The Public Service Act 1999 includes a set of Values and a Code of Conduct to guide public servants’ behaviour and actions. Even though there is a legislative requirement for the APS to recognise and utilise the diversity of the Australian population (s10(c)), the moral obligation to provide a supportive working environment for Indigenous Australians goes further.

The APS provides policy development and/or service delivery in almost every sphere of life to all Australians. Recent considerations at both Commonwealth and state/territory level have led to an increased focus on the need for a ‘connected government’ approach: a need to ensure that policy development and service delivery is integrated across portfolios and jurisdictions to facilitate access by the people for whom they are designed (see www.connected.gov.au). The best way to ensure that the APS is fully equipped to provide services to a diverse Australian public, is to ensure that we have a diverse workforce. Indigenous staff identify strongly with a desire to support Indigenous program delivery.

The APS also has a moral obligation to provide a supportive environment for its employees: a place where people are encouraged to take risks and strive to reach their personal and professional potential, and to develop key, transferable skills which can be used outside the APS for the benefit of state, territory or local government agencies, the community sector or private enterprise. The APS has an important role to play in supporting people when they first enter the workforce, or when they are re-entering after periods of carer or other responsibilities.

APS employment can help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to develop a range of marketable skills, both on-the-job and through nationally accredited training. Some of the programs that have resulted in recent successes include graduate recruitment, the provision of cadetships to support tertiary students while they are studying and provide them with ongoing employment when they graduate, and traineeships to Indigenous employment levels

The Australian Public Service (APS) has a good record on employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island employees. These employees now make up 2 per cent of the APS, which is much better than the proportional representation of Indigenous people in the Australian workforce, which stands at 1.4 per cent (Australian Public Service Commission [APSC], 2006f; Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2002).

However, our employment record has deteriorated in recent years from a high point in 1999. There are several reasons for this, including major restructuring of the public service, which saw the removal of many entry level positions; the increasing complexity of modern work in the public sector and lower average levels of qualifications of Indigenous applicants; and the opportunities now available to Indigenous people in other sectors. Nonetheless, we believe that there is also significant under-reporting of Indigenous employment, and that actual numbers and proportional representation may be higher.

The trends for middle and senior manager levels are encouraging. Proportional representation at project officer and middle management level has risen from 2.3 per cent to 2.7 per cent since 1997 (APSC, 2006f). As these are the groups which will ultimately provide the majority of our future senior managers, it is important that Indigenous representation is growing.

Equity, diversity and the public service values

As a key national employer, the APS is uniquely positioned to provide all its employees with the skills, experiences and expertise that they can use and enhance throughout their careers, both in the public and non-public sectors. The APS has a proud reputation of being at the forefront of workplace reform and organisational renewal, and remains committed to leading the way in supportive and productive workplaces (Shergold, 2006).
provide an alternative pathway into the APS for those who do not have tertiary (or even secondary) education qualifications. In this way the APS can play an important role in supporting positive economic outcomes for Indigenous Australians and their families, helping to break the poverty cycle and build stronger families.

Workforce demographics: The business case for Indigenous employment

There is also a strong business case for APS agencies to re-examine policies and practices around Indigenous employment in the public sector. The main policy imperative is how agencies will address the changing workforce demographics over the next five to fifteen years. The APS workforce, like the Australian workforce population in general, is aging (Costello, 2002). There is also greater movement into and out of the service at all levels, and a significant reduction in the number of entry-level positions (Management Advisory Committee [MAC], 2005). It is therefore expected that the APS will be competing for younger workers in what is increasingly becoming an employees’ marketplace. Against this background, are the trends among Indigenous Australians of higher birth rates and a generally younger population (ABS, 2001b).

Workforce capacity building

Linked closely to the issue of workforce demographic change is the concept of capacity building or organisational renewal: the means by which an agency (or group of agencies) determines the likely changes in their organisational profile over the medium to longer term and takes strategic steps to address any capability or skill gaps that they might identify. This requires agencies to look critically at their current staffing profiles, skill sets and operational imperatives, and to carefully analyse expected changes so that the capability gap assessment is realistic. This may encompass considerations such as the impact of changing technologies, the number of people currently studying a particular discipline at tertiary level, or the changing demographics of the client base, including expectations of service levels in non-traditional or non-profitable locations.

