Navigating to Senior Leadership in the Australian Public Service:

Identifying barriers and enablers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in APS employment

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Contents

Executive Summary

This commissioned report examines enablers and barriers which act to support or impede career progression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to senior levels in the Australian Public Service (APS).

It draws on fifty in-depth interviews with current or former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander APS employees, predominantly at the Executive and Senior Executive Service levels, reflecting on their careers in the APS.

Key findings suggest that informal relationships with mentors and managers form the key enabler of career advancement, and generally play a more important role than other institutionalised measures (which were nonetheless seen as useful), such as formal mentoring, study & development programs, affirmative measures and family-friendly provisions. A number of barriers to advancement were identified including operational constraints, limited regional opportunities, poor management practices and a lack of institutional valuing of Indigenous[1] skills and leadership styles.

The research highlights a combination of elements as creating a unique career experience for Indigenous employees, notably institutional biases fostering stereotypes and pigeonholing and the widely shared perspective among Indigenous public servants of being required to 'walk in two worlds': that of culture/community and of the Public Service.

Institutional biases clearly constitute an additional barrier to career progression, while the 'two worlds' experience can represent either a career resource or difficulty depending on the degree of institutional recognition, support and valuing of cultural diversity.

The report's main conclusion is that the APS needs to develop and more effectively disseminate at all levels, a clearly articulated business case (or Value Proposition) in relation to employing Aboriginal and Torres Islander people in terms of the strengths, capacities and attributes they bring that will directly benefit the mission and goals of the APS.

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[1] In this report we use the terms Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interchangeably.

Recommendations

These are not in any particular order. Everyone has a role to play in improving career progression. These recommendations are offered as a guide to getting started.

For the APS:
1. Increase accountability at the highest levels for improving progression through recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into executive and senior executive roles.
2. Set employment targets at all levels and monitor progress.
3. Establish mechanisms to facilitate increased mentoring, coaching and sponsoring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff by senior executives.
4. Develop a greater number of senior roles (SES and EL) and career opportunities outside Canberra, including policy roles, not just service delivery.
5. Create clear pathways and plainly communicate expectations for career progression, and enhance formal feedback processes for unsuccessful applications to positions and opportunities.
6. Develop and promote a strong 'value proposition', clearly articulating the diverse range of strengths that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees bring to the APS.
7. Utilise existing tools such as Australian Public Service Employment Database and the APS Employee Census to monitor career progression across the service.

For Indigenous People
1. Locate a range of mentors, coaches and sponsors (formal and informal, short and long term) to help you navigate the APS.
2. Develop a career plan.
3. Identify supportive peers.
4. Take advantage of any opportunities that come your way. Put your hand up for extra work and special projects. Show initiative.
5. To increase your competitiveness in the APS seek out and be open to feedback in relation to ongoing performance and opportunities.

For non-Indigenous People
1. Mentor an Indigenous person.
2. Offer clear feedback and career navigation advice.
3. Seek opportunities to build cultural awareness and cultural capability.
4. Ask Indigenous people how you can support them.
5. Join your agency's Reconciliation Action Plan Committee and actively participate in RAP activities.

Project Rationale

The 2018 State of the Service report indicates that representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the APS has improved in recent years and currently sits at 3.3% (Australian Public Service Commission 2018, p. 58). This is a significant achievement in terms of having met the *Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy 2015-2018* target of 3% representation.

Despite this achievement, employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the APS is concentrated at the lower levels. The majority are employed at APS6 and below and the largest proportion (27%) are at APS4 level. In contrast, employment at senior executive levels is very small, just 1%. Over a ten year period, representation at the Senior Executive Service levels has remained disappointingly small while Executive Level employment has declined.[2] The challenge for the APS lies in finding ways to increase the small cohort of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders positioned at Executive levels and Senior Executive levels and retain them into the immediate and longer term future.

This project was commissioned by the Australian Public Service Commission's Indigenous Capability Unit in collaboration with the APS Indigenous SES Steering Committee. The project featured a six month secondment for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander APS employee to the ANU's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research to co-conduct the project. This secondment was supported by an agreement between the Indigenous Capability Unit (APSC) and the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (ANU). Samantha Faulkner, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisor at the NHMRC, was awarded the position and appointed Visiting Fellow (June-November 2018) to work alongside Dr Julie Lahn for the duration of the project.

The project brief was to develop the evidence base for future employment strategies and programs by researching the 'unique barriers' for career progression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to senior leadership. To generate a more complete picture the authors expanded the scope to include a strengths-based focus on enablers of career progression and a consideration of the unique strengths and values that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can bring to the APS. The final research question was as follows: 'Identify the unique barriers and enablers of career progression for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Public Service.'

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[2] APS Indigenous SES Steering Committee. 2018. 'Submission to APS Review'; citing December 2017 APSED data statistics.

Project methodology

The researchers completed 50 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees of the Australian Public Service.[3]

A guiding interview schedule was developed based on an in-house literature review, a scoping meeting of CAEPR academics, technical staff and doctoral scholars and discussions with APSC staff and members of the APS Indigenous SES Steering Committee. Five foci guided the interviews: career journey to date, future plans, barriers and enablers experienced and observed, and career reflections and learnings.

Participants self-selected for an interview, by responding to email invitations sent out by APSC, the APS Indigenous SES Steering Committee, HR networks, and through the researchers' own networks.

The majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face in Canberra and in five locations around Australia; the remainder occurred via telephone or video conference.

Interview participants were employed at the Senior Executive Service (SES), Executive Level 1 (EL1), Executive Level 2 (EL2), and in regions only, a small number of Australian Public Service 6 (APS6). Most were in APS employment at interview, a very small number had exited. Of the participants, 58% were women and 42% men. 48% per cent were Canberra based while the remainder were employed outside Canberra.

Most interviews were an hour in duration. A small number extended to ninety minutes. Most participants gave permission to be recorded. All recordings were fully transcribed and a grounded theory approach guided the data analysis. Several cycles of coding were undertaken to identify themes in the data.

It is important to note that this research provides perspectives on career progression from the most senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servant group and offers useful perspectives and reflections from those who have achieved success. Future research with those positioned at lower levels may provide additional insights not explored here.

To protect the identity of interview participants all potentially identifying information has been removed including agency names, locations and interview numbers.

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[3] This project was granted approval to proceed by the ANU's Human Research Ethics Committee (18/07/18 Protocol 2018/422). Approval was received for one-on-one interviews only; a request was denied for the conduct of separate focus groups with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous groups, being considered high-risk and an 'inappropriate method' for use in research with public servants.

Research Findings

Enablers- what's working?

Factors that are enabling of career progression rarely feature in the existing literature describing experiences of public sector employment among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This makes the insights and observations of participants in the current research highly valuable, in particular those factors they considered as being most important in enabling successful advancement to positions in middle and senior management.

Responses to the issue of enablers of career progression for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are presented here in three general categories: those factors that relate to personal attributes or efforts at an individual level; those factors which emphasise the importance of relationships, both formal and more informal (including the role of workplace managers as well as mentors); and those specific institutional measures that have enabled career movement.

The separation of enablers into these three categories is somewhat artificial as many factors are interconnected. For example, personal resilience may well be bolstered by an organisational culture that communicates a strong sense of value placed on the recruitment and contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants. Similarly, a willingness by individuals to embrace a new career opportunity can be facilitated by a positive and supportive manager or mentor. The conceptual separation of these three categories is maintained here as they offer a useful means to highlight shared aspects of groups of factors raised by the participants in this study.

Individual strengths

Hard work and resilience

Throughout the interviews participants consistently emphasised the role of working hard and in some instances making difficult choices as a personal strength in fulfilling their roles as public servants:

> If you are in an Indigenous area, showing everyone non-Indigenous wise that you've got everything to offer that they do plus more. Anything that will give you that exposure is worthwhile. But that means you've got to be able to work 120% what another person has to work.

> Just getting down and just working hard. […] there's a different kind of way that we work. A lot of it's relationship based, consultative, face-to-face talking, which in the

end may lead to a better result […] I think there's more of a tendency for our cohort to do that type of networking and work that way, which is good, but sometimes when you're under pressure or you've got a tight deadline, you need your head down.

At the same time, working in an APS role requires a robust level of personal resilience:

I think there has got to be a bit of a growth mindset […] having some kind of vision or passion about something. We talk about resilience and all those sorts of things, and I know that sometimes, people who are so focused you get knocked down, and you say yes, you are going to be knocked down, but you get back up.

I was really determined to try and make it work. I think my own stubbornness is what helped me to be resilient.

Having clarity around what you can achieve and seeing bureaucracy as a marathon can help to sustain you:

I always say bureaucracy is not a sprint, it is a marathon and so you have got to have the focus and be tenacious. I find that interesting and challenging. But if you don't, it is hard. It really is. There are lots of things that you could call out around institutional racism.

Just this whole clarity about things, because sometimes it impacts on our health when you are trying to do what you need to do and if you don't have that clarity about what you can do, how you do it and that sort of stuff, then you are going to come off second best. And I have seen a lot come off second best.

'Know your worth': manage your own career

A number of participants pointed to particular personal skills and capacities as playing a significant role in their career progression. These included such things as an ability to relate to people, to interpret situations with insight and respond effectively:

My undergrad [degree] had psychology elements to it and I think that has been absolutely invaluable, understanding people's leadership styles, understanding how to communicate with people, understanding how they want things [done].

They know I'm calm under pressure, that I seem to be able to handle myself and a number of difficult stakeholders quite well, that I'm a good leader, that I'm a safe pair of hands. They know that they can give me anything.

Many participants highlighted the importance of developing an awareness of one's strengths and abilities as well as areas of personal interest and the need to leverage these in actively managing one's own career. An ability to recognise one's own potential also features in the literature (Stewart and Warn 2016, p. 11).

Managing your own career in terms of both your planning and your tactical response, you've got to know what your brand is, know what your worth is, and I don't know that everyone is clear about that. I think it's an area in which you can become clearer.

The first 12 months I'm just going to consolidate my role. … After that I'm going to look at the types of things that I might want to work on because these things are important to me. I think [people need] to be active in that process. Some people will do it because they're strong enough and in tune with themselves enough to do that but others won't, so we need to provide something to help them to enable that.

