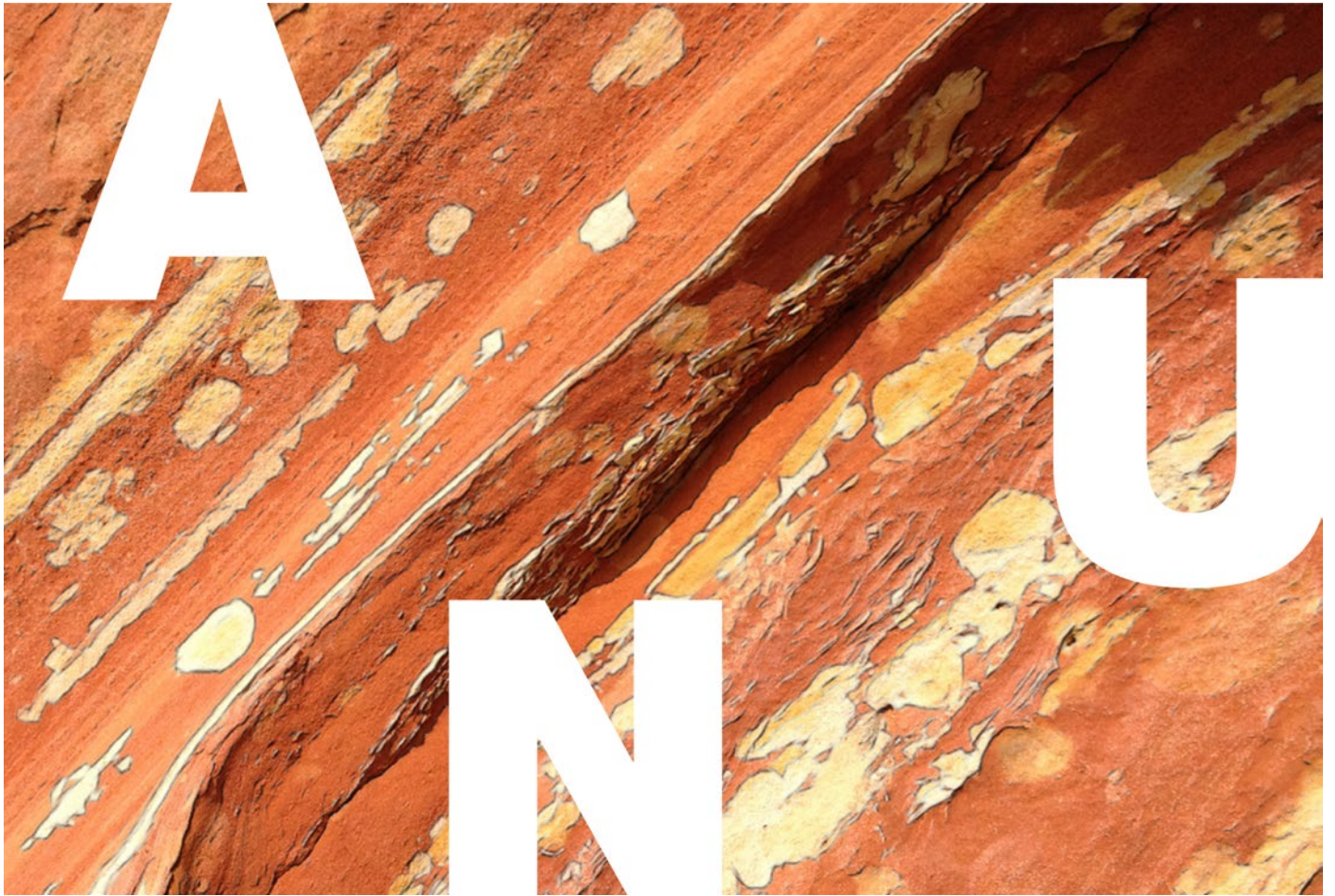




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UNDERSTANDING ABORIGINAL AND
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EMPLOYEE
DECISIONS TO EXIT THE AUSTRALIAN
PUBLIC SERVICE

N. BIDDLE AND J. LAHN

Centre for
Aboriginal Economic
Policy Research
ANU College of
Arts & Social
Sciences

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Understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee decisions to exit the Australian Public Service

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Abstract

Despite some success in recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the Australian Public Service (APS), the long-term trend is one of declining representation. A fundamental issue is that rates of separation among Indigenous public servants remain consistently greater than those of their non-Indigenous counterparts. The research presented here seeks to understand the reasons Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees opt to leave the APS. Drawing on the analysis of existing datasets, and original interviews with former and current APS employees, the findings presented here offer insights into the key factors involved in APS employment. The paper also raises important implications for strategies that aim to increase rates of Indigenous employment in the APS.

Keywords: public servants, census, qualitative, labour market, discrimination

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Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACLD	Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset
ANU	The Australian National University
APS	Australian Public Service
APSC	Australian Public Service Commission
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
IAS	Indigenous Advancement Strategy
MoG	machinery of government
NGO	nongovernment organisation
PM&C	Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

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Introduction and overview

There has been a fluctuating representation of Indigenous Australians in the Australian Public Service (APS) (ANAO 2014). At 30 June 2015, 2.6% of the total APS workforce identified as Indigenous, down from 2.8% in 2002, but up from 2.3% in 2013 (APSC 2015). According to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) projections as of June 2015, there were about 730 000 Indigenous people in Australia, or 3.1% of the population (ABS 2014).

Indigenous employees also continue to separate from the APS at a greater rate than their non-Indigenous counterparts. During 2012–13, there were 332 separations of ongoing Indigenous employees, representing an overall separation rate of 9.9%, compared with 6.3% for the APS overall. During 2011–12, the overall separation rate for Indigenous employees was nearly double the general APS rate. Resignation continues to be the most common separation type for Indigenous employees, representing 64.5% of Indigenous employee separations, compared with 46.3% for the broader APS. This was followed by retrenchments, with 17.5% of Indigenous employees separating in this way, compared with 27.9% for the APS overall.

Indigenous employees tend to separate earlier in their careers than non-Indigenous employees. During 2012–13, 20.5% of Indigenous employees who separated from the APS did so less than one year after engagement, almost four times the rate of non-Indigenous employees (5.9%). This rate increased from 16.5% in 2011–12.

The 2013 APS Employee Census found that, across a range of measures, Indigenous employees were engaged in APS employment at a slightly higher rate than non-Indigenous employees. And, despite the difference in separation rates, Indigenous employees are no more likely than non-Indigenous employees to indicate an immediate or short-term intention to leave their agency. The conundrum, therefore, is how to explain the more frequent separation of Indigenous employees.

The goal of this research project is to help understand why Indigenous public servants leave the APS. Information was sought on both push and pull factors, and any factors that might have influenced departing individuals to remain.

The paper is structured into five sections. After this introduction, we discuss the existing literature on Indigenous populations working in the public sector.

Although we focus on Australian literature, we also consider data from other countries, including Canada and New Zealand.

The third section discusses a new source of quantitative data – the Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset (ACLD). The analysis in this section aims to identify broad national patterns, key questions for further data collection and individuals from whom it is particularly important to obtain information. However, policy-relevant findings are also derived from analysis of secondary datasets.

The penultimate section of the paper presents the findings of a series of 34 semistructured interviews with current and former Indigenous APS employees. The primary focus of this section is to address the question of why Indigenous people make the decision to leave the APS.

The final section of the paper provides a summary and concluding comments. The main findings were that no single shared rationale emerged to explain the decision of Indigenous employees to exit the APS. Rather, research participants raised several difficulties that played a role in shaping their decision to exit, one or more of which may have acted as a final ‘trigger’ to depart.