For APS agencies, young Indigenous people may provide a pool of potential employees which has, to date, not been greatly utilised. This requires individual agencies to invest in their future by identifying high-potential employees and providing assistance to them to enable them to make a successful transition into the workforce.

Educational attainment and skills recognition

The increasingly graduate nature of the APS means that many graduates come into the public service not only through targeted graduate programs, but through general entry and lateral recruitment. However, the tightening labour market and an expansion of non-university post-secondary educational options necessitate an equal consideration of the non-graduate labour pool.

Studies by the Australian Bureau of Statistics have found that Indigenous students are more likely to attend colleges of technical and further education and less likely to attend university than non-Indigenous students, with around 5 per cent of young Indigenous people attending university, compared with 23 per cent of non-Indigenous young people (ABS, 2001a). The 2001 Census figures also suggest that many (82 per cent) of Indigenous students are at risk of not completing year 12 (ABS, 2001a). School retention rates is a policy imperative for the Australian Government, but in terms of Indigenous employment in APS agencies, the key consideration hinges on the link between employment and education.
All employers need to know that their employees have the skills, or the potential, to do the job for which they are employed, and the completion of secondary schooling goes some way to providing employers with a degree of certainty regarding their potential employees’ abilities. The reasons for high Indigenous non-completion rates are many and varied, and initiatives to redress the situation cannot afford to take a ‘one size fits all’ approach. Options that have been implemented in the APS since 2004 include the provision of entry-level traineeships to enable less-qualified applicants to gain experience and competencies in ongoing work, and the availability of sponsorships to facilitate school retention and school-to-work transition. The programs provide financial and personal support to potential employees by giving them the tools to help them help themselves to gain skills, knowledge and experience which can be translated into the workplace.

It is incumbent upon APS agencies to determine critically the level and type of educational attainment that they require from their employees. While the graduate versus non-graduate debate is one that is yet to be had, there is a need for an attitudinal shift among many managers in the public sector away from the perception that a university degree necessarily means that a person will be better suited for public sector employment. While there are certainly some jobs and some agencies which require specific and specialised skill sets, there is a need for greater recognition of life skills and experience when assessing an applicant’s likely capabilities.

During the 1980s and 1990s, there was a concerted effort to help women translate their life skills as wives, mothers and household managers into skills that could successfully be marketed into public sector employment positions. This engendered a range of personal development and career planning seminars specifically targeted at women, and saw a move away from the terminology of ‘discrimination’ to that of ‘affirmative action’ (Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act 1986). It may be time that similar consideration now be given to other job seekers, including Indigenous people. There is an opportunity for the public sector to reshape its approach to youth recruitment, particularly the necessity for graduate qualifications, and the ways in which Indigenous employees can be given alternative pathways into the workforce. A willingness to support new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, particularly school leavers, in the attainment of vocational or university qualifications, or the use of traineeships and cadetships which link to the employee’s work, may be ways of attracting and retaining motivated employees.

Challenges for Indigenous employment: Adapting policies for outcomes

A census survey was undertaken of all known Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander APS employees towards the end of 2005. The 2006 report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander APS Employees Census Survey identified four critical challenges for the APS in supporting the employment of Indigenous Australians:

- increasing capability;
- encouraging a greater diversity of roles for Indigenous employees in the APS;
- higher retention in the APS; and
- improving the quality of work place support (APSC, 2006a, 2006b).

The outcomes from the survey have provided a unique compilation of Indigenous employees’ own perspectives on life and work in the APS. In developing responses to these observations and experiences, it is fundamental to remember that employment outcomes are only part of a very complex socio/economic interaction. One factor that works against some Indigenous people when seeking public sector employment is any involvement that they may have had with the justice system. The arrest and incarceration rates for Indigenous people are considerably higher than for non-Indigenous Australians (Hunter, 2001), and the requirements by some public sector agencies for police, security and character clearances may mean that some Indigenous people are excluded from public sector employment due their arrest and/or incarceration history.