An aspect of career management mentioned by many participants involved possessing or acquiring a capacity to be open to opportunities that involved trying new things:

> *I think taking control of your own career is so important […] I've had a rapid career progression and I think that's solely based on the fact that I have tried new things, I took opportunities when they came up, when I saw something I thought was interesting I thought 'I've probably got no chance but let's give it a shot and see what happens'.*

> *So initially it was just getting into an acting team leader position or doing some relief and see how I could develop my skills. And then, put my hand up for training opportunities just to enhance my skills […] like do a two week [placement] in someone's role while they were on holidays. And then it was extended out to a bit longer. And then it was, maybe I could manage the team myself. And it was just those small goals where I was able to achieve them along the way.*

One advantage in being willing to 'put yourself forward' for opportunities involved the greater potential to connect with a supportive supervisor who could directly assist in career management:

> *I think part of it is having the confidence to put yourself forward for opportunities, which a lot of colleagues have, but I think that the more you put yourself out there, you know, whether or not you're successful. If you're not [successful] then it makes you less likely to continue to put yourself out there, and that can be very demoralising. I think having good supervisors can help you to identify your own career path, but also give you work and access to opportunities that will contribute to that, and then when it comes to it, supporting you for the promotion or for the posting.*

Building a profile & diversifying your skillset

Flowing on from the previous point about taking up new opportunities, participants also highlighted exposure to a range of APS settings and roles as helping to develop and raise their organisational profiles, which in turn offered a route to escape being pigeonholed in Indigenous areas and as assisting the efforts of a potential sponsor or champion:

> *I think if you're outside of any kind of Indigenous specific policy area – being an expert in an area that isn't Indigenous, being able to speak on that, run forums on that […] helps you show that you are your own success. You're not just an Indigenous staff member who should be in certain roles. You are an expert in your own right. And that helped me a lot. And it's helped me to develop my career in an entirely different way.*

> *I say 'have you noticed how non-Indigenous employees are very good at establishing a profile. Their head pops up on the screen at national conferences and things like that'. So I work hard with the Indigenous staff to say, 'let's establish a profile for yourself then I can sponsor and advocate on that'*

A related activity which participants regarded as a significant career enabler involved deliberate efforts to increase the variety of their skills and experience within the public service:

> *Diversify your skillset, put yourself in a good position to be an SES one day, because then you'll be able to manage anything. And the biggest thing all of my mentors have said to me is you need to have some exposure in a policy area so that you understand*

the government process, in terms of legislation [etc], to broaden your skillset so you could manage – be an EL2 or an SES in a policy area, or a program area.

Alongside building familiarity in policy, participants emphasised acquiring an array of 'soft skills' such as the ability to 'pivot' in approaches to work (e.g. communication style) when shifting between agencies, or to utilise emotional intelligence to quickly gain a sense of strategic possibilities in particular contexts. Developing 'political acumen' was seen as especially important in progressing beyond EL levels:

What would you call it, it's that acumen, it's political acumen. You soon discover when you're getting up to that level it's very competitive […] Often it's that acumen about being savvy in the workplace and the nuances of what's going on, so the need to mentor, the need to find sponsors, the need to find advocates and work along being acutely aware when the blue chip projects come along that you position yourself to get the good projects and the good jobs.

I do think that your frame of reference in terms of SES to ELs is a very different job. … Because in – when you start to get to the SES level your – your political savvy and your leadership savvy really starts to come in to the fore. Whereas at the EL2 level, yeah, you have to be – you know, relationally savvy, and kind of politically savvy, but you're more of a technical expert. Whereas at the SES level your level of expertise is so different. It's way softer in terms of your skills. It's more about analytical skills. I need strategic skills. I need good EQ and EI to know what's going on in a room. I need to be able to see the multiple parts moving and knowing where I can influence and where I can't and when do I push and when do I not. It's a different kind of job.

Relationships: formal and informal

The key factor most generally cited by participants as having played a major role enabling progress in their APS careers involved a positive relationship with a more senior colleague, one who was supportive, encouraging and ideally also committed to advancement of diversity. This kind of relationship occurred in two forms not necessarily exclusive of one another: that of finding a mentor, a coach, or sponsor, and the experience of having a good manager or supervisor:

So you'd probably talk to people that have had a relatively successful career and they'll talk about the mentor, the supervisor, the manager.

Having the mentors and having the senior executives actually wanting to work with their Indigenous staff and further their careers. There needs to be effort in that but that needs to come from the top.

Finding a Mentor or Sponsor

Having a mentor is cited in the literature as an important enabler in a workplace situation (Stewart and Warn 2016, p.11). Locating a mentor was also cited by participants in this study as one of the single most important influences in their career progression:

You can't be what you can't see. So as part of my career I have always found myself a mentor. Always.

I also have a mentor within the department who is one of our Indigenous Champions so I was able to build up a relationship, a mentoring relationship with that person and they were able to also give me some advice and tips for my interview as well. So yeah, I have been really supported.

I think the enablers that need to happen are coaching and mentoring.

I strongly encourage mentors as one of the most important things that we can offer new employees and established employees. The feedback on that is really positive about needing a mentor to help you navigate and manage in the workplace. The APS can be a real daunting place.

While formal mentoring programs (such as Indigenous Champions in the previous quote) were sometimes mentioned as useful, participants generally placed greater emphasis on establishing informal relationships.

I don't think we really need formalised relationships. Sometimes, it's the informal relationships that will do it, so whilst I'm not someone's [formal] mentor for example, or someone's coach, I still play that role anyway.

This parallels the findings of Watkins (2001, 28), whose work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the Queensland Public Service underscored the importance of access to less formal arrangements for learning & development opportunities, such as mentoring, work shadowing and networking:

I think definitely lots of informal mentors and sponsors. Maybe once or twice I've actually asked someone formally "Will you be my mentor?" and it's always fallen over.

I don't have a formal mentoring relationship with anyone, but there are definitely more senior members of staff that I have a good relationship with that I would go to if I'm experiencing any issues, or wanted career advice. They are people that I've worked with before who were really supportive and have good kind of political radar in the workplace … It's like an organisational, political radar.

It was always just people whose informal mentoring about […] how do you remain focused and resilient and how do you look towards your goals.

One rationale raised for adopting a less formalised approach to mentoring was the benefit of being able to engage with a number of potential mentors relevant to a variety of different issues and goals:

I'm not a huge fan of the whole speed dating mentor type programs. They can work sometimes but they're not amazing. The way that I've done it is I've watched a leader in action and gone, wow, I really admire that person's approach. Technical skill, public speaking skill, leadership skill, philosophy on whatever, and so I've then gone and said, hey, I really admire your [whatever]. Do you have time to have a coffee and have a chat with me? Interestingly enough, I've never found anybody who I've said that to who've said, no, I don't have time, because generally the kind of mentors that you're attracted to are people who are – have similar values to you but maybe different skill sets.

I have a lot of mentors for different things, different people that I've worked with across my time and I'll go to different people. I've got a network of mentors. I strongly believe that that is a huge reason why I have been so motivated to drive my own career path. And I have people offering to be mentors for me, just like SES that I've worked with, which I feel really privileged to have. So I feel I've been really lucky in the role that I have, I do get exposure to SES through diversity champions, and the SES network,

and I've just been really fortunate that they've seen something in me and want to keep encouraging me.

Mentoring relationships may work well, but they also may not. As one participant put it, such relationships are 'only as good as the people who are in them'. Seeking informal mentoring allows an individual to cast their net wide, approaching people on a needs or interest basis and providing greater focus and flexibility on both sides:

It is sometimes difficult to balance because, you know, one side have expectations and the other side has expectations too, and they don't always align. That can be really difficult, and in that sense, I just try to use common sense to figure out – often when Indigenous colleagues come to me […]I say send me your application or your pitch, or whatever, I'll have a look at it, and just take them through some of the things that have helped me.

The really good [mentors] I've had have said, 'okay, happy to do that but when you come to me I want to know something that you're struggling with right now, an area where you think you're all over it, and what your next three, six month or twelve month objective is'.

One major benefit of mentoring highlighted by participants was the ability of a good mentor to help with the decoding of the 'unwritten rules' (including the organisational culture of the APS):

I think in any workplace there's dynamics or unspoken rules or different ways that people can perceive different actions. So sometimes it can just be a good sounding board for that. If I'm writing an application for a promotion or a posting or anything, I would send it through them and ask for their feedback.

Most of the people who have been mentors and senior mentors have been non-Indigenous people and you definitely need to rely on their advice and guidance about explaining this place and how it works. One thing that you realise is there's a lot of informal networks and it can be hard for Indigenous people or people from where English is not their first language or for women to break into these networks.

Other key specific benefits included the role of a mentor or coach as facilitating career networks and also in stimulating creative thinking:

A coach can also advocate for you, and drop your name, because they're aware of much more that's happening, so they can drop your name in certain things. It's who you know. Never underestimate who you know in the APS. But you need to have the credibility to back that up. It's all about networking.

For me a coach and a mentor should not be someone who sits there and pats you on the back and goes, "Oh you're fantastic", but should challenge and provoke your thinking. So when I have mentors; when I've had coaches I say, "I want you to push me", so sometimes it might be about decisions, sometimes it might be about complex stakeholder engagements.

Informal mentors potentially also include individuals in senior management in one's own area, who may well be able to offer direct assistance in career advancement:

I've used unofficial sponsors … both my FAS and the Secretary were my unofficial sponsors. They were interested in my career. They were interested in what I was doing. They were interested in what I thought I needed for my career. Didn't just tell me what I needed to do, and they got behind it.

> *I've had a really good coach as well who was my [SES] Band 2; every conversation you have with her is a coaching conversation whether you want it to be or not.*

In this sense, the advantages offered by a mentor can at times blur with those provided by a supportive manager or supervisor.

A Good Manager

The impact of positive interest among managers and supervisors in supporting career progression for Indigenous public servants was a central conclusion in Watkins' (2001) Queensland-based study. Her findings emphasised the managers and supervisors' potential role in collaboratively identifying learning and development opportunities (both internal and external); facilitating access to opportunities for skilling up; and in providing constructive forms of dialogue and feedback, all of which had a significant enabling effect on individuals' career planning and progression (2001, pp. 23; 30).

Participants in this research similarly and unanimously also drew attention to the valuable role that can be played in career advancement by a 'good manager' in multiple ways. Certainly at times as a result of individual assistance, but just as importantly (and perhaps more so in the view of most participants) in creating a supportive environment which fostered positive conditions:

> *For my last six months there, I had a manager who was really supportive, and they helped me lead [initiative x] and that led me to get an opportunity [a 12 month secondment] so it was exactly where I wanted to go.*

> *I think the career progression aspect is largely influenced by the culture of the workplace in a broad sense and the culture of the immediate working environment. So your supervisor, your manager…. are people really committed to make a difference for people especially diversity groups. … It's the attitude that supervisors and managers bring to the table in terms of encouraging those people.*

Prominent mention was given to managers who communicated a clear sense of their valuing of diversity and the potential contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to the APS, as evidenced in appointments:

> *I was fortunate to be in the APS at a time where I was surrounded by a number of professional senior Indigenous public servants and that all came from having a really good SES manager.*

> *The [senior management] who are actually looking to employ Aboriginal people. Why are they doing it? They see an inherent value. You can't tell me they're doing it because of the goodness of their heart. They have a real reason for it. They're fine public servants, they have an output in mind, they have a deliverable in mind, and yet they're still explicitly going out there and employing Aboriginal people.*

> *He was pretty casual but he was really good at identifying opportunities and giving them to us. He was good at giving us opportunities and growing us. … He was an Aboriginal man as well so that … It helped, you know, give him the right sort of motivations to help other young people up into their careers. Not everybody was like*

that. There were some non-Indigenous managers like that but there were some that weren't as well.

