

Submission to the Australian Public Service Reform Stage 2 Integrity Initiatives Public Consultation

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (the Academy) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that brings together the multidisciplinary expertise of our nation's leading thinkers to provide practical, evidence-based advice on important social issues facing society.

As the pre-eminent organisation in Australia representing excellence across the social science disciplines, we welcome the opportunity to respond to the Australian Public Service (APS) Reform Stage 2 Integrity Initiatives.

Overview

This submission examines the APS Reform Stage 2 Integrity Initiatives and the actions and key considerations necessary to support and embed a pro-integrity culture in the APS. The submission focuses on the proposed development of an APS Code of Conduct Database and an APS Integrity Data Dashboard and considers:

- The centrality of integrity in the APS's role in serving the Government, the Parliament and the Australian public.
- Integrity as active, ongoing and reinforcing.
- The centrality of trust and transparency to sustaining integrity.
- International good practice guidance and metrics for representing integrity.
- Investing in and maintaining the data infrastructure, analytic skills, and expertise to needed to develop and effectively leverage integrity data.
- Agency reporting requirements, including making data publicly available.

The Academy's seven recommendations are intended to be practical and support the design of integrity strategies and cultures that embed integrity as a core value.

- **Recommendation 1:** Consideration be given to the establishment of a centralised, technologically enabled portal that will act as a first point of contact for Code of Conduct complaints; systematise the review of each complaint to determine whether further investigation is required; and, have the capacity for the complainants and agencies to track progress and outcomes.
- **Recommendation 2:** Clear and common guidelines and practices be developed to guide how Code of Conduct complaints are made, reviewed and decided on. Guidance should be collaboratively developed by the APSC, Agency Heads, and the Integrity Agency Group and clearly set out the parameters for any additional contextual information pertinent to Code of Conduct matters and discretionary powers to initiate reviews and investigations of breaches.

- **Recommendation 3:** The Commonwealth Integrity Maturity Framework be reviewed and updated to align explicitly with the OECD guidance and PPI. Key Commonwealth integrity laws, policies and procedures must be accounted for alongside OECD guidance and PPI.
- **Recommendation 4:** The OECD guidance and PII be used as the foundation for any future policy work on APS integrity to support consistency—both across the APS and internationally—reduce duplicated effort and embed understanding of the elements of the Government’s integrity system.
- **Recommendation 5:** The Data Dashboard and agency reporting on integrity indicators be made publicly available. This could take the form of annual agency reporting or as an interactive, real-time (or close to) dashboard.
- **Recommendation 6:** Consideration be given to the data infrastructure and capability investments required to design, implement and use the Data Dashboard.
- **Recommendation 7:** Action must be taken to support greater research-policy collaboration on matters of integrity.

To discuss any matters raised in this submission, please contact Dr Honae Cuffe, Policy Director on 0434 636 748, or honae.cuffe@socialsciences.org.au.

INTRODUCTION

Integrity is the foundation of APS professionalism and the public’s confidence that the APS will act in the best interests of and will deliver the best outcomes for Australia. A wide appreciation among all APS employees of this role and the values and behaviours that underpin it is critical (Podger, 2024).

The APS Values, Principles and Code of Conduct guide the culture and behaviours of the APS and underpin how the institution “measures and tests integrity” (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019). Integrity, however, is an active practice that requires individuals and collectives to bring integrity values and behaviours to bear in what they do, how they do it and to what end. In public sector contexts, this means that although standards provide the foundation for integrity, it is the practical considerations—the governance structures and frameworks that define institutional functions, the due processes and practices that generate public trust, and the pro-integrity culture that is born of and mutually reinforcing—that demonstrate that integrity has been understood and is actively cultivated.

Kirby and Webbe (2019) described APS institutional integrity as comprising four core elements:

1. **Purpose:** The APS must pursue clear, shared purposes to the best of its capacity.
2. **Legitimacy:** The APS must prioritise proper process, not only performance.
3. **Commitments:** The APS must keep its commitments in order to be trustworthy.
4. **Robustness:** The APS must invest in accountability mechanisms and incentives, strengthening its disposition to pursue its purposes, legitimately, and consistently and with its commitments.

The Stage 2 APS Reform Integrity Initiatives are underpinned by consideration of expanding the functions of the APS Commissioner in section 41(1)(b) of the *Public Service Act 1999* (the Act) from “upholding high standards of integrity” to an active, ongoing practice of “building and sustaining APS integrity”. The Academy welcomes this characterisation. In particular, the Academy

welcomes the proposed development of an APS Code of Conduct Database (the Code of Conduct Database) and APS Integrity Data Dashboard (the Data Dashboard) as mechanisms to improve transparency, accountability and evidence-informed decisions relating to integrity matters.

