handling system, will also reflect 'the need for contemporary, regular and appropriate training for APS staff' in FOI.⁴⁴
- 11.75 The Administrative Review Council (ARC) also drew the Committee's attention to the need for training of APS officers in administrative procedures. Such training is important because, according to the ARC, 'at one time or another, most Australians will experience administrative decision making by an APS officer'. This is because primary decision making responsibilities have largely been delegated by Government to APS officers, with internal review of decisions also undertaken within the APS. Critically, the ARC notes that decisions are frequently made on the basis of complicated and changing legislation. ⁴⁵
- 11.76 The ARC considered that the quality of decision making is heavily dependent upon the effectiveness of the training in administrative procedures provided to APS employees. In its report *Internal Review of Agency Decision-Making* the ARC found inadequacies in the training available for those involved in internal review processes and recommended development of training strategies on an agency basis.⁴⁶
- 11.77 Although the ARC has not yet undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the training available for primary decision makers, the report mentioned above noted the importance of training for these officers and also recommended development of training strategies for these officers. It suggested that training should focus on client contact skills, effective explanation of decisions to clients and training in legislative arrangements, especially in the case of complex legislation.⁴⁷
- 11.78 The ARC advised the Committee that it is presently inquiring into the use of rule-based or expert systems in a number of federal and state government departments. It noted that the use of such systems could give rise to training issues

⁴³ ibid

⁴⁴ ibid, p.2

⁴⁵ ARC, Submission no. 17, p.1

⁴⁶ ibid, p.2

⁴⁷ ibid, p.3

because, while their use could result in 'increased accuracy, consistency and efficiency in decision making', officers would still be required to explain the operation of relevant legislation and policy changes to applicants, particularly where applicants are not entitled to benefits or are no longer entitled to benefits or to the same level of benefits. Further, it noted that the use of rule-based systems could diminish the skills of decision makers and result in loss of corporate knowledge of alternative, and more complex or rarely used, paths through the legislation.⁴⁸

- 11.79 Finally, the ARC noted that there is a need for widely available training that embraced senior managers as well as more junior staff. It noted that 'a consistent need for training and support' for members of the administrative tribunal and for tribunal presiding officers to provide leadership, training and support had been expressed in consultations concerning preparation of the Council's 2001 publication, *A Guide to Standards of Conduct for Tribunal Members*.
- 11.80 The Committee is disturbed to find that, despite the support and advice on training and development provided by the APS Commission to agencies and the range of programs provided under its auspices, there are concerns that agencies lack skills and expertise in many areas and that their training agendas are fragmented and underdeveloped.
- 11.81 The Committee considers that the APS Commission should play a much more strategic role in coordinating and facilitating delivery of centralised training program. Key areas identified during the inquiry are administrative law, record keeping, financial management and freedom of information. The Committee considers that a range of delivery options could be used, including interactive internet training. This is not to discount, however, the benefits that derive from shared learning and the more immediate, personal and focused responses available from face to face training.

Recommendation 26

- 11.82 The Committee recommends that the APS Commission increase its efforts in coordinating and facilitating delivery of cross-service APS training programs in administrative law, record keeping, financial management and freedom of information requirements.
- 11.83 The Committee also considers there is a critical role for agencies and the APS Commission to promote public administration as a profession. This should include agency support for employee membership of, and involvement in, professional associations.

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Recommendation 27

11.84 The Committee recommends that the APS Commission and APS agencies actively promote public administration as a major profession and develop measures to enhance a professional identity amongst APS employees.

Conclusion: A greater role for APS Commission

11.85 The APS Commissioner, Mr Andrew Podger, recently expressed the view that, having bedded down the new devolved framework since the introduction of the Public Service Act in 1999, the time has come for the APS Commission to move into a new phase. The Committee shares the APS Commissioner's view that the APSC should now start 'to take advantage of the new framework to see if we can help agencies to take full advantage of it'49 and in particular that 'we need to have more structured learning and development arrangements'. 50

11.86 The Committee has concluded that, while devolution may have delivered some benefits, particularly in the area of recruitment, there are risks that need to be more effectively addressed. It also believes that training in some particular cross-APS skills could be delivered more effectively. The APS Commission should have a role in both these areas.

11.87 The Committee concurs with the view of the ANAO, amongst others, that there is scope for the APS Commission to undertake 'a more catalytic role' in learning and development across the APS, particularly by 'better targeting its facilitation efforts and enhanc[ing] its advisory and reporting roles, including reporting to Parliament, by the collection and analysis of APS-wide data on learning and development'. The ANAO noted that this would require the cooperation of all APS agencies and possible Ministerial direction to ensure full coverage and cooperation. The Committee hopes that this will be forthcoming, and that the recommendations made in this report will contribute to an APS that is better equipped to meet the recruitment, retention and development challenges facing it over the next decade.

11.88 However, the Committee also believes that the APS Commission needs to have increased authority to promote and coordinate 'whole of service' approaches. This is particularly necessary for striking the right balance between the responsibilities that both agencies and the APS Commission have for designing, implementing and reporting on not only training initiatives but also recruitment strategies. The Committee is concerned that under devolution the APS Commission's capacity to promote initiatives that address service-wide imperatives, such as core skills and

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⁴⁹ Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee, *Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2003, p.487

⁵⁰ Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee, *Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2003, p.473

⁵¹ ANAO, Management of Learning and Development in the Australian Public Service, Audit Report No.64 2001-2002, p.14

⁵² ibid

workforce planning, has been diminished. The Committee is firmly of the view that this situation needs to be addressed.

Recommendation 28

11.89 The Committee recommends that the APS Commission be given enhanced powers and responsibilities to ensure greater coordination on 'whole of service' issues in recruitment and training.

Senator Michael Forshaw

Chairman