



# AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL  
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES

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Independent Review of the APS  
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet  
PO Box 6500  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Review Panel

## **Independent Review of the APS**

AIATSIS welcomes the review of the Australian Public Service. As a publicly funded research and collecting agency, AIATSIS operates at a unique intersection point that creates opportunities to provide sound policy advice and research services to government, leadership and expertise in the collecting and cultural sector as well as the delivery of innovative technological solutions to communities who wish to benefit from our collections. Over AIATSIS' 50 year history, the Institute has contributed to Indigenous and academic research with a primary focus on cultural resurgence that will see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' stories, histories and cultures take their rightful place as an intrinsic part of the national narrative.

AIATSIS is committed to an Australian Public Service that values Indigenous culture and knowledge and actively engages with Indigenous peoples to support their aspirations for self-determination and cultural resurgence. Despite being a small Commonwealth Corporate Entity, AIATSIS contributes to the cultural capability of the APS directly through training and advice; bringing evidence and knowledge to bear on public policy design and implementation; and convening forums for dialogue across sectors.

Our objectives are clear and the expectations of our stakeholders are significant. It is imperative that we maximise the capability of our financial resources and our people to achieve this important work. This work needs to be supported through flexible APS arrangements to enable AIATSIS to remain responsive and proactive in achieving its mission and objectives.

Building capability, adaptability and driving innovation are important contributors to a fit-for-purpose APS, however, unless current obstacles are dealt with they will continue to hamper progress and at the least diminish the efforts of any reform program.

In many ways, smaller agencies (those with a maximum of 200 APS) are better placed to transform to a new operating model, new technological environment and new and improved



capabilities. However, the pressure on smaller agencies to be all things to all people is immense.

Some key barriers to innovation and flexibility include:

- Mismatching resourcing and APS wide ASL limitations
- Pay comparability in the APS and discipline based specialisations of staff
- Competitiveness of AIATSIS staff recruitment and retention.
- Indigenous recruitment and career development
- Administrative burden on small agencies
- Recruitment from a broader range of disciplines.

### **Resourcing and the Average Staffing Level (ASL) cap**

Long term resourcing shortfalls and increased demand for services prompted AIATSIS to undertake a review of its functions resulting in an amendment to AIATSIS' enabling legislation and an injection of funding to support the digitisation of at risk collections. In 2016-17 AIATSIS was provided with \$40 million over four years to support the ongoing effort to preserve, restore, manage and digitise collection material. However, due to the conditions linked with this additional funding, AIATSIS is unable to maximise the value of the investment.

One of the most significant challenges of the increase in resourcing has been the broader APS Average Staffing Level (ASL) cap imposed in the 2015-16 budget. The ASL cap is blind to funding levels and operational requirements, forcing the Institute to rely on external contractors to deliver on core functions. Even though AIATSIS was funded for an additional 54 people in recognition of urgent requirements, it is unable to increase its APS staffing level. This means that each new staff member has an additional cost of 25%, effectively reducing the number of funded additional positions by 14 positions.

Due to this restriction on ASL, AIATSIS has staff contractors fulfilling core functions. This creates a number of systematic inefficiencies including an increased supervision burden on supervisors and team leaders (as supervision is shared with providers); dual systems of rights and employment conditions within individual teams and program areas; high turnover and inability to attract and retain skilled staff and create career trajectories, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff; an additional administrative burden on the HR and other enabling teams within the organisation and overall increased staffing costs, all of which prevents AIATSIS from maximising the value of the additional investment. These inefficiencies impact on the immediate delivery of services as well as creating increased costs for other agencies that contract AIATSIS' specific services. AIATSIS receives more than \$4 million dollars annually in commissioned research contracts, including from the Australian government, requiring additional staff resources usually at contractor rates. Importantly this severely limits our capacity to offer secondments and transfers from within the APS to contribute to the development of skills, capabilities and mobility within the APS.

While AIATSIS is not unique among Government agencies in this situation – it is unique in its position across so many sectors. It is also still striving to address legacy issues such as its failing and inadequate infrastructure. As a small agency, these pressures are significantly exacerbated by the burden of administrative requirements.



An immediate action that would remedy this situation is for agencies with an ASL up to 200 to be made exempt from an ASL cap or allocation, providing it does not exceed 200 and is within existing budget allocations.

### **APS benchmarking and pay uniformity**

Government cultural sector organisations do not fit cleanly with the APS concepts of APS level interoperability. Most roles in an agency such as AIATSIS fulfil very narrow and specialised tasks requiring specific tertiary qualifications and experience.

This staffing profile is not reflected in parallel pay scales such as that of the Department of Health, ANSTO, CSIRO or the Australian Antarctic Division that explicitly recognise unique disciplines and task specific roles within the organisation. The current APS classification system and work level standards, whilst mapping specialist roles to the standard APS levels, does not offer organisations sufficient opportunity to engage staff at very senior levels and allowing them to totally focus on their narrow specialisation with a commensurate reduction in APS administrative or supervisory responsibilities.

In the past the APS had two streams – an administrative officer stream, and a scientific and technical officer stream (STO). This enabled APS staff to specialise and become leaders in a particular business-as-usual field.