APS CODE OF CONDUCT DATABASE

The recent introduction of own motion powers and expanded inquiry powers for the APS Commissioner enhance the overall leadership, supervision and coordination needed for a pro-integrity culture. The Academy welcomes the proposed development of the Code of Conduct Database that will streamline reporting and compliance administration and support whole-of-service strategic invigilation of high-risk areas, like staff recruitment, mobility and procurement. Replacing agency-specific arrangements with the Code of Conduct Database, including processes put in place to collate Code of Conduct matters currently recorded, will support consistency and avoid duplicated effort.

Recommendation 1: Consideration be given to the establishment of a centralised, technologically enabled portal that will act as a first point of contact for Code of Conduct complaints; systematise the review of each complaint to determine whether further investigation is required; and, have the capacity for the complainants and agencies to track progress and outcomes.

Promoting common expectations, practices and decision-making

Clear reporting requirements, guidelines relating to additional contextual information, and proper staff training will be critical to the collation of consistent data. The consultation regarding APS approaches to institutional integrity heard of perceived inconsistencies in the reporting and management of Code of Conduct complaints. This includes inconsistent record keeping and managers using various supplementary HR data (e.g. attendance data) and independently gathered information (e.g. reports from an agency's employee assistance provider, conversations with affected parties) (APSC, 2020). While this information can provide the necessary context to better understand and assess Code of Conduct complaints, it may create considerable variation across agencies in the indicators used and may contribute to inefficient or inconsistent reviews and investigations.

Enhanced guidance is needed to support greater consistency in how decisions relating to Code of Conduct matters are made between agencies, and the effectiveness with which information is used in recruitment and other staff movements. Further, this guidance will ensure the appropriate use of the Code of Conduct Database, including protecting against wasting resources or adversely affecting individuals through reporting and investigations that are possibly vindictive or lacking in detail.

Recommendation 2: Clear and common guidelines and practices be developed to guide how Code of Conduct complaints are made, reviewed and decided on. Guidance should be collaboratively developed by the APSC, Agency Heads, and the Integrity Agency Group and clearly set out the parameters for any additional contextual information pertinent to Code of Conduct matters and discretionary powers to initiate reviews and investigations of breaches.

APS INTEGRITY DATA DASHBOARD

The Academy welcomes the development of the Data Dashboard and its role in supporting greater transparency, accountability and whole-of-sector risk identification, management and action strategies.

Trust is the cornerstone on which the legitimacy of democratic institutions and systems lays. Successive policy and integrity failures and the burden of ‘wicked’ problems have, by some measures, contributed to declining levels of trust in government (Cameron et al., 2022; OECD, 2023; Head and Banerjee, 2019)

Various independent reviews and consultation processes have recently recommended greater transparency in how governments gather and use data in decision-making, including reports of wrongdoing and actions taken to address this (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019; APSC, 2020; Shergold et al., 2022; Coaldrake, 2022). The final report on consultations regarding APS approaches to institutional integrity observed that:

Lax handling of data and a retreat from evidence-based decision making or policy advice by actual or prospective employees, for example, are seen as both integrity and strategic risks for the APS, which need active management (APSC, 2020).

Elsewhere, research has identified a lack of system-wide data, analysis and research to identify and report integrity risk and trends, which is further undermined by a lack of clear and consistent integrity indicators and preventative action (Brown et al., 2018). As it stands, these gaps considerably undermine the capacity of the APS to proactively build and sustain a pro-integrity culture, in line with the changes to section 41(1)(b) of the Act.

Identifying integrity indicators and international good practice

Identifying and testing integrity indicators is challenging, encompassing both formal processes and standards and individual actions and understandings (Hsieh et al., 2018; Head, Brown and Connors, 2008). However, recent years have seen increased interest in integrity systems and indicators. This includes the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) *Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions* and work to establish the first internationally agreed Public Integrity Indicators (PII).

Australia benefits from the data and evidence that have been generated and the Academy strongly reinforces the need to draw on the OECD guidance and PII. This guidance is comprehensive, evidence-informed and intended to promote good practice and international alignment. Moreover, as an OECD member country, it is critical that Australia aligns with and meet its obligations to take collaborative action on key global policy challenges. Australia is not tracking several of the PII. In adopting and reporting against this guidance, Australia would contribute to a database for robust analysis of integrity systems and could help drive international reform.