Watkin (2001, p.30) notes the positive contribution made by managers who are able to demonstrate cultural awareness in their relationship with Indigenous employees (whether that manager is Indigenous or non-Indigenous). A number of participants here endorsed this view:

> *I call it fluent. They are fluent in blackfella talk and sense of humour and they kind of get us.*

> *He was really good at talking through some of the more complex or interesting policy challenges that we would have along the way […] He's really good at Indigenous issues [...] He's non-Indigenous but he's one of those really good people who a lot of Indigenous people in the office worked to and with and were helped along their way.*

Participants also pointed to instances where Indigenous identity facilitated an ability to establish a strong and positive supportive relationship:

> *I had a manager who really whipped me into shape. She was a bit of a hard task master, I will give her that. But it was good though because I think it whipped me into who I am now […] it was good to just have someone … Both of us, we found out we are actually related. […] But it was great to be able to just have those honest conversations because she was my EL1, but she also had high expectations.*

> *She wasn't supported to do that in any way. She just did it because she was a really strong Indigenous leader. … And that helped me along the way a lot. It helped me – she's really frank so she was able to give honest advice on, you know, you should really tackle this thing this way or, don't go there that will just bring you trouble.*

> *I tend to find my biggest champions and this is really easy for us and I am not going to describe it right, so it is not the people that are publicly the Indigenous champions, but it is actually people like Band 1s and EL2s over the years who have their grandmas may have been Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, they might have been someone back in their family or their sister just married an Aboriginal man. People that actually have connection are more likely to give me a chance and give staff a chance.*

Good managers were those who showed a willingness to 'train people up' in departmental culture and expectations, in once again understanding the 'unwritten rules' or cultural requirements required in different contexts and at different levels. A valued aspect of such training involved being provided with opportunities for roles that supported career development:

> *I think that is the work we need to do and you will see people, obviously to get that level, most people are intelligent enough but it is understanding that context and what it means as it gets more sophisticated. We know higher up the level you go, it is a very grey area of management.*

> *Initially what worked really well was having those open discussions with my supervisor about what my career direction would be but having someone believe that I had the skills to be able to do it when I didn't think I had myself, so I think that allowed me to step out of my comfort zone and push myself further. And I think because of that I've then had the confidence to keep progressing and keep taking on new challenges and different roles even when I might not have been comfortable doing them. And I think*

that just comes down to having a good leader and someone who's interested in your career development and that's what I've had.

Styles of communication emerged as helping to define a good manager, along with a focus on strengths and on deliberately fostering growth and confidence:

They were doing things that I'd imagine is a good thing to do if you're a good supervisor. I don't think the approach for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, is a different approach to anyone else. If he's a good manager, good supervisor, it's for everyone. So things like – they wouldn't just give me something and say, well, you can't do it. They'd give me something and sit down when they first gave it to me and talk me through it until I got more confident because I was new. They would give me things they thought I could add value to, that they thought played to my strengths.

I guess the managers that I have had, that I feel like I've learnt things from – because I've had some not very good ones too – it's probably more their work ethic and their styles of communication and, I don't know, whether it is their confidence or that they will delegate and let go and let you, not sink or swim, but have some authority and responsibility for doing something and that's probably what I appreciate in a manager. To be able to learn and grow from.

Access to a Network of Support

A third area of relationship highlighted by a number of participants but falling outside a mentoring or managerial type consists of having a network of co-support within the APS. This echoes a finding in Stewart & Warn (2016, p.11) who refer to the helpful role played by 'peer networks sharing experience and support'. Once again, this kind of network or support group may have a greater or lesser degree of formality.

What has worked well for me or my colleagues in our career to date? Having – you know, we have the best network of people in our own cohort, and that's been really beneficial, and having, you know, senior Indigenous staff that, you know, who walk the walk, that's been really integral to my long-term survival.

One thing I will say is that what the Commission did for me was there was networking opportunities and even be able to form the network of Indigenous grads that I have. Like I am still in touch with so many of them and that helped me a lot. That was a fantastic support base.

Often such a support network draws predominantly on a cohort of APS colleagues available as a sounding board or for debriefing. In some instances this was viewed as part of broader organisational networking in support of career progression:

I think the network for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. [Department name] had an amazing staff network. It was just such an empowering – to be a part and to know that the DG so the secretary worked with the chair as well and I think you know my up until that point where that directors came in, my working with [Department name] was such a really good experience.

Some people have robust cohorts, robust and more connected cohorts.

It is not only influencing upwards, if you influence sideways and downwards, you are building a cohort of people, but actually you can talk to them about your proposition. It took me a while to realise this but everyone looks to influence up […] If you are

influencing below you're influencing others that could actually become a cohort of supporters around a theme or around you as someone that they respect as a thinker.

The support network may also be a group of peers or friends within or even outside the APS:

I have a series of peers who I work with but there was something that I wanted to run I'd go out and have a yarn with them. I know what I want and where I want to go, I'm not shy on doing that stuff. I can absolutely see how beneficial that would be for other people and Aboriginal staff because I think we need to have different options that will suit the level, the timing, the personal circumstances of each of the individuals.

Maybe there were only five of us who identified, and we did that networking in regards to providing support to each other and also provide honest feedback to HR.

Externally I get mentoring from past scholars. They're the ones I actually studied with. … Then there's my coffee buddies when I feel that I need to explore and stretch things out or if I'm not making sense of understanding we might actually all catch up and they help me to work through a lot of stuff.

Institutional measures

Particular programs, measures and other institutional features of the APS were mentioned by many participants in the research as helpful. Prominent examples that featured include the Indigenous Champions and the existence of formal staff or graduate networks. Generally, no one institutional measure emerged as having provided a vital or decisive career-enabling benefit that could substitute for the key Relationship and Individual factors described above. Even so, a small number of existing institutional factors clearly stood out in participants' accounts as being seen to have genuine and substantive value, while in some individual cases, were regarded as highly significant.

<u>Special Measures / Affirmative measures</u>

Dedicated APS programs targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for recruitment were most often cited as an institutional measure that provided tangible positive results:

It's really good to have targeted programs like the graduate programs and your cadetships and traineeships. I think that's something that is fantastic.

So where they've actually cracked it is – two examples is Foreign Affairs and PM&C when they did special measures. [..] People come in with some form of unconscious biasness, in my view. So people are generally looking for [individuals like] themselves. It's the same thing with gender.

I think the number one thing is that, and PM&C and Department of Foreign Affairs has shown it, is the use of special measures or affirmative measures. […]The point around special measures is that there is a gap in equity in representation of Aboriginal people at whatever level […] There are honestly so many talented Aboriginal leaders and executives out there and the PM&C and the DFAT process showed that; there was hundreds that applied, and they've established a pool.

A clear view among participants was that the skills and talent to fill senior APS roles exists among Indigenous people; while affirmative measures were regarded as valuable they should not be about lowering standards but rather, creating opportunities for Indigenous people to demonstrate their capabilities:

> *One of the big things that we don't want to do and one thing I advise non-Indigenous people in particular is, please do not lower the bar at any of the APS levels if you do use affirmative measures, otherwise the person will come in to do a job and will feel vulnerable because they are not able to do the job. Please open the door of opportunity for affirmative measures but after that they have to walk and demonstrate their capability themselves.*

In one case a bulk recruiting round was identified as a useful opportunity to 'test the water, see how I'd go' in applying for a more senior position.

Study & Development Programs

The chance to engage in further study and for professional development were viewed as valuable support to career progression in the APS:

> *If you want to be a professional public servant, do the Public Sector Management Program, and let us find you mentors and tutors to do it and that is how we should all be doing it.*

> *Mentoring, Indigenous Cultural Awareness Training, Facilitators Training, Diploma in Government Leadership course. I've done change management courses, coaching within [named Department] courses. Crucial Conversations courses, Writing Skills for Manager's courses, Indigenous Mentor Accreditation.*

As part of accessing such opportunities, participants noted the usefulness of ready arrangements for release and reappointment, and secondment. One participant related approaching a manager with ideas for external study and being encouraged by the supportive response they received: 'We'll just hold you as an inoperative and when you come back just ring me and we'll work out where you go'. Watkin (2001, p.27) also noted the ability of organisations to 'backfill' a position for a specified period of time was a critical factor for Indigenous women in senior public service positions being able to engage with learning and development opportunities.

For some participants, Indigenous-specific professional development programs in the APS represented useful stepping stones to a greater range of study options:

> *Many of them said, "We just want access to the same courses and professional development. We don't actually want to go off on the [Indigenous] Leadership Development Course because when that appears on my CV it's just a point of difference, it doesn't make me as competitive as the other people". But often those [offer] rites of passage to the ANZSOG Program, to the PSMP [Public Sector Management Program, QUT] and all of these special development packages, they're highly competitive and they're hard to get into.*

Innovative department-based programs supportive of career progression for Indigenous employees (often created by senior level Indigenous people) were also cited as beneficial, in part by providing once again a form of decoding or orientation to the existing culture of a department (and of the public service more generally), effectively building on what Leitch (2017, p.1-3) refers to as the 'cultural fluency skills' of Indigenous public servants:

> When you don't believe - you can't see Indigenous people in senior professions, it makes you think "Well, what pathways are there for the future for us?" but there's a lot of work the Indigenous SES are doing now, we do a lot of that kind of stuff, talk to the Indigenous staff about promotions, we're having a little session in a couple of weeks' time with the graduates so it's a lot of – I wouldn't say mentoring, there's a lot of informal mentoring that absolutely happens, but also we try and do some formal sessions where we actually talk about thinking about careers and career progression.

> Rotation or placement in the corporate area gives you a better sense of how the department works and how to just have better insight into the processes.

> I also developed a package within the department […] my observation over the years is that we have this focus, an unnecessary focus on non-Indigenous people needing to know Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander culture, and my observations are that Indigenous staff need to know about […] bureaucratic culture. That culture has values, it has beliefs, it is a whole living kind of organism for want of a better word, and that people don't realise how big a gap there is for Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people, and particularly in rural, regional, remote areas that when we employ people, the very big gap between what they grow up with culturally or what we grow up with culturally and then how bureaucracy operates. We have monthly coaching. We have to do monthly coaching with our staff in our respective layers.

Other more informal department-based opportunities for professional development were identified as complementing the formal arrangements, in particular being exposed to higher level duties:

> What I was able to do is just get an opportunity to job shadow my supervisor and sit in on coaching sessions or other meetings that they got to do – that they were involved in and I could see how I could develop my skills. And then I put my hand up for training opportunities just to enhance my skills. I think it was just small goals like that - a two week position in someone's role while they were on holidays. And then it was extended out a bit longer. And then it was, maybe I could manage the team myself. It was just those small goals where I was able to achieve success along the way.

> The things I like to do to, where I've helped people and supported their careers, is start to expose them to the next level, bring them into workshops, meetings, forums. They may not be contributing, but they can have a look into what the next level is and start to get comfortable about it. Notwithstanding the stuff you might do around education and professional development courses and things like that which I've done for Indigenous staff and resulted in their promotion to the next level EL1 and EL2, I've invested in dozens going through that. That in itself was enough, but a lot of it is about confidence. … It's tough. The thing I think you can do for Indigenous people is that sometimes it's a fear of unknown and not the confidence, so the thing is, expose them to that space so they feel comfortable about it, but at the same time invest in their development.

Taken together, these kinds of institutionally-based measures aimed at assisting career advancement can be considered both as illustrating 'opportunities for up-skilling' and as

exemplifying 'organisational culture supporting learning and development', both of which were identified by Watkin (2001, p.23) in general terms as important enablers of career progression among the Indigenous public servants she interviewed.

Support for Family Obligations

Watkin's research also identified flexible work arrangements linked to balancing work and family life as another key institutional career enabler (2001, pp.22-3). A small number of participants in this study raised similar factors as significant. One instance focused on maternity leave arrangements and responsibilities for child care:

> *I finally had my kids and I have come back to the workforce, and again, [department x] was really good. Offered me promotions if I came back early and set up caring rooms for me. So I came back when my kids were three months old because each job I had come to, my boss had rung me on mat leave saying, "We can give you a promotion, but we need you to come back tomorrow. We will give you whatever you need." They did amazing things to support me.*

> *Superannuation is good, leave provisions, the flexibility to be able to go and pick up my kids or my step-kids when I need to.*

Barriers – what's getting in the way?

