APS Review: Graduate Programs

Graduate programs provide recent university graduates with a structured entry into full-time employment. They are common across both the private and the public sectors and typically act as the key entry-level recruitment strategy for those organisations that run a program.

According to the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) in 2016, graduate recruitment was just over 10 per cent of the recruitment the Australian Public Service (APS) undertook that year[1]. A review of staff at all levels of seniority in the public service, including the Senior Executive Service, would show that a number of existing staff started as graduates or entered into the service via junior recruitment programs.

With their significant representation in the public service and the risk that graduates may bypass external training and experience by remaining in the public service for the duration of their career, well-run and appropriate graduate programs are crucial for the ultimate success of the public service. The skills and experience of graduates completing the existing programs will affect the capabilities and direction of the public service and will contribute significantly to whether the public service remains fit-for-purpose.

The changing nature of the public service as an employer of choice for university graduates[2] has resulted in a large number of applicants attempting to be hired for what is generally a small number of roles. The result has been an increase in the quality of graduates entering the public service but also a greater need to deliver programs and workplaces that addresses the needs of the graduates or risk losing the talent to other employers.

In seeking to retain the graduates recruited as the supposed best candidates, the APS must consider whether the programs will need re-development to ensure that the graduates are able to meet the new challenges whatever the future holds and the APS best serves their needs.

This submission suggests that graduate programs are a useful and important facet of the public service, but that current programs may not be preparing graduates for the future of the public service or empowering them to shape the service in meaningful ways. The programs could be better administered from a high level to enable higher-order planning and management of the public service recruitment and the key skills needed for the future. The programs are not currently based around skill-thinking, that is, what the graduate is good at and what they want to be better at. Instead they are based around exposure learning and basic training to meet the minimum expectations of junior APS staff. A program than enables skill tracking via mobility and training will push the public service forward into the future.

The graduates that have input their ideas, insights and recommendations into this submission would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit to the panel.

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[1] See stateoftheservice.apsc.gov.au/2016/09/graduates-future-leaders-of-the-aps/#1
[2] See GradAustralia.com.au – A graduate employer ranking website with provides a list of the most sought-after graduate employers based on surveys of graduates.

Overarching features of existing graduate programs

The details of Graduate programs are department specific and as a result, are not consistent across the Public Service. Programs across the APS regularly have a number of similarities:

- Recruitment processes run between approximately March and October, with applicants required to apply via the department's website.
  - Applicants will go through 'rounds' of elimination where the department reviews the applications for different pre-conditions or skills. Common pre-conditions include a university degree where the applicant received a credit average at minimum, are an Australian Citizen and have recently graduated from university (generally within 3 years, although this is occasionally subverted by departments, such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade).
  - The final round typically involves an assessment centre where the applicant is required to attend and take part in a number of activities and/or in-person interviews for the role.
- Successful applicants will complete a security clearance process prior to commencing at the department.
- The departments support the Applicants to move to Canberra and generally commence in February of the year after their application process.
- The Graduates in the program are provided an assortment of training in skills relevant to their work and, in reasonably sized departments, will rotate into different teams within the department.

Departments may recruit anywhere between 3 and 300 graduates for any single intake, based on that departments specific needs. The programs typically run between 9 and 24 months.

Purpose of Graduate Programs

Recommendation 1: The APS should articulate the purpose of the graduate program as preparing graduates to be the future leaders of the public service. In turn, they must make decisions on the running of the programs with that clear goal in mind.

Graduate programs are run to recruit staff to the APS but there is no singular articulated purpose behind the graduate programs that helps to set the agenda for the program or give graduates a clear idea about what the program is looking to provide to them beyond entry-level employment.

Currently, one might define the purpose of the graduate programs as a tool to provide departmental teams with additional hands that do not count towards their ASL caps. Others might define the program as a way in which to learn about all facets of work within that specific department. Others might see the program as a tool to prepare graduates for careers as dedicated, long-term public servants.