The Academy notes and welcomes the work underway to identify and report against integrity measures, including the Commonwealth Integrity Maturity Framework (the Framework). The eight integrity principles underpinning the Framework are generally fit for the APS context. However, they are not consistent with the PII. Moreover, the four maturity indicators in the Framework lack tangibility and are more descriptive than instructive. Notably, the PPI explicitly focuses on actionable criteria and the steps that governments can take to address integrity risks.

While a complete overhaul is not required, a review and renewal of the Framework would be advisable.

Recommendation 3: The Commonwealth Integrity Maturity Framework be reviewed and updated to align explicitly with the OECD guidance and PPI. Key Commonwealth integrity laws, policies and procedures must be accounted for alongside OECD guidance and PPI.

Recommendation 4: The OECD guidance and PII be used as the should provide the foundation for any future policy work on APS integrity to support consistency—both across the APS and internationally—reduce duplicated effort and embed understanding of the elements of the Government’s integrity system.

When reviewing integrity indicators and selecting measurement tasks, an important consideration for the Australian Government is avoiding measurement overload, which will ultimately burden employees and distract from what is core to what is being measured and for what purpose. Lewis (2012) suggests guidelines which are broadly transferrable to mapping and measuring integrity:

- delimit the scope of measures – avoid “some is good, more is better”;
- examine the costs and benefits of measuring and remove any unnecessary measurement tasks;
- consult those who are measured to use their experience to help improve the effectiveness of implementation; and
- analyse not just what performance measurement is, but what effects it has on a range of actors, at a whole series of junctures.

Trust, transparency and public reporting

Agency reporting should be publicly available. This will signal greater accountability and transparency in how integrity pressures are identified and managed, thereby reinforcing existing initiatives intended to enhance trust and confidence within the community, such as the *Survey of Trust in Australian public services* (the Survey). Additionally, the Data Dashboard and the Survey would provide complementary core datasets that policymakers, researchers and the public can use to test assumptions and identify if and where public perceptions align with the reality of practice.

Recommendation 5: The Data Dashboard and agency reporting on integrity indicators be made publicly available. This could take the form of annual agency reporting or as an interactive, real-time (or close to) dashboard.

The need for data infrastructure investments and APS capability uplift

From the COVID-19 pandemic response to the challenging pace of digital transformation, recent developments have highlighted the importance of investing in a robust data and digital infrastructure. The design, implementation and use of the Data Dashboard is part of a broader discussion about data and digital transformation and the need to improve the quality of infrastructure investments and suitability of data management systems.

The Academy welcomes recent developments to enhance how the Australian Government gathers, shares, protects and uses data, including the Data and Digital Government Strategy and the *Data Availability and Transparency Act 2022* and DATA Scheme.

Notwithstanding those developments, the Academy's *Decadal Plan for Social Science Research Infrastructure*, highlights that users, including those in Government teams, need linked data assets and cutting-edge computing infrastructure where users can ethically and securely work with large-scale, human and culturally sensitive datasets. While some computing capabilities of this kind are available in Australia, users are limited by impractical, protracted data sharing arrangements and insufficient investment in infrastructure. The ABS DataLab, for instance, provides access to a range of integrated administrative and survey datasets, but it does not have the capacity to meet the growing demand within government and the research sector for these services (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, 2024a). Adequate investment in a secure, integrated and user-friendly data infrastructure will be critical to establishing and leveraging Data Dashboard, as well as ensuring the APS remains fit-for-purpose in years to come.

Understanding and leveraging data to design, implement and use the Data Dashboard for its intended purpose relies on investment in public sector data and analytical skills. Critical and entrenched skills shortages (APSC, 2023) and inadequate investment in the APS's data infrastructure presents a sizable risk to the secure management and use of sensitive APS employee data.

Recommendation 6: Consideration be given to the specific data infrastructure and capability investments needed to design, implement and use the Data Dashboard.

The creation of an elite integrity data team within the APSC to oversee, interrogate and use the Data Dashboard could go some way to addressing critical skills gaps. This team would play an important role in understanding the varied elements of integrity to monitor and map integrity pressures and support Agency Heads to detect and mitigate integrity risks. The nuanced insights housed within this team would help build a culture in which integrity is embedded in all the APS does and integrity issues are addressed through targeted, multipronged approaches. This team would report data insights, how data is being used and the results of data-driven integrity initiatives to the Secretaries Board on an ongoing basis.

