

Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee
Inquiry into Recruitment and Training in the Australian Public Service
Submission By Public Service Education And Training Australia
(PSETA)

INTRODUCTION

PSETA is not in a position to comment on the application of the terms of reference generally to the Australian Public Service. Our submission to this inquiry is by way of an overview of current public service recruitment, training and development trends and issues across jurisdictions.

Background to PSETA

Public Service Education and Training Australia is a “Recognised Body” under the system of industry training advisory bodies overseen by the Australian National Training Authority. It was established in 1997 and comprises employer representatives (usually the Commissioners for Public Employment or their equivalent) for the core public service from each state and territory and the Commonwealth governments, and employee representatives from the Community Public Sector Union/State Public Services Federation Group, and the Australian Manufacturing Workers’ Union.

PSETA links as required with other national training bodies for related public sector employment groups such as local government, public safety, community services, and correctional services.

PSETA’s purpose is to:

- be an effective voice for the public services industry on issues related to vocational education, training and development.
- provide information and advice to government and the industry on matters relating to the vocational education, training and development needs of the public sector, including training policy, research requirements and priorities for funding allocation within public service industry training.
- facilitate the development and maintenance of national competency standards by industry and advance the development and provision of education and training conducted in accordance with those standards consistent with the requirements of the Australian National Qualifications Framework.
- promote effective communication and liaison with relevant State/Territory departments, ITABs and other bodies.

PSETA’s work addresses the training needs of approximately 1.2 million public sector employees.

RESPONSE TO TERMS OF REFERENCE

2a (i) the trends in recruitment over recent years

All Australian public services are experiencing the impact of an aging workforce and will continue to do so over the next 10 to 20 years. For example, in South Australia 45% of the public sector will be eligible for retirement in 2011 compared to 11% at present.

Combined with the trend over the past decade to significant downsizing of the public sector, the age profile of the public sector does not follow a normal distribution curve in most jurisdictions. Even allowing for the changed skill demand brought about by the contracting out of many public sector functions the public sector is facing significant workforce capability shortages.

This is further compounded in traditionally hard to attract or retain skill areas such as financial management, project management and information technology, where the private sector offers more lucrative employment conditions.

2a (ii) the trends, in particular, in relation to the recruitment of young people, both graduates and non graduates

Graduate and youth trainee schemes for the recruitment of young people are in place in all jurisdictions to some degree. In jurisdictions or agencies where budget savings are required it tends to prove more difficult to prioritise resources for youth recruitment. The short-term business pressures produce a preference for experienced staff with developed expertise, and the mid to longer term consequences of no succession flow of younger recruits coming up through the ranks is a lesser priority. Central agency subsidy, or separation packages for departing employees against youth recruitment targets are two approaches to provide incentives to youth recruitment.

2a (iii) the employment opportunities for young people

Employment opportunities for untrained young people are decreasing. The widespread contracting out of processing functions has assisted the removal of traditional entry paths for relatively unskilled recruits. While the business literature generally highlights the need for skilled staff in the workplace of the future it remains the case that many young people in Australia do not gain access to tertiary training or education. Traditionally the public service has been able to recruit and train these young people with success. The vocational education and training system supports flexible work-based skill development.

2b (i) the trends in expenditure on training and development over recent years

Tracking expenditure on training and development has proven difficult under conditions of devolved management responsibility. Agencies often respond to requests for such data with estimates, of varying quality stating that as yet there are no useful IT systems to reliably capture and report this information. While awaiting appropriate information technology it is possible, however, to construct simple Excel format recording systems for use by line managers, aggregated to agency data. Where agencies can report in detail their expenditure on, say, information technology, but cannot produce reliable data on training and development, it reflects the lack of perception of training and development as a significant organisational and government resource.

2b (ii) the methods used to identify training needs

Training needs analysis is best conducted as an integral part of an agency's business planning, referring any systemic implications (eg shortage of finance managers) for whole of government consideration as well. The needs analysis should make a systematic assessment of short, medium and longer term skill needs of the organisation against all categories of staffing. (eg entry level, junior, mid and senior staff; first line, middle and senior manager; junior and senior executive; deputy and chief executive and specialist occupational streams)

The identification of training needs should link to performance review and development and special recruitment initiatives to provide a workforce capability assessment for the agency and the sector.

2b (iii) the methods used to evaluate training and development provided

Generally two methods are used to evaluate training and development:

- individual participants' course response sheets covering content, learning enabled, and presenter quality;
- periodic full program evaluation of major initiatives.

The HR industry has attempted to develop return on investment models and assessment tools to measure outcomes of training and development but they are as yet complicated and unproven.

The one outstanding gap in evaluation of training and development is the longer term effect. Until a reliable human resource information technology system is in place from which analysis over time of individual employee's training exposure against career progression can be extracted, the best that can be done is specific studies of a particular cohort.

2b (iv) the extent of accredited and articulated training offered

Moving training in the direction of accredited and articulated training has been a priority of the national vocational education and training system, and within that PSETA, and of aware human resource managers in the public sector for all levels of training. Accredited training provides assessed, recognised and portable skill levels. For many entry to mid level public sector staff accredited training through the Public Services Training Package is the first time they have received formal respect and recognition for their skills. Articulation ensures efficient pathways through the formal education system.

Nonetheless un-accredited training is still the norm in jurisdictions. Given that the new direction has really only been in place for a few years there is much ground to cover.

2b (v) the processes used to evaluate training offered

All public services use formal tender processes to assess and purchase training services and products. This can include referee checks of past users.

2b (vi) the adequacy of training and career development opportunities available to employees in regional areas

Rural and regional employees' access, particularly rural employees' access to training and development is problematic. Distance learning methods and, lately, on-line learning, much as they are said to have the potential to solve this situation still do not answer the critical learning need for interaction with peers in a learning environment.

2b (vii) the efficiency and effectiveness of the devolved arrangements for training

Devolution of responsibility for training and development brings with it the advantage of local knowledge and tailoring of training, but also the potential disadvantage of no local championing of the value of training and development, particularly under the pressures referred to in 2a (ii).

2c the role of the Public Service Commissioner in coordinating and supporting public sector wide training and career development opportunities

The responsibility for training and development varies across jurisdictions according to their extent of devolution of responsibilities for agency management. It ranges between complete agency head responsibility, usually in the context of some overall standards defined in legislation or policy, to a shared responsibility between agencies and the relevant central agency with the latter tending to focus on strategic interventions for whole of government workforce capability and the agency on immediate agency needs.

At either end of this continuum there needs to be a systemic resource that gives voice to the value of sound workforce capability planning and provision, else the need for this infrastructure is not recognised under the pressure of other business demands.

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