The range of obstacles faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in pursuing and advancing a career in the public service feature prominently in the limited literature that explores Indigenous employment in this sector. Many of the points raised by participants in this study reflect key findings in this earlier research in Australia and elsewhere (notably Canada, where difficulties in public sector employment emerged as part of a Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1996). There are some different areas of emphasis in the literature compared with those emerging from this study, once again likely reflecting the higher level roles of participants as occupying supervisory, management and executive positions. For example in this study participants give greater attention to specific operational constraints (such as recruitment caps and freezes) as well as aspects of unsatisfactory organisational process (such as lack of transparency in appointments). At the same time, participants provided detailed consideration of certain topics that are well-established across other material but often unelaborated, notably the role and impact of culture, relating to both the backgrounds of many Indigenous people but also organisational culture within the APS.

In general terms, a compelling core theme to emerge among participant responses overall involved highlighting the lack of a thoroughly disseminated and explicitly articulated institutional recognition of the 'value-add' Indigenous public servants bring to the APS, and a lack of effort to embed that sense of value in APS organisational culture across all levels – so that 'talking the talk' (at the highest levels) becomes 'walking the walk' (particularly in middle management).

Operational constraints

A number of participants cited contemporary operational constraints in the APS as slowing or blocking career progression among Indigenous public servants as an unintended consequence:

> *I suspect part of it has to do with very practical things … everything to do with caps, staffing caps, budgetary constraints. So you become [caught up in] all of the constraints, corporate constraints, and not elevated in your own career.*

Recruitment caps at the SES level were observed as resulting both in fewer opportunities for movement to senior appointments as well as elevating the intensity of competition for such positions, which in turn undermines and erodes an environment of peer support for individual career aspiration:

> *SES caps would be one [barrier]… The agencies aren't recruiting extensively.*

> *It's more difficult to talk to your peers who you might be competing against, because if you say oh, I really want this, and then they say oh, me too, then there's always a sense of competition. And I think that that's quite difficult sometimes to deal with, because they're your friends and your colleagues.*

> *I was acting in a Branch and so was a colleague. She and I were competing for the acting. I then got managed by her and of course she was going to be my referee to get out. She wasn't promoting me because I was her competition. It stalled my career for a number of years while I was part of her Branch.*

Some participants also suggested that the APS has overemphasised ('gone hard on') entry level recruitment of Indigenous employees and given less attention to progression to senior levels, with bulk recruitment rounds generally focusing at lower levels. The trend was exacerbated by periods of recruitment freeze:

> *I think the over-representation at the lower levels, it's not even necessarily caused by the fact that Indigenous staff are disengaged, I think it's been a recruitment issue. For the last 10 years we've gone hard on entry level programs, it's been really, really hard, but it's going to take time for that to catch up.*

> *Unfortunately we've brought most people in while we're in a recruitment freeze down cycle because if you have a look – well-meaning but what we've done is we've created a glass ceiling through the recruitment freeze. And by and large that's still around. Now, in five years' time we might be in a boom, those people might have chances [of progressing] but half of them probably would have left.*

Limited opportunities in regions

A commonly noted obstacle to career progression was the relative lack of opportunities for those employed in regional and state offices; the bureaucracy was often described as 'Canberra-centric'. Given the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in the APS are located outside the ACT (76% in 2017[1]), this was seen as a key issue. This is consistent with APSED figures for all APS employees where a minority are based in Canberra at 37.9%, (Table A, Appendix 1).

Regionally-based participants described two dimensions to the problem. Firstly, there are limited positions available in the regions. For example, Table A shows that 11.3% of all APS employees are based in Queensland and of those 11.3%, 68.9% are based in Brisbane. This trend is the same for all states, see Tables A and B in Appendix 1). The second dimension is there being relatively fewer higher level positions available to apply for in regional areas. This can be clearly seen in Table C where the majority of EL and SES positions are located in Canberra. For career progression Canberra was seen as providing more opportunities.

> *You're quite limited in your mobility up this way and the more senior you get the harder that gets.*

> *The big influencing factor for people in the regions will be the opportunity for career advancement, because it's such a limited commodity. Tenure in the regions is generally very long, so when opportunities do come up it's highly competitive for a large cohort of people. And a lot of times, the levels are going to be considerably lower than what you would find in Canberra and state capitals.*

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[1] APS Indigenous SES Steering Committee 2018.

In terms of career barriers for people who work specifically in the Indigenous Affairs space, there's limited opportunities for promotion outside of Canberra. To get an EL1 job somebody here would have to die. … Some people come in to climb the corporate ladder on the back of blacks but others come here because they want to work here, and if they come to an organisation that they want to be in because they believe in what we do then they're likely to stay, so there's limited vacancies.

You know, even our career progression; we can't progress because all the jobs are in Canberra. … There's no opportunities at the higher levels. There's no succession planning. You can have it in your performance assessment like I've had. [for example I've had] five years to work-shadow an executive staff.

Secondly, those positions which do exist are seen as offering limited possibilities for developing the varied range of skills necessary for career progression, such as experience of policy development (increasingly positioned as valuable across the APS and as a vital requirement for progression to senior levels) and also proximity to Ministers:

The theory is you need to be in Canberra because you need to be close to the Minister when he's there. These question time briefs and all these things that you do for the Minister, but I can tell you if you ask the Minister he spends at least 50% of his time in his local office. Sometimes it's not a bad thing to have an SES based outside of Canberra.

As a consequence the majority of Indigenous employees located in regional and state offices are at a significant career disadvantage. Stewart & Warn (2016, p. 15) make a related point in concluding that Indigenous public servants 'remaining in liaison and other roles more relevant to community' may compromise their promotional prospects (also identifying a need for further research on the topic).

An associated widespread view is that to seek greater opportunities at higher levels a move to Canberra is required, and this in itself can constitute a significant barrier:

I can tell you now probably one reason I won't look at a promotion is that there's an impression I'm going to have to be in Canberra.

For regionally-based Indigenous public servants settled in their home communities, who may well have leadership or other community and extended kin-related responsibilities, moving to Canberra can be difficult:

I suppose some of the things that prevent people from moving to another level, one is wanting to stay in this space, wanting to stay in the agency, wanting to stay in the same geographical location, for lots of reasons, connection to Country, connection to family, connection to kin, so that's one of the reasons why a lot of people don't move on is because they don't want to leave where they live.

For many people they don't mind the work. They don't care about the level because it's in their home.

I think the barriers are more about (and it is the one I had) do I move or don't I move away from family? Because of your cultural obligations. They are fairly strong. ... What I am committed to now is working with these women in particular, and obviously all the staff (and I have non-Indigenous staff as well), to say 'well, this is what you can start thinking about when you feel the time is right' or you can manage that whole

issue of family obligations and leadership that they inevitably have in their families and communities.

Additionally highlighted was an entrenched institutionalised sense of a 'disconnect' existing between Canberra, state offices and the regions, contributing to poor relationships across the centre-regional divide:

There's always a disconnect. We had regional offices saying to state offices you don't understand us. State offices were saying the same back to the regional offices but the same thing will apply national office to state office and the same sort of hierarchy. So we have to develop systems, processes, relationships, communication channels and understand what the priorities are for us to work together because no one will know what's happening in every place. You need to have people that will represent the department in these regions and by the very fact that the regions are different, people's understanding will be different so yes, we don't understand each other.

As a direct result participants who have relocated to Canberra in order to progress their careers noted that the experience can be a discouraging one in dealing with negative perceptions:

You go to Canberra, and I've experienced that, for some reason national office people look at you like you're from another world. Like we're not good enough. Even if we're from the State Office, or the cities, we're not good enough. And you get that feeling.

The reason why I came to [the agency] was because I was head-hunted. When I took up the role it was on the proviso that I relocate to Canberra. I didn't realise that meant that I came down with a target on my forehead.

Higher Levels Unappealing

Participants identified personal preference as an additional factor explaining a lack of career progression. That is to say, an active choice to remain at level rather than seek to advance their career. In general terms, a higher level position was viewed as being as undesirable, with several factors supporting this perspective. Some participants expressed feeling more comfortable in their current role, especially given a range of unappealing activities they associated with higher positions:

So, I have had the best start possible to the career that I have had, and I have been really fortunate. I have had a lot of jobs in a lot of areas that I have been really happy, generally speaking. I have done jobs that I really enjoy, I have chosen not to go further in the service. … To me, it is the level I am more comfortable in. I have had numerous opportunities to move up. It is just not something I am comfortable with. I don't need to spend time doing finances and meetings. … I am happy to act.

I'm pretty sure I could do a SES role. … But I've never thought about it actually. You've got to do a lot of schmoozing so that's probably why.

A related but minority view was that remaining at less senior levels in the APS offers a means to sustainably manage stress in a potentially demanding workplace:

It's just not an option (moving to an executive level position), I'm convinced that if you have an opinion it's just not valued. I try really hard to fly under the radar so I don't do

> *too much more than what's expected. I ensure that anything stats wise is just below. It's not exceeding expectations and what it does is it gives me my sanity. Because I think it's just around surviving the challenging environment.*

Other participants pointed to opportunities at lower levels for greater autonomy and for movement to a variety of different roles:

> *Why haven't I applied for EL2? I guess I probably haven't applied because I see them as a bit of the meat in the sandwich, they don't actually have much authority because everything they do has to go to the Assistant Secretary to decide, so I think, is that for me? I'm not sure. To get an EL2, it's smaller numbers [ie less positions] whereas there's a lot of EL1s. You can still go to the State Offices, there's more opportunities for that, so I probably see more opportunities sideways in terms of my own learnings. I like a new challenge so it's okay I've done that job for a while. Where is somewhere else sideways that I can go to get a new challenge?*

In a slightly different vein, occupying a senior level position was seen by some participants as bringing an increased level of personal association with policy measures and programs. Being perceived by others as a person of influence in government administration or as responsible for particular decisions or outcomes can make interactions with family and community difficult:

> *Yes it puts a bit of strain on the relationship. So that's a barrier for staff moving up the levels, because up the levels becomes more responsibility, and your name becomes someone that's associated.*
>
> *So people are a bit afraid to have that confrontation all the time. You may meet aunty or uncle at a barbecue and you've just told them that you cannot support their business loan [application], or not going to do this for you in the economic development world, then that becomes a strain.*

This might be considered as an additional factor for some Indigenous public servants to consider in efforts to balance work & family life, which impact on career planning (Watkins, 2001, p.22). For those who play an active role in community organisations, community expectations to act as a lobbyist on their behalf have been identified previously as a genuine area of difficulty (Stewart & Warn 2016 p.14).

The view that promotion to higher, more senior levels of the public service will decrease job satisfaction or work-life balance was a minority view held among participants, as was the case also in Watkin's earlier work in Queensland (2001, p.22). Given the focus here is with people already in leadership and emerging leadership roles in the APS, we suspect such views may well be more widespread at lower levels. But it is always important to give adequate attention to the exercise of individual agency, including considered processes of evaluating pros and cons and acting on one's preferences.