AIATSIS seeks to mitigate these limitations by engaging high level researchers as Visiting Research Scholars via funded stipends and study opportunities, or engaging technical specialists as contractors for time-limited projects.

However, many technical positions in AIATSIS are not project based and require ongoing resourcing. There needs to be longer term measures to support the unique nature of the existing AIATSIS staff profile as well as planned workforce growth.

For example:

- Native title research requires specific sector and community based experience and knowledge that does not fit into a traditional public service model. Our ability to attract appropriate staff (especially Indigenous staff or legal practitioners) to the role can be a challenge.
- An extremely high level of technical competence is required for the faithful digitisation of audiovisual media, in many cases there will only be one opportunity to preserve the content through digitisation (due to fragility or degradation). The ability to successfully preserve the content (and therefore the ability to share the contained knowledge with the Australian people) rests entirely on the technical skills of the digitisation officer. Finding and retaining technical staff at AIATSIS APS pay levels is highly difficult. By comparison a broadcast engineer in Sydney or Melbourne would be recompensed above the pay level of an EL2, with none of the policy and few other APS responsibilities.



## **Staff recruitment and competitiveness**

As an agency that has had historically one of the lowest pay scales across the APS, AIATSIS has also sought to attract staff via offering flexibility and a family focused working culture. For example, AIATSIS has a unique and expanded definition of family under its current Enterprise Agreement that is supportive of unique Indigenous cultural relationships. However, more can be achieved in this space. Nonetheless, AIATSIS' competitiveness for APS officers is impacted by pay scales out of step with much of the APS, including within our own portfolio of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. For example, mobility between the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, particularly the Indigenous Affairs Group, and AIATSIS is hampered by wide disparities in pay scales for the same classification levels.

As a research based Institute, AIATSIS competes with the Australian National University (ANU) for senior researchers and administrative staff. Until very recently however, the Institute has not been able to match academic pay scales or the level of conditions offered by the ANU. For example, maternity leave has been limited to the parameters of the *Maternity Leave (Commonwealth Employees) Act 1973* established over 45 years ago in comparison to the 26 weeks on offer by ANU. The dynamic nature of AIATSIS' client base – including remote communities – also requires flexibility in working arrangements to better support community priorities and need.

## **Indigenous recruitment and career development**

For decades AIATSIS has played a role in attracting, training and developing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who go on to careers and leadership roles in the APS and research workforce. The combination of factors already discussed is felt acutely in our Indigenous recruitment and career development. With high performance and output indicators in many technical areas, our flexibility in workforce design has diminished. The ASL cap has impeded our ability to recruit new Indigenous APS employees, and the resources available to devote to specific programs such as our acclaimed Indigenous Visiting Fellows Program and our Accelerated Career Development Program cannot be accommodated in the current ASL restricted environment.

## **Administrative burden**

As the users of public monies, APS agencies are obliged to satisfy multiple requirements. These range from compliance with a vast variety of legislation, consistency with a range of policies, consideration of a multiple of initiatives and imperatives, while meeting numerous regulatory requirements in a value for money way by achieving best practice and striving for an agile and innovative approach – all while being a corporate citizen.

This creates a significant administrative burden, particularly for smaller agencies with very limited administrative structures and resources, as the majority of funding is funnelled into delivering outcomes. In AIATSIS' context, the multiplicity of our role, the variety of sectors that we sit across, means that we are striving to meet an array of obligations, expectations and industry/sector standards.





The administrative requirements of an agency should be considered against its budget and size. Policy and regulatory authorities need to be cognisant of the burden to small agencies – their administration and oversight of compliance needs to change from a model of oversight, tasking and reporting to include a component that enables, trains and helps deliver. The practical benefits would be significant; better interagency engagement, improved compliance results, and resources refocussed on deliverables.

Another impediment is the high-cost risk adverse approach that influences across all agencies at some level. This leads to enormous investment and effort, and while a wholesale change is not recommended, a shift in thinking to a more pragmatic risk-based decision making would generate benefits.

Another challenge in a resource constrained environment is clarity around functions and responsibilities in a way that allows the maximum concentration of effort and resources from a whole-of-government perspective. Current arrangements have seen multiple agencies striving for the same deliverables in isolation. An innovative technology platform could help connect agencies better by identifying interdependencies and overlaps, and automatically generating advice to alert potential stakeholders, reducing duplication and confusion.

A longer term action could be a review of all administrative requirements with the view of reducing, streamlining and simplifying regulatory requirements with particular consideration for smaller agencies.

### **Broader range of disciplinary backgrounds required**

The APS predominantly recruits from the disciplines of economics and law. This narrows the conceptual and methodological lenses applied to policy development in the public service. The policy development needed to address the complex needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians requires a comprehensive range of perspectives brought to bear. As a national institution in the field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs and studies, AIATSIS requires, and recommends policy officers are drawn from a broader range of disciplines, particularly from the Social Sciences and Humanities fields.

Yours sincerely



Craig Ritchie  
Chief Executive Officer

3 July 2018