While it is acknowledged that this is part of the complexity of Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage endemic in parts of Australia, decisions taken by APS agencies to employ Indigenous people, and to provide guidance and support to young Indigenous employees will help to redress the current imbalance and may help to prevent some of the behaviours and choices that may lead to arrest, incarceration, lowered employment prospects, and continued family and community disadvantage.

The workplace experience

Around half of the respondents to the census survey (APSC, 2006c) believe that their agency actively supports the employment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders people, although 80 per cent feel that agencies should do more to support their Indigenous employees and only 30 per cent believe that their agency’s Indigenous employment strategy had been effective in improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

Most respondents agreed that their colleagues and supervisors work effectively and sensitively with Indigenous Australians, with 82 per cent satisfied that their supervisor would support the use of flexible work practices. This is a very positive result, considering that 53 per cent of respondents had carer responsibilities - much higher than the general APS result of 39 per cent. Of those with carer responsibilities, 19 per cent used more than 10 days leave to provide care at short notice, compared with 10 per cent for the general APS (APSC, 2006f).

A third of respondents indicated that they had cultural and community obligations that take them out of the workplace, with over half indicating that they had taken between one and five days out of the workplace to meet those obligations in the past year. Almost three quarters of these employees were satisfied with the support provided to meet these obligations. This suggests that support for flexible working arrangements to balance work and family responsibilities is widespread, and that Indigenous employees are encouraged and supported in their work environments, albeit not necessarily through the formal mechanism of a corporate plan or strategy.

Worryingly, however, 18 per cent of Indigenous employees indicated that they have been subjected to discrimination in the workplace in the last 12 months, with 68 per cent of
those incidents being race-based discrimination. Twenty-three percent of respondents indicated that they had been subjected to bullying or harassment.

There is an obligation on all APS employees to uphold to APS Values and Code of Conduct as set out in Sections 10 and 13 respectively of the Public Service Act 1999, and there is an additional responsibility for senior managers to model those behaviours, as set out in the Public Service Commissioner's Directions 1999. The most effective way to do this is to ensure visible commitment at the agency level to support for Indigenous employees.

In many ways, this will be the catalyst for attitudinal or behavioural change, and can often also be the determinant for retention and career progression. Many of the focus group and survey suggestions regarding bullying, discrimination and harassment refer to cross-cultural awareness training as the solution. The Commission is encouraging cross-cultural awareness training providers to register with the Commission’s panel of experts, so that possible providers can be more readily sourced by agencies, and course quality monitored.

Paradoxically, when the Commission surveyed agencies more generally, of the retention strategies identified in the State of the service report 2005-06, the provision of cross-cultural awareness training for all employees ranked sixth, behind such initiatives as the provision of special leave entitlements, access to internal and external networks, study awards, access to mentoring and coaching, and the availability of targeted leadership development opportunities. This could be seen to indicate a preference towards providing individual assistance through general terms and conditions, rather than a more holistic focus on the work environment. A similar rationale may also be suggested by the number of agencies (26 per cent) that did not consider it necessary to run cross-cultural awareness training because they do not have any Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees. It may be that the purpose of the training is seen as more targeted to the presence of certain Indigenous employees than to a more general cultural shift to make it more inviting to potential employees.

Notwithstanding this, the identification of quality cross-cultural awareness training is crucial to embedding a positive cultural environment. This could include the development of a better practice guide (or guides), inclusion of cultural awareness in leadership development programs, and developing a sense of ‘cultural competence’ among APS managers and other employees. This might be coupled with consideration of the need for a broader focus on management capabilities across the APS, including mechanisms to assess individual managers’ abilities to ensure that people who are recruited or promoted into management positions have the requisite personal and professional skills, specifically people management capabilities including diversity awareness.

**Capability development**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees are concentrated (86.8 per cent) at the lower (non-managerial) classifications of the APS. Around one quarter of Indigenous employees have bachelor degrees or higher, compared with around half of all APS employees. The Census report shows that 78 per cent of respondents feel that they have the same opportunity to access learning and development as non-Indigenous staff in their agency, but only 52 per cent of respondents are satisfied with their access to learning and development within their agency.