Preconceptions & Biases, Prejudice & Pigeon-holing

The area of barriers identified in this section shifts focus away from formal characteristics of the APS as a workplace and career setting to more obscured and unacknowledged

features which in one form or another are elements of every institutional environment. Notwithstanding this difference, they are no less tangible to the people they directly effect, or less substantial in their range of impacts, which include (but are certainly not limited to) fostering impediments to career progression among Indigenous public servants. All three of the specific features described here were raised widely among participants in the study.

The first of these, *preconceptions*, relates to the operation of unrecognised bias and ethnocentrism, notably through a normative preferential valuing of the familiar:

> *I do believe the APS inherently is good. There are very few people that I would say are bad people in the APS. The problem is, they approach it from an ethnocentric perspective where they look at what they value, and quite often what they value is what they are [rather than] the value of diversity.*

> *I think one of the greatest barriers for me moving up to the next level is that I think people perceive SES need to be a certain way, a certain look, a certain speak, and a certain thing and when you don't present that way I think there's an assumption that you therefore cannot do the job because you're not in this same mould.*

For some participants this was especially noticeable in relation to dynamics of promotion and workplace recognition:

> *But you can see what they reward. You can see it, you can hear it, and you know it, and anyone that doesn't fall into that will not get the same opportunities. That's the sad part of it. I mean, the other stuff is impressive, but surely it can't be the sum total of what you need in public service. … It's a very myopic view of what success looks like. And it's white, and it's usually male, it's now getting a little bit younger. I think the age profile of that success has changed. … It's, you know, it's Melbourne/Sydney - there's a set of kind of characteristics which predominantly defines who is successful, really successful, and who is not in the public service if you have a career ambition to get to the top. If that's what you're using as the yardstick, then it's pretty exclusive.*

> *I've seen some people that have excelled in hierarchy once they've left a certain organisation and they never got promoted within the organisation. They left that organisation, all of a sudden they've excelled. So I think that shows you the unconscious biasness. They couldn't get a Band 1 in my organisation. They moved [and became a] Band 3 later on.*

Leitch's (2017) recent publication emphasises 'entrenched institutional cultural biases' in the public service that is uncomfortable with 'differing ways of being, knowing and doing'. She describes considerable potential for feelings of isolation among Indigenous public servants and that some 'may feel the need to "act white" to be accepted'. Participants in this study confirmed aspects of her/his perspective:

> *They treat us terribly, and it is a case of "We want you here but only if you look like us, talk like us, sound like us, otherwise we don't want you here". Well of course I'm not - I'm never going to look like them. The Secretary gets it … The problem is the Secretary does not see the shit that goes down in the corridors particularly amongst the [FASs]. There's a saying in the corridors and it goes something like this, "The FASs know how to kiss up to the Secretary and they kick down". You can't expect any Secretary, I don't care how good they are and the former Secretary was brilliant, they do not have a line of sight over what happens.*

Some agencies have different levels of maturity on how they deal with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and how they engage and talk about us and to us. Indigenous business is everyone's business.

Entrenched ethnocentric bias can also manifest as prejudice (as well as intolerance, bigotry and racism). A number of participants related encountering dynamics of this kind which were certainly regarded as undermining advancement in the APS:

Barriers are other people's view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, perceptions that aren't true, you know, all of those things.

You know, and there's a – not so much now, but there is a stigma that Indigenous staff aren't good enough, you know, and you've always got to fight that fight.

Watkin's Queensland-based research nearly two decades ago reported significant occurrences of abuse, personal insults, threats, belittling around others and constant criticism of aspects of appearance being directed at Indigenous public servants in the workplace, alongside exclusion from meetings and from work and social events (2001, p.32). Participants in this research did not describe prejudice of this degree or frequency, but did raise some parallel concerns in reflecting on their career:

There are all kinds of assumptions. I've had all types of things said to me over the years about either my skill level or about other Indigenous people's skill level and they're just assumptions because you're Indigenous maybe you're not a good writer or you're not good at maths or you're not good at this or that. People have either said things like that explicitly or they have said it in a very roundabout way, so it's pretty shocking but people have said it.

When I was a young woman in government people would say to me "Gee you're smart for an Aboriginal person" and I'd go, "What kind of backhanded compliment is that?" I got the whole trifecta, to use that analogy. I was always the youngest at my management levels, I was the only female and I was the only Aboriginal person, so I grew up with that. I had to prove myself all the way. I was not taken seriously.

Leitch (2017, p.2) suggests that a consciousness of 'counteracting stereotypes, fostering a positive image, and avoiding reactions that would result in a negative outcome' is a career burden often experienced by Indigenous bureaucrats. Participants in this research affirm that view:

I've got to demonstrate that as an Aboriginal person that I'm not a slacker, even if that non-Indigenous person is doing that I need to demonstrate that we're not tarred with the same brush, because I didn't want anybody to think that as a black person they would say "Oh yeah, they're slack". I've always worked solidly anyway but I just made a point of making sure that they couldn't do that type of correlation.

This is a very competitive place it's hard. You've got to really bring your A game every day really and it's not helped if you have assumptions made about your ability or people don't fully understand you or your perspectives or where you've come from.

This extends to repercussions for 'pushing back' against examples of prejudice:

When you actually challenge some of the injustices then you are slapped with 'you've got a bad attitude'. And they'll hit you with the whole APS Code of Conduct, but can't

actually articulate to you where, how and why it's a breach. I've watched a lot of really good staff that I admire, where I thought 'buddy stop looking [i.e. in the code], it's not you. You are looking for something that doesn't exist.'

Other additional burdens raised by participants that reflect those appearing in other studies include an assumption that Indigenous public servants are required to explain relevant aspects of cultural realities to non-Indigenous colleagues, and contending with stereotypes concerning 'real' or 'true' Indigenous status, especially in relation to physical appearance (Leitch 2017 p.2; Watkin 2001, p.33):

I have had to educate people when they say things like 'oh, you're one of the good ones' or 'you wouldn't think you were Aboriginal, because you are so blah, blah, blah'. And that is where I feel that the walking in two worlds has made a huge impact to me, because personally it takes me back, but … that's where I try to use that as an opportunity to educate someone.

One of the paradoxes I think is an issue is that in particularly Indigenous focused areas of work Indigenous staff are more likely to encounter what they might call racism, than maybe in other areas. I mean racism in a soft sense, of something which is misperceptions, misunderstandings, crude understanding of identity issues; because in a workplace which is focused on Indigenous issues the Indigenous issues are the subject of the conversation. So it's probably more likely that they are going to hear or mishear what an EL1 non-Indigenous EL1 or an APS6 is saying about a particular topic. So that kind of casual racism is in the workplaces which have a focus for Indigenous culture – [but] workplaces probably don't tackle those sorts of issues well.

Lateral violence [can] occur in an Indigenous employee network, because you don't look black enough, or they don't know your cultural identity, necessarily, and they question your identity in front of you, behind your back, all sorts of different things, and that probably can impact on an individual.

A third career barrier that is closely aligned with preconception and prejudice is the tendency for Indigenous public servants to be pigeon-holed into certain fields, in particular Indigenous services and policy:

There's a lot of Indigenous people working on Indigenous issues, or in roles like mine, which are good because you need people who can relate, but at the same time I think sometimes people are pigeon-holed into those kinds of positions.

On this point participants once again reinforced the persistence of a problem in public service settings already noted in by earlier research (Watkin, 2001, p.33), one that involves an Indigenous perspective being viewed primarily as relevant to Indigenous affairs, rather than being able to contribute to policy and program areas more broadly.

I did start to notice that because I had branched so far away from my original home in an Indigenous [area] which is where I fit neatly into a silo – into a [different] sort of a role; Indigenous people in Indigenous [areas] is something that a lot of people can get their heads around but Indigenous people working on [non-Indigenous/mainstream area] not so much. … I think it makes it more difficult to progress and everyone says, oh we want Indigenous people working here, there, and everywhere but in reality they quite often want Indigenous people working in this particular area or this particular area so you end up with careers in human resources

or business affairs or some kind of Indigenous policy area or something and it's much harder to take your career off elsewhere.

An Indigenous area is more specialised, so the opportunities are less. But more than often it's – because you've got to really develop – it's really competitive too, and you've got to compete hard with non-Indigenous officers for those positions. And you really need more experience – if you want to – there's more opportunity for promotion to SES outside of Indigenous Affairs, because there's just a lot more range. And you've just got to look around and see where our Indigenous staff are working.

A related consequence highlighted by participants is an overrepresentation of Indigenous people in administrative role and not policy roles. One person emphasised the greater value the APS seems to accord Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are outside the public service (sometimes hired as consultants) over those occupying senior levels within it:

There's a culture the public service constructs that seems to inhibit the value-add that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can bring, and that is evident by the fact that we place more value on people when they leave the public service than when they're in it. Because a lot of people that are national – that consult nationally, they couldn't get an SES job in the public service and now they're consulting Prime Ministers. I just think it's crazy.

Ironically, one participant described what they termed 'reverse pigeonholing', being seen as too disconnected from community to be effective:

Now that I've worked outside for so long and there's the reverse pigeonholing. … Which is, 'oh, you – you're not really – you haven't been involved in the community for a while, what can you really offer? You work in this other area.' But actually there's a lot of opportunity for crossover.

Poor Management Practices

A central aspect of poor management practice which most participants' drew attention to as a barrier to career progression involved deficiencies in communication, in particular, a lack of constructive feedback on work performance. This included non-Indigenous managers being reluctant to discuss performance with Indigenous employees specifically (perhaps as a result of confusion or misunderstanding concerning potential cultural issues), as well as those who just seem to lack critical management skills in this area:

Part of the problem is, they're all too scared to have a conversation with us, whereas we got to these levels for a reason, we're happy to have a rigorous conversation. I think the thing which shows me the complete lack of value is that nobody actually has a conversation, nobody has the courage to say, "You know what, we see you as valuable here, what can we do?"

If I had any issues I could email him and he would meet with me within a day or two, whereas my direct line manager, if I wanted to meet with her it would take three weeks and it would usually get cancelled anyway. Since I was in that role I never had performance feedback, I was there for 18 months, not once, and I asked… I had [my Performance Development Plan] in the system and then she just approved it while I was on holidays, she just ticked the box. Didn't have a conversation with me and then

when I got back I said to her, "I'm a new EL2, I don't need you to hold my hand but I would like some performance feedback so at least I know if I'm doing a good job or not".

People at the Executive level don't have people skills. They don't know how to engage with staff. They're frightened. We need the open and honest feedback, because if we're not doing well, we shouldn't be given jobs.

A related point which speaks to APS culture more generally concerned a lack of recognition for performing particularly complex or difficult work that while necessary, may not be in a high profile policy area:

They don't recognise hard work yet we all expect that they should, and they don't. Hard work is generally you've got a difficult role, it's a mongrel, and no one's going to give you any recognition for it whatsoever, but you do it and then you get rewarded. That's how it works. Because the hard work is actually generally closing something, doing something that isn't popular, you're still a public servant, you're still doing the work of government, but you'll never get recognition for that. But do something that is good and is topical, and is government flavour of the day, you get rewarded. I don't mean just from government in terms of public service medals and stuff, but your executive. That's what speaks loudest.

Another barrier involved managers or supervisors who failed to offer support for engaging in forms of work activity and experience-building that directly assist in career advancement:

An unsupportive manager – you're not invited to the inner circle to go to the meetings. You don't get all the unspoken context, or the spoken context that doesn't get recorded in those official meetings, the committees, the briefings or the debriefings. You don't get access to that, don't get the flavour and the change and then you don't look professional, because you don't look like you know what is going on because you are not in the inner circle.