A more focused and useful purpose is that the program should be preparing its participants to be future leaders of the public service. This would be, above all else, the APS valuing empowerment of its junior staff and establishing the leaderships at all levels principal as a core to the values the public service respect and cater for. Training and recruitment should be structured around those values. Leadership can be defined broadly and nuanced out depending upon individual staff and their goals. Facets of leadership may include creativity

and innovation, respectful engagement with others, consistent and constructive work, teamwork and vision making. Current feature of programs does not serve to lead back to establishing graduates as leaders should be removed or rethought

The current understanding of graduate programs seems to revolve around the assumption that graduates are relatively inexperienced, young staff who are looking for long-term employment in the public service, but those assumptions are being challenged by the changing nature of the recruitment process of the program. As the programs become more competitive, the graduates that are recruited are more experienced and skilled than previously cohorts. Graduates now have years of work experience in multiple industries, are highly educated often with post-graduate qualifications and many are made multiple job offers by both the public and private sectors. As graduates become more skilled and specialised, their expectations on training and opportunity will likewise grow. As graduate programs are a specialised entry format into the public service, there is an expectation that the program will offer training or opportunities that are pitched at a level appropriate to their educational and professional backgrounds.

The current level of experience of graduates means that programs need to address whether they are simply providing employment with basic training to complete the job of an APS3 staff member or whether the program is looking to skill the graduates beyond their immediate expected staffing level.

Alternatively, it might be time to consider whether "graduate program" remains an accurate description of the program given the large number of graduates with higher degrees or significant work experience. The APS could consider rebranding the graduate program as a "Fast-track" program which aims to attract high performing candidates who want to enter the public service as a cohort but might already have work experience, Masters Degrees and PhDs. The Fast Track could be supplemented by other entry-level programs that aim to recruit fresh graduates, and other applicants from diverse or atypical non-public service backgrounds (see Recommendation 6).

Recommendation 2: The APSC should require departments to undertake regular reviews of Graduate programs to ascertain whether graduates are gaining the value from the program it set out to create.

The APSC should have a role in ensuring departments are appropriately reflecting on their programs and whether they are achieving their stated purpose. Though departments may currently undertake some form of review, anecdotal evidence suggests feedback is not always collected formally and fails to be acted upon. As a result, it is recommended that surveys and feedback forms are prepared as well as a regular and consistent collection of data on Graduate trends to determine if insights can be ascertained about the graduates exiting the programs or leaving the public service thereafter.

It should be required that all graduates fill in any survey or feedback form prepared by departments or the APSC to ensure the programs are receiving a holistic perspective on their programs, rather than a vocal majority's perspective. The APSC's annual survey already provides an opportunity for broader feedback to be collected and analysed but this can be built on with customised feedback opportunities.

Recommendation 3: Departments should seek to come together and share best practice in the delivery of graduate programs

Though departmental officers involved in the administration of graduate programs might currently share information between each other on best practice behaviour or standards for graduate programs, there doesn't appear to be co-ordinated effort to develop a sharing platform with staff on attracting the best talent, good recruitment habits, well-regarded training or other features of the department.

<u>**Governance of Graduate Programs**</u>

Recommendation 4: The APSC should take a greater role in setting minimum requirements for graduate training during the program.

As previously mentioned, departments largely choose to run their programs according to their respective needs but that fails to account for a broader need for consistency across the public service and the development of certain generalist skills.

Currently, the APSC oversee some optional Graduate training available to departments. The training in recent years has included a panel discussion of senior public servants, a 'mentorship day' where senior public servants speak on their experiences to a crowd, and a GradHack day in which graduates create solutions to existing public service issues., though ideas from the day were not followed up or implemented.

The existing training prepared by the APSC is insufficient and doesn't skill graduates in any systematic and consistent way.

To ensure that the broad cohort of Graduates are prepared to meet future challenges and ways of working for the public service, the APSC should be undertaking a review of the future work experiences needed of public servants and plan out a schedule of training that departments should be required to enrol their graduates in. Expected training might include:

- A writing course covering at minimum brief writing for Ministers
- The cabinet process
- Excel training that covers up to intermediate skills on graphing and formulas
- Understanding statistics and preparing statistics
- The use of census and other statistical data on Australian citizens
- Soft skill use including making yourself heard in a team meeting, speaking confidently to a room
- Short course sessions concerning economics, taxation, the legal system and interpreting legislation, coding and the policy cycle (including best practice policy thinking around consultation, co-design, implementation and building evaluative frameworks into programs).

In this manner, graduates will have the opportunity to be consistently skilled across the subject matter expected of public servants but departments will still be able to support their graduates to complete more specialist training for that department of based on the needs of the individual.

Recommendation 5: Departments running Graduate Programs should create a body of Senior Executive Service, Human Resources Staff and Graduates who have completed their program within the last few years to administer the details of the program.

