

# Navigating Indigenous research collaborations with government and university

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# Our Research Project - how did it come about?

- emerged out of a professional relationship
- right timing - review and renewal of 'Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy 2015-2018'
- invitation to pitch research ideas
- commissioned piece
- underpinned by MoU between government and university (ANU, NHMRC, APSC)
- co-designed to some extent

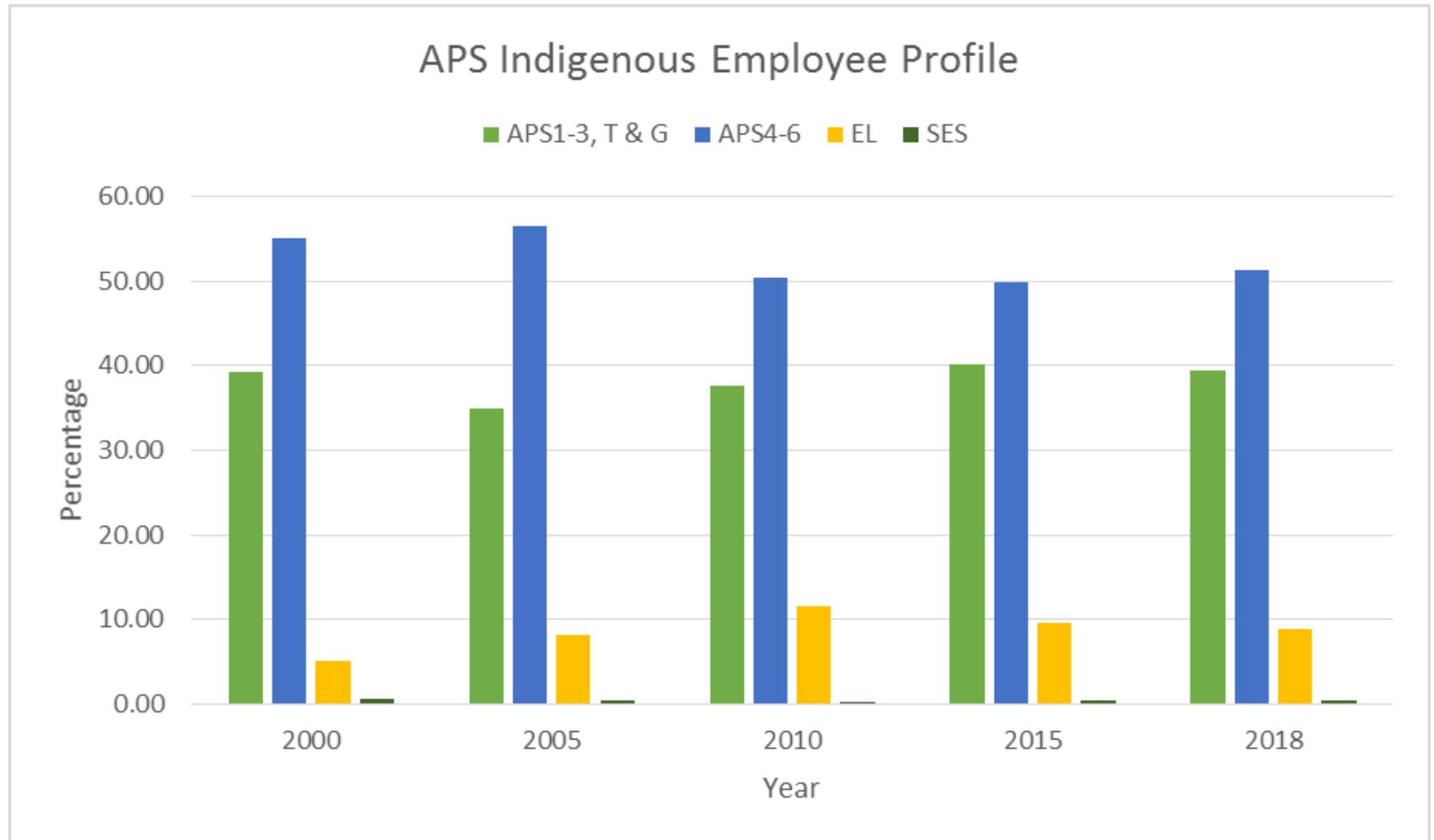
# Project secondment opportunity

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee in the Australian Public Service
- formal application
- 6 months
- to collaborate on all aspects of the project (design, ethics, interviews, coding, writing)
- an opportunity for the individual to deepen research skills
- and for academic to contribute to capacity building of APS in area of research

# APS workforce

*50 years of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment in the Commonwealth public service*

- Total workforce = 5,042 people
- Targets now *met and exceeded* (3.3%)
- But, majority employed at lower levels
- Senior Executive Service very small, just 1% or 27 individuals
- Executive Levels have declined



# The research task

To identify the unique barriers to career advancement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in the APS



Barriers AND enablers – to identify *strengths* and how things have been working

# The 6 month project

- Ethics
- Literature review
- 50 recorded interviews
- Coding
- Analysis
- Findings

# The Interviews

*50 qualitative in-depth interviews*

- EL, SES (a few APS6, in regions only)
- 42% men, 58% women
- 48% Canberra based
- Face-to-face, phone, videoconference

Topics included: career narratives, barriers, enablers, career plans, career reflections, approaches to leadership, advice for the next generation.