Even people that are doing all these initiatives for government, they're saying we're just another tick in the box to say this department has recruited X amount of Indigenous people. Once we're in there they give us no support, and even when we're matched to the position, they don't match us to the skills that we have, to the department that we should be going to. There's no real training on the job, there's no support. I feel for them.

The latter echoes a finding in Watkin (2001, p.26) who raised situations where the support provided by supervisor at work level was not consistent with the priorities espoused by department heads.

A lack of transparency in appointments was a concern raised by the majority of participants, with many also feeling that there were inadequate mechanisms for providing positive, proactive and forward-looking responses to internal candidates who are unsuccessful in applying for promotion. This is particularly important for Indigenous public servants given their awareness of dynamics of preconceptions, pigeonholing and prejudice mentioned previously:

I think there are always issues of local transparency around appointments, how they [selections] get made. If you don't have a keen eye on transparency you then create perceptions of people getting opportunities or not getting opportunities, which sometimes gets seen through the lens of Aboriginality.

I don't think we organise ourselves well around the ripple effects. So I know that for the ones I've reached out to, and offered them support and advice but as for structured business approaches to how we manage people who missed out on promotion … we haven't set up a formal structure of saying, "Okay, where did you go wrong? Where do you need to improve?" and putting together a development plan and the things they need to do. I think what happens is, often the person themselves is deflated, upset, probably not ready for some feedback, probably not even going to seek it, but we need to have an approach because guess what? Sometimes it's not because you're a failure you missed out, and I often say this to people, there were three people and you are all good, it's just that somebody was better, so I don't want you to go – we actually as an organisation want you to apply again. I think if we don't do that with our people there's a real risk they say, "I was no good, I'm out of here" when in actual fact we need to say, "No, you were good, there's just somebody better".

Participants drew attention to deficiencies in feedback following a failed attempt to progress one's career through seeking promotion or posting, as well as to a lack of clarity surrounding the use of merit lists:

So it's not tailored – they do up a report, one generic report, and so the details of other candidates are redacted. So you'll get to see where you are on the list, where you came. You know, highly suitable, suitable, not suitable, on the list. And then they have comments at the bottom, which are redacted where the panel said your name specifically. If you were highly competitive for the [opportunity] then you would see that, but it would be redacted. So, it's not really very good feedback, and the process is very opaque. It often means that because there's not a better articulation of why a person got a job over another person, sometimes it can lead to some people spiraling into, you know, kind of 'oh why not me', and 'what am I doing wrong', and that kind of doubt.

There's a merit list there, but they're not using it. There's no guarantee that they're going to use it. Now I've been found suitable at a [level x] across the APS but there's no guarantee that's actually going to be used.

Inadequate commitment to diversity

The sixth and final area of obstructions to career progression identified by participants speaks to a need for broad institutional change in the APS in relation to strengthening its operational commitments to diversity across the organisation:

We talk about diversity within the APS and the reality is we don't practice it, and I don't think we understand as a bureaucracy how to support our staff and how do we best leverage that diversity? The importance of building and maintaining relationships, even if it's not immediately part of your role is critical when we as Aboriginal staff are utilised to either provide advice on engagement and complex policy issues or to drive that engagement, yet it's not supported.

People don't realise how big a gap there is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and particularly in rural, regional, remote areas that when we employ people, the very big gap between what they grow up with culturally or what we grow up with culturally and then how bureaucracy operates. That I think is one of the biggest

barriers and it is one that is unseen for people being able to function within bureaucracy. … There is not even a recognition that is there. There is an assumption that because you're born in Australia, you grow up here. Somehow, you're part of the broader culture… But ours is a different culture.

Within this broader commitment, nearly all participants in the study emphasised the importance of the APS explicitly articulating the value that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people bring to the public service, and for greater attention to embedding this positive affirmation of value across all levels in individual departments and agencies:

Proactive recruitment and retention programs are very important but still suffer from a lack of commitment from middle management. Most department heads are committed, but in my experience the commitment dissipates the further down the line you go. Band 1s and EL2s are the major blockage – they're most likely to recruit people 'in their image'. They are also the most likely to indulge in cronyism. Until the APS really gets the 'value proposition' i.e. what Indigenous people bring to the APS, then all we'll receive is halfhearted paternalism.

A fundamental aspect of such a process of 'opening up' the APS to a genuine embrace of diversity was sometimes linked to challenging processes of institutional renewal and cultural change in the APS as an institution:

[Indigenous public servants] don't know all the [APS] traditions – so there's all the risks of making an error. And then you look around and because of the power of the foundations and the genesis of it, it still dominates, despite people's open intellectualisation around inclusion it is still – and it's not them, it's the system. The system has been founded in something that if it was founded today it would be founded in something different. And so how do you actually re-engineer the foundations of a system?

In a Canadian civil service context, Dwyer (2003 p.3) has noted the potential difficulties for Indigenous individuals drawing on specific culturally-based values working in an organisation where western values and norms dominate. An example of this effect in an Australian setting is raised by Stewart & Warn (2016, p.10, who highlight the persistent problems Indigenous public servants experience in having their special skills and expertise recognised. Participants in this study raised this concern primarily in regard to styles of communication and leadership:

I think there are issues with culture and departments that make people want to leave, there are issues with lack of understanding of Indigenous communication styles and leadership styles, all of that [acts as] blockers [to career progression].

These issues were associated for example with the framing of selection criteria, which are viewed as frequently failing to sufficiently convey or endorse the value of the specific skill-sets and capabilities associated with Indigenous people:

We recruit – not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander – we recruit diversity groups for an aspiration that we never utilise – or we hardly utilise and we don't place a value on that … Some agencies say that we want Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to come into our organisation because we value their contribution. And then

we have the selection criteria that talks about sound financial management, you know, sound written skills, sound communication – whatever it is. So the criteria is your standard public service value based with no value base on what they supposedly say they're looking for in terms of diversity. … I just find it bizarre that you want an accountant you put something in your criteria around accountancy skills. … You want an economist it will be something around economic skills. … When you're looking for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people very rarely would you find anything that actually signals to the market but also assesses them against the value-add.

Similarly, one participant spoke of the lack of institutional recognition or reward in the APS for successful community or stakeholder engagement, one of the key areas of strength (networking, negotiation, relationship-building) that many Indigenous people bring to their work in the public sector:

We really don't reward – I haven't seen a public service medal [being awarded] for stakeholder engagement. I've seen a lot of public service medals for non-Indigenous people who've played roles in agencies in and around Indigenous service delivery, or Indigenous policy, but I haven't seen a lot of the other. Yet we say we want Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander so we can do more engagement, yet we don't actually recognise it. I think there's this dissonance, there's these conflicting messages between what we want and what we try and recruit to, and what we actually reward and will progress and recognise.

Stewart & Warn (2016, pp. 14-15) have noted that 'dissonance' of this kind have real implications for Indigenous public servants seeking to advance their careers: 'success may be difficult to demonstrate in competitive situations where other managers may be able to point to accepted performance indicators'.

A closely related issue concerns the potential for a misreading of bureaucratic culture by Indigenous people, to their career detriment:

I see a lot of misreading of scenarios in the workplace and usually, as is with any minority group, Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people come off second best, 9.9 times out of 10 when situations are misread.

One example highlighted by a number of participants (and is also reflected in the literature) was a reluctance to praise one's own skills and accomplishments, despite this being an established norm in public service:

Some of our stuff is culturally based and not having the ability to express ourselves. We're not very good at selling ourselves. We're not very good at writing and talking and using the words we need to use, because we haven't been brought up that way.

Part of that Talent Program, I did a 360 degree feedback, and one of them was that in our Directors' meetings I should speak up more about things that aren't just my area of expertise [but] I wasn't raised to just talk for the sake of hearing my voice. There's this expectation that you will talk and you will have all the knowledge and all that kind of stuff whereas a lot of blackfellas don't do that, they sit back and they wait and if they have something to say they will say it, and I think that's something that managers don't necessarily understand and then they mistake people for being shy or not knowledgeable or not confident and then it blocks them from getting to the next level.

Again, the message conveyed is not one of being valued as an Indigenous person, or of the clear availability of diverse routes for career development and progression that include building on the specific strengths Indigenous public servants may well bring to their role (as an alternative to focusing on normative deficits). This is not to overlook the many examples of Indigenous public servants that have been able to navigate their way through such a complex array of difficulties and successfully progress their careers to a high level. A notable focus among some of the more senior level participants in this study was to assist Indigenous colleagues in accomplishing this:

> *I've got a lot of friends at [senior levels] who […] confuse their role between the political arm and the administrative arm. And it's really hard at this level not to do that because as I said there's a big difference in being politically savvy and being political and our job is to be politically savvy not political. Particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who have this innate advocacy disposition based on injustice. And this incredible passion to do things for the mob and get it done – to change a deficit discourse that can be quite confusing for people to traverse.*

> *My focus, partially as I am getting to the back end of my time in the public service, has really been about focusing on the people themselves, to build their capability and we talk like that. Also, to take it away from a deficit model that many Indigenous issues are viewed from. So, that is one of my eternal sources of frustration, but you have got to carefully address that, but for our [Indigenous] staff to say well, it is okay. In our cultural context, remember we're family and community, and this is how we do things and there is nothing wrong with that. That is how we do things and that is what we value.*

Participants generally raised concerns about a lack of systematic efforts to foster leadership talent among Indigenous people. Both Watkin (2001, p.29) and Stewart & Warn (2016, p.14) identify shortcomings in available models of leadership in public service settings and maintain that a lack of articulating and promoting more diverse models of leadership (for example, through formal career development programs) represents an obstacle for career advancement among Indigenous people in the public sector. Many of the participants in this study agreed:

> *What would have kept me would have been that value, that sense of structure for my career development, for someone to sit back and go, "You know what, we actually see you as a valuable commodity here within the APS and what do we need to do to diversify and grow that? How do we build you? Where are your career aspirations? How do we help to create a pathway that enables you to do that?"*

> *Just what will it take for the public service commission, or the public service to be an employer of choice where career progression is available to all, with clear expectations and understanding of how you might progress? You know, so put the onus back on the employer to do it.*

Discussion - Unique Indigenous Experience

The question of which aspects of the barriers and enablers detailed in the preceding sections might be considered *unique* to Indigenous public servants is a challenging one in the absence of parallel comparative research among non-Indigenous APS employees.

Substantial overlap in career experiences likely exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous public servants. For example, when considering that mentoring by senior colleagues has played an important role in advancement (p.9), or identifying a need for active career planning, including building a personal profile and varied skillset (pp. 6-7). As one study participant previously pointed out (p.13) a good supervisor and manager who works to foster growth and confidence among their employees will be assisting the career progression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples without needing to adopt an Indigenous-specific approach.

Where senior managers demonstrate awareness and valuing of cultural diversity this might be expected to facilitate strong and positive relationships (p.12) with people from a range of minority cultural and ethnic backgrounds, not only Indigenous peoples. And equally, all public servants from minority populations doubtless benefit from seeing members of their group represented at senior levels – gaining a tangible sense that pathways to advancement do exist (p.16).