Major themes in the existing literature

Research literature examining Indigenous experiences of employment in the APS is scant. This is unsurprising, given the dominant academic focus in Australia on circumstances of Indigenous disadvantage, and on rural and remote community settings, where less opportunity exists for professional employment. This mirrors the situation internationally, with only a small number of qualitative or quantitative studies of Indigenous employees in government having appeared, notably in New Zealand (e.g. Durie 2003, Ryan et al. 2014), Canada (e.g. Dwyer 2003, Treasury Board of Canada 2014) and, most recently, Chile (Radcliffe 2015).

This situation is changing, however, with emerging research concerning Indigenous populations in urban contexts, most clearly in Canada (e.g. Peters & Anderson 2013), but also in Australia (e.g. Morgan 2006, Taylor 2013). As a result, Indigenous experiences of urban employment, of social mobility and, more specifically, of involvement in professional forms of work are also beginning to come into focus (e.g. Taylor et al. 2012, Lahn 2013), alongside studies of Indigenous involvement in particular professions such as nursing (e.g. Usher et al. 2005) and medicine (Anderson & Lavalley 2007).

Additionally, Indigenous professionals themselves are becoming more visible through the development of their own representative bodies and associations (e.g. the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association). As a number of workplaces across a variety of sectors (e.g. banking, mining) are identifying Indigenous employment as a priority, increasing attention is being given to the development of suitable engagement and retention strategies, creating demand for relevant research (e.g. Constable 2009, Constable et al. 2013, Daly et al. 2013, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry 2014).

Academic studies of Indigenous experiences in public service agencies are also beginning to emerge, notably, two Australian PhD theses (Ganter 2010, Larkin 2013; see also Ganter 2011, Ganter in press). Ganter 2010 and Larkin 2013 feature in-depth interviews with Indigenous public servants, and both researchers have many years of experience working within the public service. Their work provides crucial insight into experiences of being Indigenous in the public service and the various pressures that contribute to exit of Indigenous people from the sector.

A small number of additional studies address aspects of Indigenous Australian employment experiences in the federal and state public service contexts, but in considerably less detail (e.g. Sully 1997, Almond 2006, Briggs 2006, Barnett et al. 2008, McRae-Williams 2012). Of these, the Barnett et al. (2008) study is the most relevant for this paper because of its specific concern with identifying reasons for early exit from the South Australian public service, and potential measures that may assist the service to reach its (then) target of 2% Indigenous employment. Other research publications contain some material relevant to Indigenous experiences more generally in public sector employment, particularly in public health (e.g. Wakeman et al. 2000). There is also a growing body of literature that addresses issues of greater inclusion and respect for Indigenous people as part of commitments to workplace diversity, giving attention to strategies and frameworks for cultural awareness, and cultural competency training (e.g. Truong et al. 2014). This includes questions of supervision and support for Indigenous staff (e.g. Burgess & Dyer 2009; Scerra 2012).

The existing studies within the small body of academic literature do not specifically focus on the subject of the retention of Indigenous employees in the APS. Rather, the research to date – including that of Ganter and Larkin – tends to highlight a series of challenges in relation to Indigenous people's experiences of APS

employment. Nonetheless, information that potentially sheds light on issues of retention is, at times, embedded in this material. The following sections summarise thematically the key findings of the literature, highlighting the major areas of difficulty experienced by Indigenous APS employees.

Role modelling

Ganter's research with senior Indigenous bureaucrats in the Northern Territory public service suggests that they experienced a widespread expectation that they would act as 'role models', both by the community and by others within government (Ganter 2010:93–96). She noted that, although half of her 76 interviewees were 'comfortable' with role modelling, others were less willing to see themselves as speaking on behalf of Aboriginal people 'on the ground'. This group saw their speaking position rather as that of 'Aborigines positioned in the government' (Ganter 2010:205). Ethical dilemmas and other difficulties surrounding the representation of group views and interests, and what this might entail in Aboriginal terms, emerged as a key concern among the senior Indigenous public servants in Ganter's study. This was fundamental to understanding her participants' general experiences of employment in the public service and, often also, their decision to leave. Ganter notes:

... at the point where events conspired to leave them feeling inefficacious or illegitimate in ways they could attribute to their Aboriginality, some interviewees felt so cornered that they declined the representative invitation by deciding that it was better to leave the NTPS. (2010:169)

Cultural obligations

The literature about Indigenous people and work consistently emphasised the significance of cultural obligations to family and community (e.g. Austin-Broos 2003, Gibson 2010, McRae-Williams & Gerritsen 2010, Lahn 2012). These obligations also emerged as relevant to understanding Indigenous experiences of employment in the public service. The Australian Public Service Commission's (APSC's) Indigenous Census for 2012 found that contributing to the community was more important to Indigenous than to non-Indigenous employees. Comparatively, this value was given even more significance among Indigenous people working outside of Canberra (APSC 2013:32), which is the case for most Indigenous public servants. One study of Aboriginal health managers in the Northern Territory found that they possessed a strong sense of moral commitment to Aboriginal clients and their communities, engendered

by a sense of responsibility linked to shared identity (Wakerman et al. 2000). A survey of Aboriginal people in Victoria deployed across a range of government and nongovernment organisations (NGOs) found that working in, or closely with, their communities was valued because of the support that was provided by the connection with family (Sully 1997).

Importantly, although relationships with community can play a supportive role, it may have negative implications in some instances. A number of health managers from the Wakerman et al. (2000:18) study also pointed to difficulties in creating and maintaining boundaries between family and work. Approximately 40% of health managers surveyed indicated that finding a work–family balance was stressful. Furthermore, female health managers in particular experienced additional expectations from their communities in relation to performing caring roles (Wakerman et al. 2000:43). Expectations to care for family were found to be a factor in Indigenous employees exiting the South Australian public service (Barnett et al. 2008:12). The Barnett et al. (2008) study makes the additional relevant point that strong provisions for cultural leave and flexible working arrangements may be insufficient to address this issue, as these provisions are not always taken up.

Professional development and skills recognition

Ganter (2010) identified several key reasons for Aboriginal people leaving the senior ranks of the Northern Territory public service that relate to issues of professional development and career advancement. The most prominent was feeling ineffectual in one's work and being given no opportunity to use skills gained outside the bureaucracy, including through other forms of work or study. 'Feeling ineffectual' also stemmed from being overlooked for promotion (Ganter 2010:186), particularly when a position was awarded to a less experienced non-Indigenous person (Ganter 2010:185). Larkin's (2013) study also highlighted the issue of Indigenous employees feeling overlooked in relation to a range of workplace opportunities (e.g. training and advancement). The following quote from an Indigenous participant illustrates the study's general findings in this respect:

They [Indigenous staff] get left out of promotion and they get left out being taken to, being asked to go to courses or they've been left out ... I'm talking about training and promotion and acting duties and you keep getting overlooked for acting or higher duties, you say, 'something is wrong here'. I think most of the Indigenous people pick up the signals pretty quickly. (Larkin 2013:262)

Although Ganter's and Larkin's findings relate to senior-level employees, similar findings have emerged for lower levels of the APS. The *State of the service series report 2012* noted that Indigenous employees working in the APS in Canberra indicated that their inhouse training needs are not taken seriously and that there is a lack of clear direction on improving their performance (APSC 2013:26). Data from the 2009 Census suggested that the neglect of formal and informal training needs persists, particularly at the lower APS levels and among regional staff (APSC 2009:33), which includes a significant number of Indigenous employees.

A number of sources discussed the related issue of the lack of recognition of pre-existing skills held by Indigenous employees. Indigenous people entering the public service bring with them a range of unique life skills and expertise that they often view as being underused and under-recognised (Sully 1997:8, Briggs 2006, Ganter 2010:164, Larkin 2013). Scerra's (2012:83) review of models of Indigenous workplace supervision points to the importance of acknowledging the everyday life skills of Indigenous people within the implementation of formal workplace strategies that attempt to balance both cultural knowledge and professional development. Scerra highlights New Zealand research into the positive effects of Kaupapa Māori models of 'cultural supervision' and 'cultural safety' for the wellbeing of Māori staff (2012:80). She argues such models have particular relevance for considering the cultural appropriateness of supervision provided to Indigenous staff, which, historically, has been an issue in the Australian work environment (Scerra 2012:77).