Currently, graduate programs are not necessarily managed by any kind of board or group of staff beyond the HR department. This fails to take account of the varying needs of each department as well as the needs of the Graduates in the program. The different representatives should balance consideration of experience about the needs of the public service, the graduate perspective on what worked and HR's ability to facilitate the determinations of the body.

If departments have separate graduate governance groups and graduate areas in HR, they need to be well integrated. Multiple graduates found their governing groups were unaware of issues or processes going on with HR and that there was little discussion with the current graduates on the program. The lack of transparency in the decisions made by existing bodies does not give graduates an opportunity to put forward submissions or ideas.

Recruitment and Diversity of Staff

Recommendation 6: The minimum requirements for university education should be reconsidered.

As stated before, the core minimum condition required by the graduate program for entry is a university degree. This requirement for tertiary qualifications should be reconsidered. Recruiting from a limited pool of tertiary qualified candidates means missing out on a larger group of people lacking these qualifications, but who may still have the skills required for an entry level position. Removing this restriction, the program would be able to tap into a number of individuals that may not have completed university but have attained other qualifications (e.g. TAFE qualifications) or did not have the opportunity to attend a tertiary institution for a variety of reasons including family commitments, economic instability or systemic disadvantage. Requiring a university education is a false measure of capability that should not exist if skill and potential is placed at the forefront of the recruitment process. Opening up graduate recruitment to anyone who can demonstrate the necessary skills will only increase the talent pool and lead to a more equally representative public service. Departments can support staff long term into completing formal qualifications if they so choose (see Recommendation 12).

It is also worth considering whether graduate programs should remain the primary entry-level recruitment program, as it can be expected that even if non-university graduates were eligible to apply for the program it is unlikely they would proceed through all the recruitment rounds en masse. We need to consider whether affirmative measures or alternative entry-level programs are needed to attract talent from diverse cultural and education backgrounds, from different sectors, or socio-economic circumstances. Some programs already exist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants but these could be expanded.

Recommendation 7: Recruitment practices and criterion need to be reconsidered to better attract and retain a more diversely educated group of graduates that reflect the versatility and make-up of the Australian public and account for the future needs of the public service, specifically data analytic and software development expertise

The general public often feel that Canberra and public servants broader are out of touch with the wider community and part of that likely has to do with the diversity of the people that work there.

In 2016, the graduate recruitment statistics indicate that approximately 25 per cent of those recruited had studied law, approximately 16 per cent had studied economics, commerce and accounting but only 0.3 per cent had studied education and only 2 per cent had studied mathematics and statistics.[3] These figures indicate that we have overrepresentation and underrepresentation of different thinking and skill entering the public service at junior levels.

There also remains a constant underrepresentation of LGBTQI people, those with a disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in all levels of government. Great strides have been made to ensure the public service now has an approximately equal representation of women to men, but more needs to be done to ensure they are present in senior roles.

Departments should be seeking to introduce better systems that enable a wider number of people from diverse groups to be hired such that departments become more representative of the people they are seeking to impact and more balanced in their schools of thought and experience.

Yet, this constraining must also be weighted with the developing skill requirements for the coming decade. Those hired in the public service should also possess the skills required for the future. Research by McKinseys indicates that 30 percent of all occupations of all activities are technically automatable, based on current technologies.[4] This level of automation is only expected to increase over the coming decade. As we move towards a more data-rich world, we will need to be focusing graduate recruitment to attract people who are skilled in data analytics, data collection and software. Programs run the risk of continuing to recruit graduates that lack the ability or the inclination to learn more about data and IT solutions. This seems to be in part due to the continued expectation that graduates need to be generalists and more skilled in writing or humanities-based skills. However, this fails to account for the growing need to be better at evaluative reviews of programs and develop programs based on data insights. Introducing these skills into the public service now will help the public service to discover new ways of thinking and better adapt to a fast changing world and prevent long term challenges in avoid the challenge of mass reskilling staff into non-automatable skills.

Currently, the public service cannot envision the utility or purpose of certain training around data and software capabilities, but once trained people are likely to discover new ways they can go about creating or changing standard practices to enable the service to be smarter and more agile.

Recommendation 8: Recruitment processes need to better manage the recruitment of staff from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

The graduate programs are not currently recruiting from a diverse class background insofar that low socio-economic students are regularly locked out of the program because they have not got the pre-requisites for the program (see recommendation 6 regarding qualifications) or

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[3] See stateoftheservice.apsc.gov.au/graduate-data/
[4] http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/employment-and-growth/technology-jobs-and-the-future-of-work.

do not believe they will be successful if they apply to the program. The methodology of recruitment and how one advertises the programs may dissuade low SES students from applying. Targeted recruitment at certain universities and reconsidering the phrasing of certain graduate applications away from appearing 'elite' may assist in enabling more students to apply to graduate programs.