Of the self-identified learning and development priorities that were reported in the census survey, the three highest recurring needs were communication skills (including presentation and negotiation skills and cultural sensitivities), leadership skills (both general leadership development and specifically skills to lead in the whole-of-government environment and when dealing with the Indigenous community), and management skills including project, financial, time, contract and people management.

It is incumbent upon agencies to develop and monitor workforce planning strategies to meet their emerging skill needs. Ideally, these workforce plans should include an assessment of skills gaps, succession planning strategies, and targeted recruitment, retention, and learning and development plans. In this context, agencies need to reconsider their Indigenous recruitment and retention strategies to correlate individual development goals with operational and business needs.

**Separation and retention**

The Census report also shows that almost half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees indicated that they were thinking of leaving the APS within the next three years or were unsure if they would stay. Four of the five main reasons given for intending to leave were lack of job satisfaction, feeling under-valued, lack of workplace support, and poor management. These are all areas in which more can and should be done by agencies to provide real and tangible support to their employees.

The high rate of Indigenous separations (that is, the rate of departure from the APS) has been identified as a key concern for the APS for some time. Even though
this is an important issue that needs to be tackled, it should be seen in the wider context. There remains a
dearth of information about where Indigenous employ-
ees go when they leave the APS, and whether their APS
experience provides valuable skills transfer into the
state/territory public service, local government, or
community organisations, or the private sector. We
expect, however, that the APS provides an important
stepping stone for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
people into the rest of the labour market or further
education and training.

Consideration of measures to address retention (separa-
tion) issues tends to focus on either why people are
leaving or what can be done to make them stay. Opera-
tionally, the latter is easier to implement, but without
informed data, any initiatives risk having only limited
impact. There is a distinct need for evidence-based poli-
cymaking in this context, but obtaining the evidence is
notoriously difficult. Surveys of current employees can
attempt to gauge intentions to stay or leave their agency
and/or the public sector, but the timing and reasons for
the final decision can only be gathered once the decision
is made and the person has left. Moreover, the reason for,
and manner of, their departure will necessarily colour
any feedback that may be given following separation.

We have an opportunity to harness the first-hand
experiences and perspectives of our Indigenous
employees and implement policies and practices that
will support individuals and, through them, Indigenous
families and communities.

Types of jobs

There has been some debate, and some conflicting
anecdotal evidence, around the types of jobs that
Indigenous people are seeking, particularly between
jobs that serve Indigenous communities or focus specif-
cally on Indigenous issues, and ‘mainstream’ jobs in
policy or service delivery.

The Census report (APSC, 2006b) shows that 78 per
cent of Indigenous employees indicated that their work
directly involves delivering services to the public, com-
pared with 50 per cent for the APS overall. Forty-six
percent of respondents indicated that the work they
undertake is specifically related to the Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander community.

Over a third of Census respondents indicated that they
would prefer to apply for jobs that were advertised as
either open only to Indigenous applicants or which
included Indigenous-related selection criteria. In con-
trast, 45 per cent indicated that they would prefer to
compete in an open selection exercise. The divergent
opinions would seem to suggest that there is little value in
developing a policy or initiative that presupposes one or
the other of these options; more value would accrue from
acknowledging that this is an individual decision based
on a range of personal circumstances, and focusing efforts
on engaging agency commitment to Indigenous employ-
ment as part of their overall employment strategy.

Location and relocation

While 35 per cent of the APS is located in Canberra, the
vast majority of non-Canberra based jobs are in the
other capital cities, and only 9 per cent are at middle or
senior management level (APSC, 2006g). This has a
two-fold impact on Indigenous employment prospects.
Firstly, potential employees will generally be required
to relocate to one of the capital cities in order to take
up an APS employment opportunity. With 99 per cent
of the Indigenous population living outside the ACT
(ABS, 2001c) and 27 per cent living in remote areas
(Brough, 2006, 1.3), this may be a particularly big ‘ask’.
Secondly, once people are employed in an agency’s
regional or State office, there is often little prospect of
career advancement, as more senior positions are sig-
nificantly limited.