Stereotypes, racism and bullying

The issue of race has also been found to play a significant role in the negative experiences of Indigenous APS employees. Larkin's (2013) research argued that race issues and hierarchies pervade the public service as they do Australian society more generally. His study into the social dynamics of the senior APS ranks of Indigenous Affairs included text-based analysis and in-depth interviews with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous senior executives. His findings pointed to a persistent racialised hierarchy and division of labour within Indigenous Affairs, and a poor knowledge and limited experience of Indigenous people and issues among non-Indigenous staff. This, in turn, contributed to an environment where 'everyday racism' was prevalent, and largely unrecognised and unaddressed by the non-Indigenous senior public servants. A key conclusion in Larkin's work was that these issues directly contribute to poor retention rates for Indigenous employees.

He suggested that there is evidence that this situation works to create an environment where Indigenous public servants themselves are blamed for poor retention rates, because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees are perceived as being incapable of detaching themselves from their Indigeneity in their workplace.

Importantly, the individual pressures surrounding representation that appeared in Ganter's (2010) Northern Territory research extended to the issue of racial stereotypes, where some Indigenous public servants who are perceived as not appearing 'sufficiently Indigenous' (i.e. in phenotypic terms) are not regarded as legitimate representatives of Aboriginal people and their perspectives (Ganter 2010). She cites one interviewee as noting:

It's quite hard being a fair skinned Indigenous person in a place where you're not from ... I find it very hard to be taken seriously as an Indigenous person. (Ganter 2010:200)

Experiences of this kind hindered the ability of some Indigenous employees to fulfil their aspirations to make specific contributions as Aboriginal public servants.

It should be noted that racism can manifest in a diverse and potentially subtle range of forms, such that its prevalence may be difficult to ascertain in quantitative terms. Racism can also be embedded within broader categories of 'bullying and harassment', alongside a range of other identifiers, including gender, disability, ethnicity, age, religion or political opinion. This may help to explain the higher rates of bullying and harassment reported in the Indigenous Census by Indigenous APS employees (relative to non-Indigenous employees) over a number of years (APSC 2013). Reports of bullying and harassment have been significantly higher for Indigenous than for non-Indigenous APS employees in all locations (APSC 2014:11). The Australian Public Service Commissioner has identified that 'uncomfortably high perceptions' of bullying and harassment are linked to poor retention of certain diversity groups (APSC 2014:7).

This specific research on Indigenous populations fits within the broader literature on implicit biases or implicit prejudice. Becker (1971:14) defined people as having a 'taste for discrimination' if they acted in such a way that they were 'willing to pay something, either directly or in the form of reduced income, to be associated with some persons instead of others'. Altonji and Blank define labour market discrimination as 'a situation in which persons who provide labour market services and who are equally productive in a physical or material sense are

treated unequally in a way that is related to an observable characteristic such as race, ethnicity or gender' (1999:3168). Such definitions work well for aspects of discrimination that are conscious and result from personal animosity or hostility towards another group.

More recently, however, behavioural research has shown that most prejudice is implicit and, perhaps even more surprisingly, that implicit discrimination can have a more damaging effect on those who experience it. Specifically, Hardin and Banaji define implicit prejudice as 'unwitting, unintentional and uncontrollable' (2013:13–14). This may include unwittingly not hiring an Indigenous Australian because of assumptions about mobility or dedication to the job, or assigning certain tasks to females and other tasks to males (with the latter being those that are most likely to lead to promotion). Hardin and Banaji also make it clear that 'implicit prejudice is not limited to judgement of others, however, but also affects self-judgement and behaviour, especially with regard to intellectual performance' (2013:18).

Analysis of existing datasets

One promising source of data that may shed light on prospective outcomes is the ACLD, released by the ABS in late 2013. According to the ABS, 'a sample of almost one million records from the 2006 Census (wave 1) was brought together with corresponding records from the 2011 Census (wave 2) to form the largest longitudinal dataset in Australia' (ABS 2013). To produce the ACLD, 5% of records from the 2006 Census were linked probabilistically with available data from the 2011 Census based on the most likely match, given observed characteristics. Because this linking was done without knowing the individual's exact name and address, a minority of linked pairs will not, in reality, be the same individual. This needs to be kept in mind when making conclusions based on the data. However, for the first time in Australia, we have a large dataset with information on a person's employed status in both 2006 and 2011, as well as their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics in both years.

The ACLD has information on 5853 Indigenous Australians who were employed in 2006 and a further 455 014 non-Indigenous Australians. Of the Indigenous sample, 253 were coded as being employed by the Australian Government.¹ Although this is not a very large sample, it is greater than that found in any other longitudinal dataset. Using population weights that reflect undercount in both the 2006 Census and missed links between the 2006 and 2011 censuses, this represents

6904 individuals, or 4.5% of the workforce (and 4.4% of the non-Indigenous workforce).

Around 43.6% of the ACLD Indigenous APS were male, compared with 33.5% of those employed by state or territory governments, 58.9% employed by local governments and 53.3% employed by the private sector. By comparison, 53.9% of the ACLD non-Indigenous APS were male.

Between 2006 and 2011, 55.9% of Indigenous people who were employed by the APS in 2006 were no longer APS employees. This is a slightly higher attrition rate than for the ACLD non-Indigenous APS (51.2%). It is clear that there is significant churn across a five-year period. Of those Indigenous employees who had left the APS between 2006 and 2011, 21.5% were no longer in any employment. This was actually a lower percentage than for non-Indigenous employees (27.7%), potentially reflecting, in part, the younger age profile of the ACLD Indigenous APS.

There were no Indigenous Australians in the ACLD who went from the APS to local government (1.2% of ACLD non-Indigenous APS made that transition). The main destination for the Indigenous sample after leaving the APS was the private sector² (53.4%), with the remaining 19.3% transitioning into state or territory government employment (comparable figures for the non-Indigenous sample were 56.7% and 14.5%, respectively).

Compared with the rest of the Indigenous workforce in 2006, those employed by the Australian Government were quite geographically mobile. Specifically, 44.5% changed their place of usual residence between 2006 and 2011, compared with 40.5% of those employed by state or territory government, 17.2% employed by local government and 43.1% employed by the private sector. The APS non-Indigenous employed were, however, slightly more geographically mobile, with 47.6% changing usual residence.

What is perhaps most interesting about the geographic mobility in the APS is that those who stayed in the APS were the most likely to move among all those employed by the Australian Government in 2006. That is, people are more likely to move within the public service than after leaving. Specifically, 51.6% of those who were in the APS in both 2006 and 2011 changed their place of usual residence, compared with 40.0% of those who went to state or territory government, 41.6% who went into the private sector and only 20.5% who left employment entirely.

Interviews with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants

This section presents the findings of a series of 34 semistructured interviews conducted with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people previously or currently employed in the APS. The primary focus was to address the question of why Indigenous people make the decision to leave the APS. The main methodological approach is summarised below.³

Research questions and method

A guiding interview schedule was developed based on discussions with APSC staff, a review of relevant literature, and insights from a meeting of Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) academic staff, research support staff and doctoral scholars.⁴

The outcome of this process involved the identification of four guiding research questions:

1. What motivates Indigenous people to join the APS?
2. How do Indigenous people explain their decision to leave the APS?
3. Where do former Indigenous employees go after leaving the APS?
4. Why do Indigenous people remain in the APS?