Institutional biases

At the same time participants did raise several elements that have particular relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A prominent example was the perception of the APS as overly 'Canberra-centric' in character, with limited opportunities for career progression in regional and remote locales disadvantaging Indigenous public servants in these areas unwilling or unable to relocate as a result of local cultural obligations such as connection to kin and to Country (p.20).

Family responsibilities linked to a wide set of kin can also lend special importance to adequate provision of flexible leave and work arrangements for Indigenous peoples (pp.17; 22), while accountability to the expectations of family, community and/or Indigenous organisations can have an impact on willingness to advance to higher positions as involving greater personal association with the impacts of government policy (p.22).

Participants also highlighted the effects of unrecognised institutional biases and ethnocentrism, resulting in instances of career pigeonholing, a conscious sense of having to act to counteract stereotypes and foster a positive image of Indigenous peoples. An additional area of difficulty included assumptions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will correct non-Indigenous colleagues' misunderstandings or misperceptions about aspects of Indigenous cultural realities, all of which can engender feelings of

isolation (pp.23-5). They might also be expected to contribute their own cultural knowledge or that of their networks without recognition or reward – leading to feelings of being exploited.

It is the *combination* of these factors which might be said to constitute a unique career experience and have specific career effects for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the APS. One Indigenous scholar recently described this in terms of a distinctive 'career burden' faced by Indigenous public servants (Leitch 2017, p.2). However, there is some risk such a concept might be approached through the pervasive 'deficit discourse' prism which encourages a view of problems as residing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as against the systems and structures in which people are embedded (Fogarty et.al. 2018:vi). This deficit paradigm is increasingly being rejected as unhelpful, with a range of alternate frameworks including strengths-based approaches emerging as more useful and constructive.

A different expression, that of living in 'two worlds' is more neutral, appears regularly in the literature, and also directly reflects a widely shared concept among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of their distinctive situation. These comprise the social and cultural contexts of Indigenous family and community in contrast to those of the historically dominant non-Indigenous majority, with the institutional culture of public bureaucracies firmly linked to the latter (e.g. Watkin 2001; Stewart & Warn 2016; ANZOG 2018). Ganter (2016, p.66) quotes one of her research participants in the NTPS describing herself as a 'messenger between both worlds', while research with Indigenous public servants in NSW raises the notion of wearing 'two hats' (as community member and public servant) (Dreise 2017).

Engaging with Two Worlds

Given its established prominence, this study deliberately explored the relevance of the 'two worlds' concept with each interviewee in relation to their own career as a public servant. There was strong recognition among participants of the salience of this idea to their experiences in the APS (and more generally). One participant also referred to a notion of 'learning to walk in both camps'; and a few participants suggested that 'three' or even 'four' worlds was a more accurate description:

> *You have to be able to walk in both worlds and be able to manage that really well and hold your own.*

> *Learn how to walk in both camps. Because it's really hard being a public servant when its perceived by some communities about you working for government, and that if something goes wrong in your community you are therefore responsible for fixing it, even though you're not even working in that department or have any influence. … It's about learning how to wear which hat at what time.*

It is a real big thing within the public service, the balance between public service and being a good public servant and being an Indigenous person, family, culture, all of that.

You're a bureaucrat, a public servant first but we walk in three worlds … our public service world, our community world and our family world.

Participants approached the two worlds issue in a variety of ways. Most worked to maintain a separation of the APS world from the dynamics of family and/or community. For some, this involved experiences of compromise and even at times, sacrifice. All felt that there were ongoing challenges involved:

You have to be a bit of a chameleon. I still stay authentic and true to myself but depending on who I'm talking to I change communication style to suit my audience. … because we work in this bureaucracy, things have to be done a certain way, they have to be written a certain way and I think it's a struggle because people feel like if they do change too much they're not still being authentic.

I don't walk in both worlds at the same time. I have my family and then I have my work. So they don't really cross over too much. They have crossed over at times, but I try and keep it separate. It makes it too difficult.

I think sometimes we have to sacrifice ourselves in order to get to where we want to go or be the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander public servant that they want us to be not the one that they kind of don't want us to be which is the one that speaks up.

It needs to be acknowledged that the two world experience can be particularly acute for those who are closely connected to regional locales or have extensive local networks:

If you have some sort of family connection, if you're from the region … sometimes making those harder decisions of 'no, you've been declined for this' or 'we can't help you with that', those sorts of things have repercussions for you outside of the work office.

A compelling finding to emerge from the interviews is that the experience of dealing with 'two worlds' was not viewed in terms of simply representing a career burden or barrier to progression, but was also seen as a source of strength and motivation to make a positive contribution towards better outcomes for Indigenous people whatever the difficulties:

It's difficult. It's just sort of thrown about and it's just like "oh yeah, well mortality is this" [i.e. statistical figures] and yeah it depends on how you're feeling on the day but sometimes it can affect you, because of the trauma and you're looking at your family and it's personal, and in terms of walking in the two worlds, you know wearing both of those hats. I see it as a strength too.

The cultural identity and walking in two worlds is a massive part of how that stuff is embedded into every conversation that we have.

I encourage us to be bi-cultural, learn to walk in both worlds – the public servant world, and our community because we're Indigenous 24 hours a days. We're public servants for this much of our lives and when we're not needed, we'll be retrenched, redundant, VR'd so we need to make sure that this isn't the only thing that defines us and keep true to ourselves and keep strong.

The experience of two worlds can be understood as offering a vital driver for people to enter the APS, providing a source of support from communities, families and Indigenous networks (including those within the APS); providing a persistent touchstone for one's involvement in APS employment in continuing to seek to make a difference including by progressing to senior ranks.

> *I walk between two worlds easily. So, I come from a cultural background, I have a strong cultural heritage but if you're not effective in walking between both worlds, then you can't succeed. Not just as an employee, but actually in anything advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.*

A sense of living in two (or more) worlds can form part of everyday experience for all Indigenous peoples in contemporary Australia. The extent to which this might be either a career barrier or enabler in the APS environment very much depends on institutional messages communicated to Indigenous employees both formally and informally: to what extent are active efforts being made to welcome and embrace cultural diversity as a significant and important resource to the APS? How evident is it to Indigenous employees that the APS takes serious account of the potential value of the experiences, insights and unique perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in formulating policy and delivering outcomes?

Moving Forward – building the 'value proposition'

A clear message that emerged among participants in this study was that while Indigenous public servants often face obstacles or barriers to career progression – some aspects of which can be conceived as more or less distinctive to the general situation of Indigenous peoples – a general preference in moving forward is to focus far more on the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants and the significance of their contribution to the work of the APS. Participants maintained this requires a clearer institutional recognition of the value (actual and potential) of Indigenous public servants, along with far greater dissemination and embedding of such recognition as a *positive rationale or business case* for APS efforts to employ and advance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants.

Currently the case for employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in public service tends to emphasise negative or neutral terms:

- to ameliorate disadvantage (the negative case)

- to achieve numerical 'representation' (the neutral case)

Neither proposition clearly articulates a *positive case* concerning the value that Indigenous peoples bring and the range of benefits they provide to the goals and work of the APS. Movement towards a clear valuing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the APS was seen by participants as being critically important. Creating a compelling case for employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a positive move towards this. An approach to doing so could involve developing some form of Value Proposition:

> *What it would take is for the public service and its agencies to recognise the unique value that public servants of Indigenous background and Indigenous knowledge.*
>
> *Until the APS really gets the 'value proposition', i.e. what Indigenous people bring to the APS, then all we'll receive is half-hearted paternalism.*

Interview participants identified a variety of distinctive strengths and skills that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples bring to their role as public servants, focusing on:

- a stewardship approach and commitment to working for a greater good

- the beneficial contributions of cultural knowledge and cultural identity

- possessing a range of soft skills, including developed capacities for networking and collaboration along with resilience and humour

- Indigenous styles of leadership

Clearly, not every individual will possess all these qualities in the same combination or at every stage of their career. These reflections are intended as offering some insights and

guidance to assist future efforts towards shaping a positive value proposition in the APS in relation to employing Indigenous public servants.

Stewardship & working for a greater good

Participants affirmed that a 'passion to serve the mob' formed a key motivation to work in the APS. Making a difference through their job was seen as a way to give back to their community. It was also seen as important to have an Indigenous voice at the table. As a result, the elements of care, responsibility and trust central to ideas of stewardship were often spoken about:

> *I had no lack of support to make me understand and encourage me to work every day for the benefit of my community. The passion to serve the mob is there.*

> *When you think about the concept of stewardship and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, it's an innate skill that we have about custodianship and that's why I think the public sector is such a great job for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people because they get custodianship. It's that ability to be able to learn from the past to steward the present to set up for the future, that is one of the most incredible intuitive things that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have.*

> *Having an Indigenous voice and somebody that has the understanding of those issues is better placed to create opportunities for Indigenous people to grow, just because they'll have a bit more of a historical knowledge of what's happened. They'll draw on their family experiences, and information that they've gathered from listening to their elders, aunties and uncles.*

> *We don't go home at 5.00 and stop working in Indigenous Affairs, we are motivated to get the best because we can relate policy outcomes to our families, communities, to broader people, networks, whereas non-Indigenous people think about the government of the day. If we bring the best out of our Indigenous staff, there's actually value in their lived experiences. As much as we value a formal education, I'm lucky I have both.*

Cultural knowledge and cultural identity

Participants expressed strong views that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture could and should be valued further within the APS as contributing in a number of different ways, including pertinent cultural knowledge, lived experience, and stakeholder communication and engagement.

> *So the same skills as everybody else plus all of that understanding about how culture and community work. All of the nuances that non-Indigenous people don't get even if they're really skilled in the area there's just some things that they may never understand because it's not something they've been exposed to. It brings perspective to the way we can do our work that is fundamentally different to other people. So if we're working on Indigenous issues or even if we're not working on Indigenous issues, we just have a different perspective and that richness of the perspectives is what we bring to the workplace.*

Beyond the obvious of Indigenous servicing and particularly design, if you don't have Indigenous people in an organisation that has some responsibility for Indigenous clients, if you do not have Indigenous people in a strategic setting, shaping and managing strategy then you are missing a great opportunity.

They bring an understanding of culture and knowledge in terms of how to actually interact, deal, work with people in community because people come from a particular place they know all the nuances, they know who the particular key players are. So, they're able to facilitate meetings or work or introduce new policies or programs in a much more culturally responsive manner.

We as Indigenous staff know what the issues are. We know what the barriers are. We know what we should be saying in being able to interpret it into what we think the policy matter is but how do we translate that into writing – that's a real skill.

It's one thing to have an Indigenous background, another to have Indigenous knowledge, so let's not confuse the two, they don't always come as a package … What are those unique knowledges? Well, it's kind of what you get with a generic APS, EL or SES officer, plus an organically, biologically, community connected individual in addition to their formal academic and scholarly kind of experience in policy. Because you've got to be good at both.

Soft skills

A depth of acquired soft skills was highlighted by participants as a largely unrecognised area of ability among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The range of skills includes observation and reading body language, along with workplace networking and collaboration.

I have a really good set of soft skills as most Indigenous people do, and those soft skills are about reading a room, being polite, respectful, being assertive when we need to.

Networking and collaborating

A tangible benefit in employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is the extensive network they often bring, built on lived experience and contacts. Networks have enormous value throughout a public service career in sounding out ideas and bringing forward more synthesised and nuanced advice in relation to various areas of work.