Service delivery agencies in particular may need to
reconsider their current approach to the location of
their agency offices, particularly with regard to non-
capital city locations and the requirements of their
client group(s). Many agencies that provide intensive,
direct client services are aware of the need to continu-
ally re-evaluate the location of their offices vis-à-vis
the clients that they service. These imperatives are also
at times driven by broader government policy agenda,
for example border protection (which may focus on
illegal immigration, terrorism, organised crime and/or
exotic pests). The location of an agency’s offices may
dictate how appealing the agency is as a potential
employer, or how long a person may stay with the
agency if they have relocated some distance to take up
a job opportunity.

In February 2006, a joint public and private sector
working group presented a report to the Federal Gov-
ernment on the benefits to Australian business
processes of adopting more broadly the principles of
‘teleworking’. The report of the Australian Telework
Advisory Committee recommended that greater
research and development be invested in the imple-
mentation of infrastructure and working practices that
support an increased uptake of teleworking. In this
context, ‘teleworking’ is defined as “work undertaken,
either on a full-time, part-time or occasional basis, by
an employee or self-employed person, which is per-
formed away from the traditional office environment,
including from home, and which is enabled by ICT
such as mobile telephony or the Internet” (DoCITA &
DEWR, 2006). Access to and use of teleworking may be
a strategy that could make the APS more attractive to
Indigenous employees, as it has the potential to enable
employees to spend less time in the (metropolitan)
office and to be more flexible around the geographical
location of jobs.
The way forward

On 12 August 2005 the Prime Minister announced $6.45 million funding over three years for the implementation of the APS Employment and Capability Strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employees (APSC, 2005a) (see www.apsc.gov.au). The Strategy was developed in response to the declining number of Indigenous APS employees and the identified business needs and obligations noted earlier. The strategy aims to stabilise numbers in the first instance, provide personal and professional development support to new and current employees, and increase the capability of the APS as a whole to utilise the unique skills and experiences of our workforce and harness them to provide more effective service delivery to Indigenous people and communities.

The Strategy has been developed around several key elements. The first element is to provide support to the emerging whole-of-government agenda by helping all employees to achieve their potential through support and development, and so making the public service better able to do Indigenous business. Key outcomes in this area have been the provision of targeted capability development programs focussing on how to make the whole-of-government idea a reality, and the negotiation of secondments for senior managers to gain broader experiences and perspectives.

The second element of the strategy focuses on developing and implementing alternative pathways to employment, by removing barriers and finding new and different ways to let people know about public service jobs and how to apply for them. Some of the programs under this element have been mentioned earlier, including the service-wide recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates and cadets. Entry-level traineeships provide accessible pathways into public service jobs, particularly for applicants who do not have tertiary or secondary educational qualifications, and a developing school-to-work program provides support to eligible Indigenous students to finish secondary school (to the end of year 12) and then transition into employment, and includes appropriate work experience, training and qualifications. Two recent publications have also been launched to assist Indigenous job seekers to apply for APS jobs (Getting a Job in the APS) (APSC, 2006d) and to enable Indigenous employees to tell their stories and show that APS employment is Not Just a Job (APSC, 2006c).

The next two elements of the Strategy are designed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to do the best job that they can, and to support employers to integrate Indigenous employment into their broader workforce plans. To this end, the Commission supports a number of Indigenous employee networks around Australia, and has instituted several targeted development programs for employees across the range of classifications. A series of Indigenous Career Trek workshops provided opportunities for employees around the country to discuss their career goals and development needs, and the establishment of a capability fund enables agencies to support development opportunities for their Indigenous employees. The Indigenous Census Survey was a key milestone in the aggregation of baseline data from which to development future directions, and further research is planned into areas such as capacity development, separation rates, and effective recruitment and retention strategies. The Commission is also developing a range of better practice guides to help the public service become an employer of choice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We have an opportunity to harness the first-hand experiences and perspectives of our Indigenous employees and implement policies and practices that will support individuals and, through them, Indigenous families and communities.

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Lynelle Briggs is the Australian Public Service Commissioner.