# Enablers – what's worked

- Individual strengths
- Strong relationships, formal and informal
- Institutional measures

# Enablers - Individual Strengths

- Hard work and resilience

*‘showing everyone non-Indigenous 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%.’*

- Knowing your own worth

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

- Building a profile & diverse skillset

*‘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.’*

# Enablers - Strong Relationships

- **Mentors and Sponsors**

*'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.'*

- **A Good Manager**

*'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 that allowed me to step out of my comfort zone and push myself further. And 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.'*

- **Network of Support**

*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.'*

# Enablers - Institutional measures

- Special measures/affirmative measures

*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.*

- Study and Development

*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.*

- Support for families

# Barriers

- Operational constraints
- Limited Opportunities, particularly in Regions \*
- Higher Levels Unappealing
- Preconceptions & Biases, Prejudice & Pigeonholing
- Poor Management Practices \*
- Inadequate Commitment to Diversity

# Barriers – Limited Opps in Regions

Majority of employees are in regions (76%)

1. Limited positions outside Canberra
2. Limited opportunities to develop a diverse skill base (incl. in policy development)

Those outside Canberra face significant career disadvantages.

Highlighting ‘disconnect’ between Canberra, state offices and regions.

# Barriers – Poor Management Practices

- Lack of feedback on work performance

*‘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...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”.*

- Lack of recognition for complex or difficult work that is not high profile

*‘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.’*

# Poor Management Practices (cont...)

- Lack of support for career advancing experiences or activities

*'[with] 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 and then you don't look professional, because you don't look like you know what is going on.'*

- Lack of transparency in appointments

*'I don't think we organise ourselves well around the ripple effects. So I know that from 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 with the things they need to do.'*

- Deficiencies in feedback

# What's Unique Here?

- Many obstacles and enablers potentially shared with other public servants
- Unique combination of factors
- Institutional Biases
- Engaging with Two Worlds

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

*'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.'*

*'You have to be a bit of a chameleon'*

A career barrier or enabler? Depends on the institutional context.

# Advice from Participants to Next Gen:

- Develop Skills and Qualifications, Seek Opportunities

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

- Build your Reputation and Networks

*'It's really about your networks. Building a really solid brand for yourself. This is what Canberra is about, you've got to use your networks and go where people value you.'*

- Develop Confidence and Self-Awareness

## Advice (continued...)

- 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 only get someone championing you if you can show you are proactive, interested, involved and you work hard.’*

- Learn about the APS Environment

*‘Listen and watch for your first 3-6 months ... absorb everything that you can and try to make connections with everybody within your organisation. Find out what people do ... and how they get their job done.’*

*‘There are risks in being in one department for your whole career, it gives a very blinkered view, so go and do a stint in PM&C or the APSC.’*

## Advice (continued...)

- Keep your Life Balanced and the 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.'*

*'If you are committed and want to be here and want to do the right thing then the opportunities will open up for you.'*

*'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.'*

# Recommendations - 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.

# Recommendations (continued)

## **For Indigenous People in the APS**

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.

# Recommendations (continued)

## **For non-Indigenous People in the APS**

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.

# SWOT analysis - the collaboration

## **Strengths**

- built on existing relationship
- university-based, ethics clearance
- ANU and CAEPR brand - trust
- research topic was current
- privileging Indigenous voices

## **Weaknesses**

- short timeframe for the research project
- we could have done more interviews
- we could have used more data

# SWOT analysis

## **Opportunities**

- could do more research
- could interview participants in 1 year, 5 years
- continuing the relationship - government & academia
- capacity building for public servants

## **Threats/Risks**

- limited to ongoing funding
- researcher relationships - doesn't work out
- report and recommendations don't go anywhere - policy influence is elusive!

# Thank you

- To the participants
- APS Indigenous SES Network Steering Committee
- Indigenous Capability Unit, APSC
- Professor Rae Frances, Dean of CASS
- CAEPR staff, academics, and scholars
- National Health and Medical Research Council

*A copy of the report is available on the CAEPR website*

[caepr.cass.anu.edu.au](http://caepr.cass.anu.edu.au)