We are really good influencers and negotiators … we're spending thousands of dollars as the public service training managers to develop those soft skills, yet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have them naturally because culturally, some of our cultural norms is about that respectful engagement. That waiting, hearing the facts, engaging appropriately.

We actually have cultural skills from being a collective community that sets us up really well to be team players in the public service.

A very strong Indigenous presence means that you've got stronger reach in terms of a different set of relationships, ways of thinking and that's a capability to the service.

We know like the Murri grapevine, we know stuff that's happening.

You break up the norm, bring in different world views, a set of diverse life experiences and ways of thinking about problems [so that] together with other ways of thinking you actually produce more unique outcomes.

Resilience & Humour

A widespread use of humour was specifically raised by a number of participants as a positive element of Indigenous cultural identity and as important in fostering and maintaining resilience:

Humour is one of the things that Indigenous people utilise to best effect but you've got to be able to understand when to use it and when not to use it.

When you're working in Indigenous affairs it's always been a deficit. To have some humour is a good thing, it's just who we are and us as a culture.

We just bring our own perspective, we come from a place of truth, we're resilient and you need that in the public service for multiple reasons. The work that we do may have multiple set-backs, some of the people who you work with, the environments can be very toxic.

As an Indigenous person, you're really standing on the shoulders of your family, community and people and then just that commitment to be the best at public service, you need that perseverance, dedication and commitment over a long period of time, and that commitment to also put Indigenous issues, a part of the mainstream agenda and that's something that I've tried to do.

Leadership qualities

Increasingly, attention is given throughout the world to considering the distinctive characteristics of Indigenous leadership in the context of the public sector. A recent Australian and New Zealand forum identified such qualities as involving a 'more nuanced and broad, team-based and consultative approach' that prioritises 'responding to and uplifting others'. Indigenous leadership draws on a 'high-level capacity for associational thinking' and as a result 'makes Indigenous leaders highly empathic and good at problem solving' (ANZOG 2017:7).

Participants in this study echoed these characterisations in providing their own views about Indigenous styles of leadership. They agreed that vision or passion was a critical aspect, and alongside the necessity to be assertive at times and make judgement calls depending on the circumstances and situation, placed particular importance on being flexible and collegiate, motivating and supporting others to achieve.

I like to empower and bring people along with me. I like to provide people with the opportunity to excel, I'm big on communication.

I'm satisfied with my career, I'm happy or more focused on developing other people's career and seeing them succeed. That's my biggest accomplishment, and that's what I've been working with my team on now is helping them with their career development

and that's just because – being supportive and looking at their strengths and building on their skills and capabilities like someone did for me all those years ago.

Diverse teams were viewed as an asset, helping to ensure that there are minimal gaps in the collective capacity and that skill sets complement one another. The onus rested on the leader to ensure that the team was well equipped and prepared to deliver on the outcomes:

In the Public Service, this is what the values are, and what you need to be mindful of. It is explicit conversations and constant reinforcing of that, building the capability across Indigenous and non-Indigenous managers in particular and then with the hierarchy, cascading that down and we identify what the issue is. Putting our agency hat on, as a manager, so a bit of that situational leadership stuff. What is expected of us? That is what is required and there is context, and then what is the value-add we bring in from an Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander perspective.

Participants also suggested Indigenous leaders were willing to invest time and resources in their staff, often actively managing under-performing staff, and while viewing coaching and encouraging Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander employees as important applied this approach to non-Indigenous employees as well. Participants expressed a commitment to support staff even if they did not want to move up or out:

As a team leader, I made sure I knew what my staff did. You have to role model that you can do what they can do and demonstrate to them that you understand their work. Until that happens you're not going to earn your respect from any staff, because you're not going to earn it by just delegating.

One participant referred to this approach as a *circle of influence*: 'if you do it right, you build that at whatever level you're at'. Empathy was seen as a key characteristic:

Working in this space you come across people that have had trauma in their life. They feel safe asking me questions without fear of me judging them, being offended, or anything like that. So they felt safe to have some really challenging conversations with me because they knew I wouldn't judge them.

While the APS environment is a challenging one in terms of innovation, some participants saw opportunities emerging from Indigenous skills in relationship-building:

Indigenous people were being creative and innovative within the APS. When you do stuff up front it pays off. A lot of it you are not seeing. Efficiencies are made but the bureaucracy doesn't see that. Developing relationships in the beginning. People think it is easy. It is not, you have no idea the risks we're managing around the interests of the department. If you thought creatively and innovatively you could actually do stuff.

Where we can actually apply a different lens to a policy, or a program, or an engagement piece that means that it's going to be more inclusive, more open. People are going to feel safe to bring their ideas to the table. The way that our ancestors did business was there's a circle, yarning circles, all sorts of traditional things that you see in workplaces now, that people are actually trying to build those sorts of things in, but we've been doing it for thousands of years. And we do it in a respectful way.

Finally, a clear perspective emerged that Indigenous peoples' capacity for leadership should not be measured simply by classification level:

> *There may be other leaders who aren't necessarily at that level; they can be a leader in their community. From an APS perspective in terms of people's skills and abilities we're too focused on classification levels rather than what people can actually do.*

> *I think the default in this organisation and a lot of other organisations is formalised education, rather than the default in the organisation being lived experience to leadership. You can teach leadership. There's great leadership courses out there, but leadership really does come from the heart and one of the biggest things, especially as an Indigenous person in Indigenous Affairs is there's no clock off for us.*

Advice for the Next Generation

During the interviews participants were invited to offer advice that may assist the next generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in progressing their APS careers. They responded with generosity and enthusiasm, welcoming the opportunity to assist future Indigenous leaders. The following is a summary of key insights:

Develop Skills and Qualifications, Seek Opportunities

A central message is to take an active role in building your career:

In order to prosper you need to take a long term view of your career and to take responsibility for your own development.

To get ahead in the public service, you have to take strong responsibility in this. Don't wait for the department to do it for you. Don't expect that it's just going to fall into your lap. You need to actively manage that process and surround yourself with smart people to help you do that.

Education and lifelong learning is important; make use of universities and professional development courses within the APS (which are also an asset to careers elsewhere).

Be a sponge and soak up as much [as you can] in the early years.

Apply for all development opportunities available within the APS.

Take every opportunity that comes by. Don't be afraid to try it out. I try and build my network as much as possible because you never know … [it] could lead to something else.

Think of mistakes or challenges as a learning experience.

I always say 'Ask for more work. If you haven't got enough or you're not feeling challenged, put yourself out there and say 'Oh can I be involved in that?''

Build your Reputation and Networks

Networking plays a big role in APS careers:

It's really about your networks. Building a really solid brand for yourself.

You need a good reputation at work, professionally. You work hard, you're there, you're willing.

This is what Canberra is about, you've got to use your networks and go where people value you.

If someone asks you to do something even if you think 'that's not really my job' you still do it because that otherwise attaches to your reputation… At a lower level it might just be your team but as you start going up, the other Directors or the Assistant Secretaries will notice you. No matter what it is, say 'yep I'll take it on'. It might be completely outside your comfort zone but give it a go and be honest 'I haven't done it before but I'll give it a go'.

Develop Confidence and Self-Awareness

Confidence, pride and a healthy sense of self-worth is important to building your career:

You need to have that confidence about your own abilities … it doesn't mean that you think you're always right or you're always going to get it right because you can get it as wrong as anyone but in terms of your capabilities.

Seek out a range of Mentors and Coaches

Don't work in the APS without at least one mentor. Mentoring and support is critical to know how to handle different situations and a confidant who has your back.

You need a coach because a coach is someone who can also give you that frankness, and challenge your own thoughts, and giving you the reality of whatever the political landscape in the organisation is, and you need to know that.

My first mentor was my champion, he trusted me and put me forward for things … but you only get someone championing you if you can show you are proactive, interested, involved and you work hard.

Learn about the APS Environment

Know your environment and learn all you can about it to develop an appreciation of what you're coming into and bureaucratic culture.

Listen and watch for your first three to six months. …absorb everything that you can and try to make connections with everybody within your organisation. Find out what people do in your agency and how they get their job done.

You've got to be interested in being a public servant as well and what's happening in the public service. Follow what the APSC is saying, follow what [departments] are doing in the diversity space, the future of work, so these bigger questions that get your head beyond just your own level, your office or department, just thinking about your place in the public service.

There are risks in being in one department for your whole career, I think it gives you a very blinkered view of all the public services in the world, so go and do a stint in PM&C or something like that at some point, or the APSC.

Keep your life balanced and work in perspective

There's rules to being a good public servant and they're not always harmonious with being a good Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person. You've got to find that balance.

You're an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person in that bureaucracy but you're a public servant and that's at odds with you many times. What are you going to do? How are you going to rise above that? How are you going to be apolitical? How are you going to be resilient? What support are you going to seek?

If you are committed and want to be here and want to do the right thing then the opportunities will open up for you. But if you are here for the wrong reasons or you know that it's not right for you and … you don't come to terms with that then it's a real struggle and you won't enjoy the journey.

Be proud of who you are... Own who you are and know who you are and where you come from and have self-pride, don't water it down for anybody.

Pay respect to those people who have been here and fought for things before you got here, because life wasn't always this easy in the APS.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1

Table A: Employee Location by State

	ACT	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	Over-seas
Numbers	57,115	27,870	25,531	16,995	9,979	6,963	3,694	2,016	1,471
%	37.9%	18.5%	17%	11.3%	6%	4.6%	2.5%	1.3%	1%

Total Number of Employees – 150,594

Table B: Employee Location by Capital City/Regional Areas

	ACT 37.9%	NSW 18.5%	VIC 17%	QLD 11.3%	SA 6%	WA 4.6%	TAS 2.5%	NT 1.3%
Capital City	100	68.2%	82.4%	68.9%	96.2%	86.7%	84.7%	63.8%
Regional Areas	0	31.8%	17.6%	31.1%	3.8%	13.3%	15.3%	36.2%

Source - APSED, June 2018

Table C: All Employees: location by base classification and employment category highlighting proportion of employees located in Canberra (ACT) at different levels

Location	Classification													Total
	Trainee	Graduate	APS 1	APS 2	APS 3	APS 4	APS 5	APS 6	EL 1	EL 2	SES 1	SES 2	SES 3	
Australian Capital Territory	196 (29%)	971 (81%)	556 (19%)	751 (16%)	1977 (11%)	5689 (19%)	7897 (38%)	14998 (45%)	15404 (60%)	6745 (57%)	1404 (70%)	421 (76%)	106 (85%)	57115
New South Wales	55	50	886	1545	4938	7445	3613	5038	2698	1404	151	46	1	27870
Victoria	148	107	480	996	4014	5979	3409	5315	3211	1635	183	48	6	25531
Queensland	131	28	360	654	2837	4742	2507	3266	1692	656	74	8	.	16955
South Australia	44	22	111	375	1322	2044	1328	1972	1148	577	30	6	.	8979
Western Australia	76	7	213	190	1579	1867	995	1144	624	236	32	.	.	6963
Tasmania	4	2	47	220	609	1244	491	646	281	141	8	1	.	3694
Northern Territory	28	6	236	65	323	434	349	327	188	53	7	.	.	2016
Overseas	.	5	.	.	11	14	260	275	426	314	128	27	11	1471
Total	682	1198	2889	4796	17610	29458	20849	32981	25672	11761	2017	557	124	150594

Source: APSED, June 2018 Statistical Bulletin