Research question (1) accommodates the idea that reasons for leaving the APS may well be linked to reasons for joining (e.g. particular expectations were not being met); questions (2) and (3) probe both push and pull factors in decisions to leave; and question (4) seeks to identify specific positive experiences of employment in the APS that may well be applicable to future strategies for improving retention of Indigenous public servants more broadly.

Thirty-four Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – 16 women and 18 men – who had worked for the APS in three capital cities (including Canberra) and three regional centres were interviewed using a semistructured, in-depth interview method. This type of interview is commonly used in the social sciences to identify a diverse range of perspectives and experiences about a given issue. It provides the opportunity for participants to express their views in their own terms, while maintaining a commitment to obtaining comparable relevant, qualitative data on specific topics.

About half of the interviews were conducted face to face, with the remainder carried out by telephone. All interviews were conducted with participants in confidence, and potentially identifying information has been omitted from this report.

Participants self-selected by responding to email messages that invited them to participate in the study. Emails were sent out by the APSC through their existing networks and by the researchers through their own networks.

Participants comprised APS former and current employees. The latter included three different groups:

- those satisfied with APS employment
- those not satisfied but choosing to remain for the interim
- those unsatisfied and actively seeking alternative employment positions outside the APS.

Participants' experience of APS work embraced 13 individual departments and several statutory agencies. Participants in the research at the point of exit or, if currently employed, at the time of interview were employed across all APS classification levels – APS1–6, Executive Level (EL) 1 and 2, and Senior Executive Service (SES) (APSC 2015). Modes of APS entry among participants included advertised positions, public service examinations, cadet programs, traineeship schemes and graduate programs.

Interview findings

Why do Indigenous people join the Australian Public Service?

Interview participants cited a range of reasons for seeking employment with the APS. Strikingly, for most participants, an overwhelming motivation involved a desire to make a useful difference – that is, to help improve government policy and programs, to serve their community and to contribute to activity on Indigenous issues:

I wasn't serving a purpose of helping Indigenous people. I actually went into it to try and understand what I could do to help. [Interview 9]

I was finishing Year 12 and I wasn't going to go to uni or do an apprenticeship so there wasn't a lot of options, especially in terms of Indigenous specific stuff which is what I was interested in. [Interview 10]

I think I had that outsider view of government of effecting change, that sort of thing ... It is what attracts people to the public service that they are going to be making a difference and stuff but you get in there and it is hard to see how what you are doing contributes to that because it's so far away from grassroots. [Interview 17]

Another prominent factor involved perceptions of the APS as offering attractive working conditions, in terms of salary, job security and potential flexibility:

I was at the end of uni. It was just time to get a more serious job ... I noticed the entry pay was [amount removed] a year or thereabouts whereas a first year teacher was [lower amount removed]. So it was in my financial interests to apply. [Interview 4]

I think that's the attraction of the public services is really, honestly, the pay and their flexibility if you have a family. [Interview 29]

I think [I wanted to join the APS] because of my generalist university degree. I still didn't know what I wanted to do and I didn't want to do any further study without having clarity around what I wanted in job security. [Interview 28]

Some interviewees also noted that the APS can be viewed as a useful initial step into the working world, rather than necessarily as a career choice in itself:

It's an easy way to start your professional working life. It's an easy option and the wallet's not too bad, because you get a leg in, find out what the working world is about ... [Interview 22]

Some cadets never intend to stay, but get their degree costs covered and employment experience and with a degree and work experience, they are confident they can find jobs at home. [Interview 1]

Indigenous employees sometimes cited these initial reasons for joining the APS as influencing their decision to continue over time and as linked to reasons for leaving. These dynamics are explored in more detail in the following sections.

Why do Indigenous people leave the Australian Public Service?

No single factor emerged among interviewees as a general explanation or underlying cause of choosing to exit the APS. However, five critical areas of difficulty

experienced in the course of APS employment were widespread in participants' accounts. Each individual decision to exit tended to be triggered by one or a combination of these. Considered here thematically, these areas of difficulty, when taken together, provide a summation of significant common conditions and experiences among participants that substantially contributed to their departure from the APS.

If the five themes were to be summed up, a useful gloss could be 'unmet expectations' – expectations about how participants would be treated as Indigenous employees of the APS and about the value of their individual contributions. In the language of participants, this might best be expressed as disappointment at not being able to 'make a difference', notably to the wellbeing of Indigenous people and communities, but also to the effectiveness of the APS as a whole in dealing with Indigenous issues.

Overselling the Australian Public Service

A view that presented almost universally among this group was that, before entering the APS, they had held an inaccurate impression of the nature of the work involved. As a result, they felt that they were largely unprepared for the reality of the experience, giving rise to a range of early negative reactions including disappointment, disillusionment and even dismay. Individuals who gained APS entry through the graduate program in particular described a strong sense that they had been encouraged to develop expectations of a future role in the APS that were in fact unrealistic, if not exaggerated. This was often linked to the expression 'oversold':

For the vast majority of the grads, who are getting a more generalist position, it's oversold, and you're told 'you're the best of the best' and when you experience the programs, you hit the ground, very different to what's been sold. And that's true for all grad programs. [Interview 5]

The rhetoric doesn't match the reality of work of the public service. All agencies try to promote themselves as the employer of choice but they get the people through the door and they might be nice for a little while but then you know once it's all worn off six months down the track people get back to reality find out this is not what attracted me to your agency in the first place. [Interview 16]

Interviewees described their feelings of disappointment as incoming graduates and trainees after realising that it can take many years to reach positions of genuine

leadership – that is, to occupy senior levels within the public service:

In the grad program they constantly tell you you're the leaders of tomorrow, you're this, you're that. [Interview 28]

The young people tend to be from the graduate program now ... and they sell it to them on the 'J curve', 'oh you're a graduate and you'll be an EL1 within 6 months'. [Interview 4]

In mainstream grad programs you get 1000 applicants for 30 positions. That's a small success rate. And that cohort know these numbers, and have been sold as 'you're going to be the head of [department name]', etc. [Interview 32]

But it's the career progression, the realisation that it takes a career to get there, that kills off people. They come in very enthusiastic, very ambitious, and very naive about how the public service works and 'this is not what I was sold, no thank you'. [Interview 5]

For interviewees, a significant negative implication involved a sense that any potential to make a difference through their participation in the APS – notably in terms of advancing the interests of Aboriginal people and their communities – was quite delimited or postponed:

Coming into the public service was like being sold the dream, about making a difference, enabling people at the grassroots to do the work about how we were the people. That was the impression we were given. And I've been on the other side [within government] looking at how they pump up the tyres on these guys, selling the public service to them [trainees], telling them 'this is the job you want'. [Interview 21]

When I applied for the graduate program I was very idealistic and was really sold that aspect of why I wanted to work for the organisation ... I think people who come in do so with the idea of effecting change from the inside then get frustrated with how slow[ly] change can be implemented when they get in. And you think 'oh I spent 12 months and I didn't achieve anything and am I going to spend another 12 months and do the same thing' or you know. [Interview 30]

Politics and policy

Following on from the previous theme of having an oversold sense of what APS employment would deliver,

interviewees frequently also expressed frustration at the extent to which political considerations and political expediency appeared to pervade the APS. Once again, this limited or undermined their sense of being able to become meaningfully involved in positive policy initiatives, or deliver useful programs to Indigenous people:

In the APS decisions are made in a way that are almost warped. In that they are made on political grounds ... The whole way the APS operates is politically driven and that's what pollutes the environment. And that then reduces the capacity of your interventions to be successful. And when you're Aboriginal in the APS, and you're working on those programs, that are the same as any other program in a way, except your attachment to those programs is much greater, you really want them to work. I mean ... you're working on an Indigenous program and the point is a social economic intervention to try to ameliorate disadvantage. [Interview 4]

The impact of politics was also viewed as playing a role in sidelining the special expertise and experience of Indigenous APS employees in relation to Indigenous issues:

I saw a dynamic change with The Intervention. With The Intervention, what was sold was a very political space, you've got a lot of resources being thrown into it ... At the time they sold it [to existing APS employees] as 'come into Indigenous Affairs, go and be a GEC [Government Engagement Coordinator] or a GBM [Government Business Manager]' or whatever they called it, 'go and save the Aborigines from themselves, go have an adventure.' They didn't say 'save the Aborigines', but that was the tone. 'Come back get a promotion'. It meant that we didn't attract people who could understand or could care to understand Indigenous Affairs. Now many of those people have grown in their construct of Indigenous Affairs but realistically the scars they're leaving on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, we're not doing anything well. [Interview 25]

This in turn eroded the sense Indigenous employees have of being able to make specific contributions as Indigenous people and, by extension, to feel valued as Indigenous employees:

The public service is now designed to keep the government of the day happy rather than dealing with the issues citizens face and it's even worse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [employees] because a lot of people who work in that environment

when they hear the Prime Minister goes running off to ... well he's got his own certain few Aboriginal people he talks to ... and the people working in those environments don't feel valued because you know they might have a different view on things. [Interview 16]

The whole conversations about the retention space and whole side of why do people leave the Public Service ... But when you're stuck in that environment and you see these things going on and have a different understanding of the world, and when you don't see [positive Indigenous policy] happening or hear or see ... or there's no-one around you has [informed in relation to Indigenous issues] type of thinking or the conversations around you doesn't relate to that type of thinking ... Or you know somebody wants to roll something out that somebody thought of twenty years ago that didn't work back then, but they think is a great idea now – when the whole conversation is foreign to what needs to be done ... you say well 'I don't need to be here, I'm going, see you later'. [Interview 17]

In several cases, participants' sense of having their personal and professional experience and insights in relation to Indigenous issues marginalised by broader political considerations was linked to strong dissatisfaction with specific policy directions or initiatives they witnessed. The Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) attracted particular criticism in this respect:

To start with I was proud of what I was doing. When I was at community events I would say I worked for government. I wouldn't say I worked for [department name] because I was ashamed at where it was going. And the fact that there was so many Aboriginal staff especially out in the network, which are the face that the department provides to community, and we had no say. We could see that it wasn't going to be good [i.e. the Indigenous Advancement Strategy] and it wasn't, but we tried to work with what we had and make it as good as we could and it didn't [succeed]. [Interview 23]

Sometime you felt like you were talking to brick walls or bashing your head against a brick wall because what you are feeding up to national office would not be used or you just felt like you were so disconnected from policy ah and that sort of stuff and people just became cynical and more disillusioned and you know I start to think I'm probably heading into that phase and I don't want to be like that, you know, miserable when I come to work. [Interview 30]

People just feel so disrespected and not valued for their experience and knowledge of what we could do to make a change ... At some point in time we were having an impact but now definitely not. We're not getting listened to at all. Policy is made at a very high level by people who think they know but really don't. And if we are ever asked to give feedback it never seems to be considered. [Interview 27]

The current government talks about a new engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people yet the bureaucracy doesn't deliver a new engagement inside itself [i.e. more closely with Indigenous employees]. [Interview 25]

Regional APS employees noted that a significant consequence of being involved in executing and, at times, publicly representing what they regarded as poorly designed and implemented policy was damage to personal relationships with community stakeholders. One interviewee referred to this in terms of being forced into a deeply uncomfortable position as a 'messenger of bad news' to Indigenous organisations and communities in which strongly felt connections had been built over a lengthy period.

With the IAS it was a little bit rushed, a little bit unclear, and we didn't have a lot of information that we could then send to organisations ... Organisations got cagey, felt we were being misleading and you know, in the lead up to the IAS rollout there was a lot of talk about engaging with community, hearing their ideas, developing their ideas into projects and putting them up to fund, you know, be innovative and creative ... And it doesn't make us look very trustworthy when that fell through. And that's with relationships that we've had for 10, 15 years, you know that you've built up with these organisations and that you've built up with these key people in these organisations. It was very damaging to that relationship and people's reputations. [Interview 30]

Career and supervision

A range of concerns were raised under the theme of career and supervision, without any overriding or conspicuously shared issue emerging. A number of participants expressed degrees of frustration at a lack of opportunity to use previously existing skillsets or those developed through APS training:

You take the best thinkers and then you give them work they don't have to think on ... You can't really

think, you can't do analysis, you can't really create new ideas and responses to it. [Interview 5]

The cadetship was good for my education but you come out at a low level and there's extra hurdles to get through the levels, and there's no respect for specialist skills you bring from your education. [Interview 2]

Basically I was just doing monkey work where I was printing off applications that came through and stapling them. I got a bit shitty about that because I had all this training done and I went from doing these higher duties showing what I was capable of and then they showed no interest in utilising me ... It was just boring. Meaningless. I went from having a job where I was being invested in, I was learning, developing, to a job where you could train up a year 6 kid to do it. [Interview 21]

I've become very frustrated and disappointed that all the skills I've learnt aren't being utilised to their potential and not for want of trying ... I've offered to help out in other areas but everything's so formalised so 'oh no we have to go through an EOI and if we give it to you someone else might have wanted to do it' and I just think 'oh I can't be bothered' ... [Interview 7]

Interviewees also cited experiences of career stagnation, which often involved detailed narratives of attempts to position and reposition oneself with little sense of transparent mechanisms for advancement:

There's not enough support within agency for advancement ... Some [cadets and trainees] are disappointed with slow rate of advancement. [Interview 1]

I was an acting EL1 but [due to family illness] I had to relocate so I had to drop to an APS5 to transfer and I'm still at an APS5 which is where I started 13 years ago. And I've gone completely round in a circle and now I have no staff, no responsibility, my skills aren't utilised. I'm APS5 so I'm treated like the admin person ... there's absolutely no opportunity for progression. My regional manager told me that on a number of occasions. [Interview 7]

I was doing the equivalent of two EL1 positions as an APS5. Most of our EL1s were heavily loaded up, some managing 12 programs. Most of the other branches, their EL1s had 6 to 8. I had 16, as an APS5! Prior to the MoG [machinery of government] I was

acting in an EL1 position but I was told they could not pay me as an EL1 so I was being paid at the top of an APS6, a better job and a more involved job than the previous job. So I thought 'okay I'll prove to them I can do this'. I was told the job was going to be advertised and I was going to get the chance to apply for it. Then this government came in and that was abolished and I had to go back to my substantive position. After nearly two years acting in a high 6 as an EL1 position, no opportunity. So after 5 years I was back down to a 5 with no prospects. My [performance assessments] were outstanding! [Interview 23]

Interviewees mentioned a range of problems with supervision, including difficult or exploitative relationships with individual supervisors and a lack of adequate support from leadership teams:

I felt like I was supporting [a supervisor] to do his job. And often I had caught him out taking stuff I had discussed with him and passing it off as his own and call him out at meetings just to let him know that I knew it was going on. You just get to the stage when you are sick of being a stepping stone for non-Aboriginal people who work in Indigenous areas who want it on their resumé and sometimes are not doing it for the right reasons. [Interview 26]

There seems to be a pattern of managing underperformance by worsening underperformance so there is no escaping and if someone thought you were underperforming you're instantly stuck with that label of underperforming and things were made harder for you by not given anything meaningful. [Interview 30]

I sat down with the manager and explained to him why I wanted to [move to a regional office] and he told me I hadn't been effective in my duties ... I didn't know where it came from, I hadn't been fed back anything about my performance before. I was blown away by that and resigned. I didn't want to work with people like that. [Interview 23]

It's just frustrating. You go and ask the leadership team certain things about 'I'm going out in the community. I'm going to be doing this, this and this. Can you advise me on the next template for the reporting for them so I can integrate that into my conversation'. And you get told 'I don't know'. That's really frustrating. So when I go out there I'm using my skills and I'm doing my job correctly, but then I expect the leadership team here to be doing the

same thing and providing us with the tools that we need to do our job. [Interview 28]