Socio-economic status remains one of the hardest determinants to account for and manage in any recruitment system and remains overlooked. It is easier to identify and counteract other representative challenges throughout recruitment, such as gender, disability and Aboriginality. Low SES markers often are harder to identify and manifest as a less impressive resume or experience portfolio.

Competition for a position on the graduate program has enabled recruitment staff to be more selective with the experience and qualifications of the graduates. The unfortunate result of this is the heavy presence of graduates with privileged backgrounds who had the means and time available to undertake unpaid or poorly paid internships, had connections to finding work opportunities in well-known businesses as well as the opportunity to attend some of the best schools across the country and abroad. There remains concern in graduate cohorts that facts like which university you attended and the names of businesses you worked for are a driver behind recruitment, despite that not necessarily being a formal means of determining people's skill and appropriateness for the program.

The inherent flaw of the current recruitment techniques is that the recruiters look at who a person is at the date of interview, rather than who they could be with training or what they have managed to overcome to develop the opportunities present on their resume.

Programs would benefit from considering other methods of accounting for low SES backgrounds. Some universities quantify disadvantage by the postcode or area of high school and are given extra ATAR points to enter university to somewhat counteract their disadvantage. A modified version of this may assist in boosting the profile of low SES graduates. A 'contextual recruitment system' similar to that produced by Rare Recruitment and used in the UK for a number of law firms might assist in identifying individuals that otherwise are missed in the process but would be exceptional candidates for graduate programs.

Recommendation 9: The public service needs to balance the need between generalists and specialists better and do so by placing graduates for applicable skills and interest in doing so on specialist career trajectories.

There is a trade-off between generalists and specialists. Graduates and public servants will be expected to fill many roles and be across bureaucratic process, but at the end of the day they will be asked to advise on particular topics or complete specific skilled tasks. These topics or tasks can be highly technical and require expertise. Staff are also expected to have a strong ability to write competently, work in teams and manage deadlines.

Expert positions are uncommon and vary by department. A lack of room for specialists encourages the creation of new agencies, e.g. the Infrastructure and Project Financing Agency, or the use of consultants to produce work which is counterintuitive. Graduate recruitment and the program holistically can help to engage specialists or put them on career pathways that will enable them to become specialised.

Many graduates found that while there is frequent reference to them being generalists, in practice areas look for graduates at the end of the program with certain skill sets. I.e. Economics graduates will be headhunted for economic roles. The public service needs to pre-empt the needs of the department and match people with both an ability to undertake general public service work but also specialise in certain topics or complete specific tasks.

Rotations

Rotations are a way to move graduates between areas within a department. There is a trade-off between sampling different areas, and building human capital and trust. The more areas a graduate visits, the greater understanding they have of their department and where they might wish to end up. The longer a graduate stays in an area, the more human capital they are able to develop and the more they will earn the trust of that area.

Recommendation 10: Preferencing systems are important and should be retained but should be bolstered by analytic data and skill-matching.

Graduates should be able to preference the areas of the department they want to work in. These preferences should be taken seriously and handled by an algorithm. The current method of sorting preferences requires staff to 'eye-ball' over 100 different preference rankings. Graduates spoke of people preferencing certain areas low on their interest list but are sent there despite other graduates having preferenced the area highly. If the purpose of the program is to give graduates a pathway to skilling that will cover an initial generalist purpose with opportunities to develop into specifically skilled staff, then preferences should be taken seriously to enable those outcomes to come into fruition.

Rotations should be reviewed for the specific skills the graduate is expected to receive as well as whether the graduate has spent significant time in other rotations gaining those skills. This should link into Recommendation 12 and 14 below. Overlap should be permitted where the subject matter covered in that rotation is considerably different but graduates should be moved to different teams where they get a wide berth of skills for their initial introduction to the public service.

Recommendation 11: There should be a greater emphasis on establishing streams of graduate programs.

There is scope for having streams within graduate programs. Existing streams are typically the legal stream, the policy stream and the IT stream for graduates with those capabilities and interests. Graduates generally see this as a positive means of ensuring that people interested in pursuing those dedicated skills can do that whilst avoiding other staff, who have no interest of pursuing certain work, from ending up in those areas. One graduate spoke of being sent to an internal accounting area with no skills or interest in accounting, so was effectively underutilised for 6 months. This is a balancing act, as graduates may have pre-conceived notions about what they will and will not like, but this can be managed and shaped by the matters raised in recommendation 12.