The Australian Government's understanding of integrity systems and existing pressures and the quality of future policy work in this domain will benefit from rigorous, integrated system-wide research. In this respect, action is needed to support greater research-policy collaboration on matters of integrity. This includes ensuring the accessibility of integrity data—with open data where possible—noting the importance of strong protection and security protocols.

Recommendation 7: Action be taken to support greater research-policy collaboration on matters of integrity.

One potential avenue to achieve this is the creation of an 'integrity research champion' role, ideally within the aforementioned integrity data team, who would:

- Identify and develop relationships with relevant research experts.
- Work with the APS Integrity Taskforce to identify priority areas of need and strategies to respond, including collaborative research projects, such as the ANZSOG Research Model (ANZSOG, 2022), or roundtables on policy issues of concern, in collaboration with research experts, for instance, those convened by the Academy (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, 2024b).

In addition to building the broader analytical, empirically focused capabilities of the APS and leveraging research expertise, there is a need for increased higher education and research

investment to develop a pipeline of capable public servants and safeguard the capacity to support the future policy work on integrity that is being driven across the service. A high-quality education in social science equips students with the skills in data analysis and an understanding of the social systems, structures and institutions that shape our lives. This provides a solid foundation for interrogating and understanding the nuances of integrity and trust.

REFERENCES

Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (2024a). Roundtables.

<https://socialsciences.org.au/roundtables/>

Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. (2024b). *Connected, Innovative and Responsive: Decadal Plan for Social Science Research Infrastructure 2024-33*. <https://socialsciences.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Decadal-Plan-for-Social-Science-Research-Infrastructure-2024-33.pdf>

ANZSOG (2022). Current Research Projects. <https://anzsog.edu.au/research-insights-and-resources/research-projects/current-research-projects/>

Brown, A. J., Graycar, A., Kelly, K., Coghill, K., Prenzler, T., & Ransley, J. (2018). *A National Integrity Commission – Options for Australia*. Transparency Australia and Griffith University Press. <https://transparency.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Options-Paper-Summary.pdf>

Cameron, S., McAllister, I., Jackman, S., & Sheppard, J. (2022). *The 2022 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*. Canberra: Australian National University.

Coaldrake, P. (2022). *Let the Sunshine In: Review of Culture and Accountability in the Queensland Public Sector: Final Report*. <https://independentcovidreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/FAULT-LINES-1.pdf>.

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2019). *Our Public Service, Our Future. Independent Review of the Australian Public Service*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/independent-review-aps.pdf>

Head, B. W., & Banerjee, S. (2019). Policy Expertise and Use of Evidence in a Populist Era. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 55(1), 110–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2019.1686117>.

Head, B. W., Brown, A. J., & Connors, C. (Eds.) (2008). *Promoting Integrity: Evaluating and Improving Public Institutions*. Ashgate: Farnham

Hsieh, N., Lange, B., Rodin, D., & Wolf-Bauwens, M., (2018). Getting Clear on Corporate Culture: Conceptualisation, Measurement and Operationalisation. *Journal of the British Academy*, 6(s1), 155–184. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/006s1.155>

Kirby, N., & Webbe, S. (2019). *Being a Trusted and Respected Partner: The APS Integrity Framework*. An ANZSOG Research Paper for the Australian Public Service Review Panel. ANZSOG Research Insights No. 3. Melbourne: ANZSOG. <https://anzsog.edu.au/app/uploads/2023/06/3-Kirby-and-Webbe-March-2019-final-RI.pdf>

Lewis, J. M. (2012). Performance Measurement: Foundations, Consequences and Futures. ANZSOG Occasional Paper, 21. Melbourne: ANZSOG. https://anzsog.edu.au/app/uploads/2022/06/Lewis_2012-SSA-Occ-Paper-21.pdf

OECD (2023). Trust in Government. <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/trust-in-government.html>

Poder, A. (2024). *Discussion Paper: Further Reform of the Australian Public Service*. Canberra: POLIS: The Centre for Social Policy Research, Australian National University. https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2024/7/APS_REFORM_-_2024_-_DISCUSSION_PAPER25.pdf.

Shergold, P., Broadbent, J., Marshall, I., & Varghese, P. (2022) *Fault Lines: An Independent Review into Australia's Response to COVID-19*. <https://independentcovidreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/FAULT-LINES-1.pdf>

The Australian Public Service Commission, (2020). *Report into Consultations Regarding APS Approaches to Ensure Institutional Integrity*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.apsc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-03/report_into_consultations_regarding_aps_approaches_to_ensure_institutional_integrity.pdf