A particular aspect of supervision that elicited a number of negative observations from participants involved a lack of familiarity or competency in relation to Indigenous cultures, which was seen as creating a range of difficulties, including undermining effective program delivery and poor management of Indigenous staff:

There's a lack at very senior levels, a distinct lack of awareness of Aboriginal people, I think some organisations do it better, I commend the [department name] for having a more thorough understanding of Aboriginal circumstances for example. But if you go to [dept name] or [dept name] even, you start to explain to them that the majority of Aboriginal people don't live in the Northern Territory, 'what, you've got to be kidding me'. I mean they wouldn't know. I mean basic demographics are lacking before you even start to get to particular issues around specific disadvantage. It all comes from, when there is an understanding, there is still a shallow understanding of what is Indigeneity, what does an Aboriginal person look like even. [Interview 2]

My branch manager ... in everything else but Indigenous he was a good bloke but he just couldn't get, understand the benefits of having [a particular program rolled out] out in remote communities for Aboriginal people. I tried to explain it to him and he was the type of bloke who wanted you to, you know, he wanted you to do all the work then he wanted to meet with you and you talk him through it all and I said 'no my job is to do the work and get it through to you and you tell me whether it is right or wrong or otherwise and I'll do whatever it needs doing to fix it up'. So I thought 'bugger it', I left and had a break for a while. [Interview 16]

Finally, a number of participants linked dissatisfaction with APS employment to recent MoG restructuring in relation to the movement of Indigenous Affairs into the Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). This generated considerable uncertainty for many of those interviewed over an extended period concerning their duties, in addition to a range of staff movements:

Even before the [most recent] MoG we were being told 'we don't know where you're going to sit in the department, we don't know if your branch is going to continue or if your branch is going to be absorbed

into another team or what'll happen', and they kept us going like that for two years. [Interview 23]

Before the MoG people would come down for the grad program, stay for a while and end up getting too homesick and go home. That was a factor prior to the MoG, now it's sort of not the main excuse but people are saying I'm going home I'm sick of this rubbish here. It's sort of the last straw that's pushed people over the edge. [Interview 20]

Other interviewees mentioned that they had difficulty with the incorporation of Indigenous Affairs into PM&C. There were perceptions of a clash of distinct and disparate agency cultures:

Very difficult. I don't think it was handled very well. It's a big change. It's not really been a merging of the culture. It's been, well, this is their culture. So I think there is still that feeling of us and them, particularly when the managers are from there. [Interview 26]

It was like putting AUSAID into DFAT. You've got a social agency, a program delivery agency, and you're putting it into a highly politicised agency. They don't match. They don't go together. And even though we had 1500 come into Indigenous Affairs under PM&C compared with their only 500, they still insist on wanting it like PM&C. [Interview 23]

Before we MoG-ed we had an Indigenous mentoring program nationally, it was an opt in voluntary basis. I had a mentor ... and I used to meet with him on a fortnightly basis and we'd talk through career aspirations ... and I found that fantastic because he was a completely different person separate to the office ... and that got cancelled as soon as we got MoG-ed. Hasn't been in place since. [Interview 7]

Several interviewees cited that the recent MoG change period led directly to their resignation.

Racism and response

The issue of racism was frequently raised by interviewees, whether experienced personally or observed. Some spoke of racism as a form of bullying and/or harassment, while for others the two issues were viewed as separate. In both cases, instances of racism were viewed as directly undermining a sense of being valued within the APS as an Indigenous employee. However, at the same time as being deeply disappointed, interviewees often communicated a sense

that encountering racism was not wholly unexpected, given similar problems existing in Australian society more widely. Participants communicated a particularly vivid sense of difficulty and determination in encountering casual or incidental racism:

I think the APS as an employer suffers probably no more or less ... That's there, that's in the APS, same as everywhere else. [Interview 4]

In Indigenous Affairs, among people who write policy for Indigenous people, we heard racist statements on a daily basis. One staff member was told 'just let the discriminatory stuff go past you it'll be right' by a non-Indigenous section manager. I've had other staff in tears when other people make open statements about 'Aboriginal organisations being so hopeless' ... when those kind of comments are allowed to continue on a daily basis ... You are forced to operate in a space which doesn't value you at all. [Interview 25]

Even when I was working at [department name] there was people working there who were making blatant racist remarks and people working in Indigenous Affairs with these racist beliefs about Aboriginal people, people going to communities for a few weeks coming back as experts, and using that to climb the corporate ladder and opportunities given to graduates over permanent staff were happening. In that type of environment people just walk out. [Interview 15]

But there has been full-on incidences of blatant, full on, racism as well. A number of different examples I've heard have just been people making jokes about stereotypes and racial profiles and stuff and people just believing that's okay. [Interview 30]

Participants described real dilemmas in dealing with, or responding to, instances of racism. A majority view was that it was generally better not to respond, and certainly not to make a formal complaint of any kind, as a means of avoiding negative reactions from others. For a number of interviewees, part of the reality of being an Indigenous public servant involved a sense of being under scrutiny by non-Indigenous colleagues and, consequently, a desire not to appear 'thin-skinned' or 'angry'. As one participant put it, a real risk in reacting to racism is that 'you come off looking worse'. Several participants were specifically concerned at negative repercussions from management. However, despite these difficulties, a small number of

interviewees did make informal or formal complaints to supervisors:

You can either make a joke of it or you can get really upset and you then get labelled angry and get moved on. And you end up with Adam Goodes. [Interview 5]

If an Indigenous person takes offence then [the perception is] that person is being a little sooky and that's not dealt with. Like that person then goes to management and expects management to deal with it. But it's not ... but the perpetrators aren't dealt with and the victim then becomes ostracised and seen as like, you know a little bit sooky and making trouble. Like they're the ones with the problem. It becomes that damaging ... it becomes about them, not the people making the comments. It's never knocked on the head and there's never anything that says you can't do this cause this is racism. [Interview 30]

We didn't like hearing racist remarks and the other lady she responds loudly where I don't, you know, because as soon as you speak out loudly you're stamped out ... So she was being set up to being moved on in a way that she was being given work and put in positions and giving her work that she would not like. And she already told them 'I can't do that work because of this', whatever the reason was, the work she was experienced in they wouldn't give it to her. So they expected her to quit or move out of that area. [Interview 9]

I don't know if I'd made things worse for myself ... We had a lady who was rude and arrogant and racist. And she thought she was funny when she made comments and there was one particular comment ... I had two options: rip into her right now but I'm at work and I'm professional, or deal with this in another way. I needed to think on it. So I went home and thought on it and I wrote a letter to my manager and to her and to HR. And I put in that letter how offended I was. I don't always ask for Aboriginal services but I'm very proud of who I am and I identify and I was extremely offended and I felt it was racist. [Interview 17]

Whatever the individual response to encountering particular instances of racism, a general effect expressed by participants was to question the extent to which the APS valued them as Indigenous employees.

Being undervalued

For many participants, a sense of being undervalued by the APS was not a consequence of experiences of racism alone, but rather represented the cumulative outcome of one or more of the themes already raised. For some, this sense was expressed very strongly; for others, more questioningly.