Professional Development

Recommendation 12: Graduate programs should move towards a customised journey process for graduates rather than a one-size-fits-all program.

Although resource intensive, having a customised program that views individuals as individuals with different interests and goals would set apart the graduate programs from regular entry-level positions and create a greater incentive to apply and invest long-term in the department.

A customised program would look at speaking to graduates early into the recruitment stage about their goals, interests and existing skill set, with a mind to seeing whether they would fit into the department and its future. Upon recruitment, short one-on-one sessions should be set up with human resources or the SES board about what goals they have and where they want to be developing. These conversations may produce important insights into expectations and interests that can be factored into analytical rotation preferencing or training for the individual.

The existing training and experience of graduates should also be considered in the setting of training. With more and more specialised and skilled graduates entering the public service, whether the training on offer addresses the needs of the graduates and the skills they are lacking needs to be reviewed. Training will also be a very individualise matter with certain staff interested in completing certain formal education and others not having any idea about what training they could benefit from. The personalised take on training would also help to ensure staff are moving in a career direction that they are interested in and which offers them the most stimulation and learning.

HR should check in with graduates about their rotation. Rotations can be difficult to predict and feedback early on as well as after is important. Having a check-in session early into a rotation enables HR to see how the rotation is going, if the graduate has adequate work and if the expected skills are what is being provided. Many graduates spoke of facing difficulties in their rotations but struggling to air these until after their rotations were completed or when doing so, HR not being sure how to best assist the graduate without making their situation more challenging. Discussions of rotations after they are completed should also occur consistently and would provide HR with an understanding of the rotation start to finish. It gives them an idea of what graduates will are regularly asked to do and what they are likely to learn. This will be useful for future rotations and homing in on the rotations best suited to graduates looking for certain learnings.

Recommendation 13: Mobility of graduates, as well as the public service broader, should be seen as a high priority.

There is great benefit to short term mobility placements throughout the APS and the private sector. This serves to increase both private sector and public-sector skills without losing staff to other opportunities. In addition to picking up skills between departments, people pick up more institutional knowledge and networks that better connect staff and break down departmental silos.

The APS is currently moving towards a better, more mobile service with staff prepared to move around but there is still work to be done. The APS statistical bulletin states 72 per cent of public servants have only worked in a single agency, 18 per cent for two, and the remaining 10 per cent for three or more.[5] The APSC's mobility data has 60 per cent of APS, 63 per cent

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[5] https://www.themandarin.com.au/90383-most-aps-stay-still-secretaries-want-to-learn-why/

of EL and 57 per cent of SES stating workplace mobility should be more common in their agency.[6]

Though mobility transfers are often seen as a prestigious opportunity earned by middle-management staff, it should be more of a requirement for development, and done at all levels to ensure the public service remains connected. Graduates having the opportunity to undertake placements has the benefit of investing early in a whole-of-government perspective and normalises a practice they are likely to view favourably as they become more senior and are asked to facilitate mobility opportunities for others.

Recommendation 14: A badging system for training should be introduced across the entire public service where, if minimum requirements for certain competencies are met, staff are badged with certain levels of skill or expertise.

Hard and soft skills can be a challenge to build but having both formal and informal ways of certifying that you have achieved something could take the public service to a new level. 'Badging' is online record of achievements, tracking the recipient's communities of interaction that issued the badge and the work completed to get it. Badges can be laid out on a stream basis with an end destination to where you are considered a specialist in certain skills.

Badging is still a relatively new concept but a number of organisations and institutions, including US community colleges, US Department of Veteran Affairs, NASA and the New York City Department of Education, have been adopting different types of badging system and are a developing tool that track skilling across organisations. More information can be found online at openbadges.org or any number of other badging developers and organisations.

Streams of training can develop from badging, enabling generalists to become specialists in areas of relevance. This would enable staff to take authority over programs or projects not just on their seniority but also on their capabilities and thereby reduce the rigid hierarchy that antiquates the public service.

Graduates should be required to meet a certain number of generalist competencies within their graduate program and should set out to work with the graduate program opportunities to meet their interests in skills by identifying streams or badges they wish to obtain.

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[6] https://www.apsc.gov.au/mobility-aps