Several participants pointed to general concerns about a lack of awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and issues in the APS more generally as part of their sense of being undervalued. Improved training in this area was seen as a necessary part of cultural shifts in the APS towards being supportive of the retention of Indigenous staff, while at the same time there was recognition of the challenges in finding the right approach:

I've had the pleasure of working with some wonderful non-Indigenous people but conversely just for every good person there are people who aren't aware their views are inappropriate ... Why isn't [cultural awareness] a core skillset? Why isn't it a core competency? ... There was a SES round – not one question was about understanding Indigenous people and Indigenous issues and these people were the leaders in Indigenous affairs! [Interview 25]

[After the most recent MoG] it also got nearly two years to get an ATSI [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] network approved in PM&C. They had an existing network. They started discussions with other networks that existed in other departments prior, which was great, but then when it went up to [name removed] it was met with comments like 'why is this important?', 'why do you need an Indigenous staff network?', 'why should it be supported by the executive?' You've got the Office of Indigenous Affairs within the department and you are now the highest employer of Indigenous staff, do you really need to ask why you need it, why do they need a voice? [Interview 23]

Cultural awareness training has been the benchmark or baseline, to get cultural awareness of ATSI cultures and that in itself is fraught with lots of dangers, there's far too much diversity among ATSI cultures, so any training that's given in that space is generally too generic and low level to be any good to anyone ... so cultural proficiency means dealing with the organisation as a whole and applying a systems approach for change of philosophy. So that philosophy has to be ingrained into the structure of the APS. [Interview 15]

The question of what the APS actually sought to gain from its Indigenous employees as Indigenous people, and queries concerning the substantive intent of Indigenous recruitment and diversity targets (i.e. beyond simply numbers) were common sentiments among the interviewees:

I feel a bit tokenistic. I'm trotted out as an Indigenous employee but I don't think there's any value placed on me apart from that. People don't feel valued here for their experience and their knowledge. Here you feel like you're dictated to when we're actually the experts on Indigenous programs but we're not having any input into anything. [Interview 26]

Looking at some of the things that are written or said about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people [internally] I mean the whole discussion and dialogue from a deficit perspective influences the way that people engage. For me on a daily basis, I'd hear how hopeless Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations, communities are and 'when are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people just gonna get over it hasn't healing been done'. And I think to myself well if that's your view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people you might not see me in that light but you're actually talking about me and you're talking about my family and you're talking about my community. And when you hear that on a daily basis from people who are making policy and quite often have a very strong voice in policy I mean for me how do you respond to that? [Interview 25]

Some participants queried the degree to which the APS has fully thought through the fundamental question of why Indigenous people were being sought as employees. Many raised the idea that departments were simply responding to required targets, rather than carefully considering the character of the potential contribution Indigenous people can make:

I don't think the Commonwealth I don't think they actually come to grips with why they want to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I think it's a target and because they've been told they need a target that's the only reason they do it. They don't actually sit down and think about it. [Interview 15]

Part of the challenge is, do they understand why they want Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff? Increasing Indigenous employment isn't just about the target. It's the experience and exposure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff bring ... The value being the difference in perspectives and

insight that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff bring. Fundamentally that value is where we are lacking. [Interview 25]

Where do Indigenous people go after they leave the Australian Public Service?

Interviewees reported moving to a variety of positions after leaving the APS, including the state public service, private sector and Indigenous sector. Some moved on to study or to start their own business, and some exited the workforce entirely to care for, or be nearer to, ill relatives.

Many participants had the strong sense that numerous alternative employment options exist outside the APS and, indeed, that several sectors have strong demand for Indigenous employees:

Other sectors, you're competing with other sectors, banks, mining companies, anyone with a RAP [Reconciliation Action Plan] who wants Indigenous employee target, local governments, state governments, Indigenous organisations, NGOs all after. It's a small field, a very competitive market particularly for those people with generic skills. [Interview 5]

[Indigenous APS employees], they're knowledgeable, educated, experienced, practised, skilled, talented, particularly young Aboriginal people, they'll be poached. Like the big banks, they're looking to recruit Aboriginal people and they want Aboriginal people to come and work for them and some of our people will be captured by that and that's alright. [Interview 4]

Through that MoG back in 2008 and 2009 we lost half of [the Indigenous staff] straight up ... some went across to [government] providers because they were prepared to pay the money for the skills. [Interview 18]

Interviewees who joined other sectors offered a number of reflections on their working environments that involved direct and positive contrasts with experiences of the APS:

With state government, you're close to the action. People want to see change and you've got a direct line of sight to the minister. So things happen quickly. And our ideas are valued for that. [Interview 15]

I think the states – if you want to do that policy type work or project implementation, you almost have to move to state government. [Interview 31]

[Local government] is a very open place. It's an honest place. Very, very supportive. No question is a silly question. You can ask and they'll help. We have regular team meetings. We know what everybody is doing. [Interview 17]

I just found that I achieved more here [in a not for profit] in 12 months than I had in 4 years in the federal public service. You are working with people one on one, writing programs, policies, the whole cross-section. In the public service you'd never be allowed to do that. It's broadening my skills much more than the public service. I've upskilled so much quicker since I've left. [Interview 21]

I'm looking at private enterprise and other things because I know from having worked in private enterprise before that if you work hard you're well rewarded [promoted]. [Interview 7]

A majority of the interviewees who had left the APS stated that they would not be tempted to return. A smaller number suggested that they could consider returning under particular circumstances, notably avoiding forms of general entry involving limited control over placement, and instead preferring to choose a department, section and supervisor with some care. And a few interviewees, despite their own experiences of dissatisfaction, continued to see APS employment as offering practical benefits:

In the APS, if you couldn't work [for family reasons] people say 'have you considered leave without pay' or 'have you considered half pay'. It's just things like that that make it easier, for you to have that long absence to work out your issues. I think they do a little more here to support people to stay at work. [Interview 27]

I've encouraged others [to join the public service], even though I'm going through all this [dissatisfaction at work], I've said to them, even if you don't work in an area that you're happy with, it's still the security and you work with other Aboriginal people. And the reason why we don't go to our co-ops or whatever to work, Aboriginal orgs, is the money and the job security. [Interview 26]

Why do Indigenous people remain in the APS?

Although the primary focus of this research has involved Indigenous employees leaving APS employment, discussions with CAEPR colleagues suggested that some attention to reasons for choosing to remain would be a

useful supplement. Several points emerged, the majority consistent with the account of rationales for joining the APS raised previously. In particular, although the bulk of participants clearly struggled to find an adequate sense of being able to make a valuable contribution (and being valued themselves, in turn), the few who were able to do so were among those who remained.

Participants expressed the common sentiment that the APS offers secure employment with a good salary and flexible conditions:

If it wasn't for the working conditions of the APS, no-one would work there. [Interview 4]

For me another big reason I'm here is I've got a three-year-old, and this office is really supportive of me needing to take leave when I need to take it if she's sick. [Interview 28]

I think that the attraction of the public services is really, honestly, the pay and their flexibility if you have a family. They are the two things that keep people. [Interview 29]

Secure salary and flexible conditions played a significant role in decisions to remain in the APS where participants were responsible for providing for the family:

The thought had crossed my mind to quit. But I had a family, I had obligations, we need the money, I can't just do this. I wasn't going to quit. [Interview 17]

What makes it hard [to leave the APS] is when you've got a mortgage and young family to look after you sort of gotta take job shopping [around for new jobs] seriously because it's a big change and if it doesn't work out in the new place you're up shit creek without a paddle so even though it's not ideal the working environment or you know the work satisfaction you kinda have to put up with it cause you don't have much of a choice. [Interview 30]

In addition to the APS offering salary and conditions, interviewees also cited supportive colleagues as a key reason to remain in the public service:

The one good thing was you had the support of your team mates around you and you were all trying to do something good. [Interview 23]

I think now that I've found a really good support network here in terms of a couple of the other [Indigenous colleagues] – I've found people that I

can relate to. I've got friends that are non-Indigenous that I have as a support network, but this is a little bit different, this is that sort of cultural stuff. I don't know, we're all just on the same wavelength and we're all passionate about Indigenous communities. [Interview 26]

Having a strong connection to working on Indigenous issues provided a reason for some to stay on:

I think because we have that connection to our [Indigenous specific] work, the deeper connection, I don't think it's as easy for us to move on and up. [Interview 28]

For several participants, ongoing community engagement was a valued aspect of their public service work, particularly for, but not restricted to, those people working in the regions:

You do get to see change when it happens. There is some really good work going on and some really good people with drive and ambition who want the betterment of their people that's the centre of what they do. You meet some really positive role models and that sort of thing so the community engagement part is probably the most satisfying part and you do meet some very committed people, some very good people in the organisations. They've stuck it out, been a lot of change and they're still there forging ahead and sticking to their goals so that's very good. [Interview 30]

The notion of service and of serving the community was also an important consideration for continuing in the public service:

I was thinking 'well I've got a job. I'm doing good things serving people'. I was going to hang on to that. [Interview 17]

For some who remain in the public service, finding a way to effect change was critical to finding value in their work:

For me it's scale of impact. I can make a bigger change here with a small effort than I can with a NGO or somewhere like that. If I was working with a NGO I could improve the lives of a couple of families but in my job here I can have a bigger effect on many more people. That's why I'm staying. [Interview 7]

Clearly, several of these factors serve to reinforce earlier points – in particular, motivations for joining the APS. A sense of making a difference to Indigenous issues, of

having positive impacts – especially those that are readily apparent – and experiencing positive relationships both with Indigenous communities and colleagues (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) are all acknowledged as supporting a desire to remain with the APS. For some Indigenous people, significant aspects of the key expectations of employment in the APS are being met.

Summary and concluding comments

Around the time the first draft of this paper was being written, Senator the Hon. Michaelia Cash, Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Public Service, and Senator the Hon. Nigel Scullion, Minister for Indigenous Affairs, launched the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy. According to the announcement, the Australian Government's goal is to 'increase the representation of Indigenous employees across the Commonwealth public sector to 3% by 2018' (roughly equivalent to the percentage of the total Australian population estimated to identify as being Indigenous). 'For the first time', it is stated, 'the Government has set agency-level targets for Indigenous representation' (Cash & Scullion 2015).

Achieving the targets set out in the employment strategy would lead to a significant increase in total Indigenous APS employment, which may alter the structure and nature of the APS. In recent years, however, there has been considerable change in the nature of Indigenous policy at the Australian Government level. This is most clearly evident in the move of Indigenous programs and services into PM&C, and consolidation of these services under the IAS. These changes follow on from other actions, including the Northern Territory Emergency Response (also known as The Intervention), the Apology by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, the adoption of Closing the Gap targets to guide Indigenous policy, and the use of Income Management and Welfare Conditionality more broadly to modify Indigenous people's behaviour in directions that governments feel are more desirable (e.g. increased school attendance or greater spending on fresh fruits and vegetables).

The APS itself has also undergone many structural changes unrelated to Indigenous affairs. Numerous departments have merged or split, whereas others have witnessed considerable staff losses. The APS has been required to meet a more diverse set of needs with fewer resources. Technology has helped with this, but APS employees have been forced to adapt and respond creatively to changing circumstances.

In many ways, therefore, it is an opportune time to consider the employment decisions of Indigenous public servants, with a particular focus on why those who have left the public service may have done so. In doing so, it is important to recognise (as the interviews show) that many Indigenous public servants are engaged with their job, find it rewarding, and are making contributions to policy development, service delivery and the lives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. None of the findings discussed in this paper negate that. At the same time, however, the data presented in this paper show that Indigenous Australians continue to be more likely to leave the APS than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Understanding why this happens is vital for a well-functioning government and for individual departments to be able to meet their own stated goals.

The main focus of the analysis in this paper is interviews with 34 Indigenous Australians who have either recently left, or who are currently employed within, the APS. A semistructured interviewing technique was used to draw out and highlight Indigenous voices and narratives. Many of the issues raised were specific to Indigenous employees. Others were general issues related to employment in government that may impact on Indigenous employees more than, or in different ways from, non-Indigenous employees. There was no single factor that was consistent across all employees. Rather, five main themes emerged.

The first theme related to an initial 'overselling' of APS employment to new recruits. Many former and current Indigenous employees felt that there were exaggerated depictions of career progression, and the degree of leadership and influence in Indigenous policy that they would exercise. Almost all employees faced some dissatisfaction in their career at some point. However, that is much more difficult to cope with if expectations are raised to an unrealistic level. There is obviously pressure to meet recruitment targets. However, to create the right incentives, these targets should be focused on retention as well as recruitment.

The second theme related to frustration at the extent to which politics limited the potential for positive Indigenous policy initiatives, and the effective delivery of programs to Indigenous people and communities. Indigenous Australians are recruited in many ways to make a difference to their community (however defined). Many government employees may struggle with their role in implementing the policies of the government of the day. However, this is likely to be particularly salient for Indigenous Australians, who often see the direct effect of these policies up close and who may have a

greater sense of what is more or less likely to work in practice, but whose specific expertise is often ignored. Explaining and articulating the rationale and evidence behind policies in a more effective way may mitigate this. Ultimately, this is unlikely to change without all Indigenous Australians having a greater say in the policies that affect them.

Many Indigenous employees (former or current) reported a range of problematic career experiences. This third theme included a lack of opportunities for promotion, insufficient recognition of skillsets and difficult relationships with supervisors. A dramatic increase in the size of the Indigenous workforce within the Australian Government bureaucracy will require commensurate increases in mentoring, promotion support, retraining and general assistance.

The fourth theme that was raised related to participants' experiences of racism in the APS and a sense of unreasonable constraints on their ability to respond. It was mentioned by some that such racism was expected because of experiences in wider Australian society. This may explain some behaviour, but it does not excuse it. Some of this racism was explicit and needed to be dealt with using the same level of seriousness as any form of bullying or harassment. This includes using existing formal grievance procedures, real sanctions for perpetrators, and adequate counselling or redress for victims. However, some of the racism was more implicit or unintentional, and this requires a subtler policy response (see Hardin & Banaji 2013 for a discussion). These responses will need to be well targeted, well funded and well evaluated.

The fifth and final area of difficulty incorporates concerns at being undervalued as Indigenous employees and an insufficient level of cultural awareness in the APS. This was identified as being particularly evident at more senior levels within some departments. Specific training may reduce this, but may only scratch the surface. Any attempt to significantly increase the size of the Indigenous workforce cannot expect only new Indigenous employees to change their cultural values to suit the culture of the workplace that they are entering. The workplaces themselves must change as well.

Ultimately, what the results presented in this paper show is that recruitment is only one component of increasing Indigenous employment in the public service. In some ways, it is the easiest component. Retention and staff satisfaction require a much greater and more long-term investment. Some uncomfortable discussions around

racism and reframing of Indigenous-specific policy will need to be had.

Perhaps most significantly, key questions about APS recruitment and employment goals for Indigenous employment emerged from this research – specifically, ‘why are Indigenous people being sought as employees?’, ‘what is the APS seeking to gain from its Indigenous employees as *Indigenous people*?’ and ‘what is the intention of Indigenous recruitment and diversity targets (beyond simply numbers)?’ These questions are important to address, at least so that the goals and nature of Indigenous employment are made clear to Indigenous APS employees at entry. Without this underlying investment and effort in considering and articulating APS intentions, any Indigenous recruitment strategy will fail to retain its Indigenous employees over the long term and miss the opportunity to achieve better decision making within government.

Notes

1. These individuals were previously coded as working for the Australian Government. Although this is not completely equivalent to the Australian Public Service, it is a useful enough proxy for the purposes of this paper.
2. This is likely to include private industry, but also nongovernment organisations, Indigenous organisations and universities.
3. Ethics clearance was obtained from the Australian National University’s Human Research Ethics Committee (protocol number 2015/151).
4. These included Talia Avrahamzon, Nick Biddle, Rob Bray, Heather Crawford, Elizabeth Ganter, Tjanara Goreng Goreng, Boyd Hunter, Julie Lahn, Katie Smith, Allison Thatcher and Kaely Woods.

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