Sustainability in Government

Making Change for Sustainability:

Perspectives from the Australian Public Service

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Acknowledgements

Citation

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Abbreviations used in this document

APS	Australian Public Service
ANAO	Australian National Audit Office
DEW	The Australian Government Department of the Environment and Water Resources
DOFA	Department of Finance and Administration
EfS	Education for Sustainability
EMS	Environmental Management Systems
EU	European Union
MAC	Management Advisory Committee
NSESD	National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development
PM&C	Prime Minister and Cabinet
SES	Senior Executive Service
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs
UNDESD	United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

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Sustainability in Government

Sustainability is emerging as a management priority for public and private sector organisations across the globe. This is being driven by a societal shift towards environmental protection and the realisation that effective management incorporates systems thinking and corporate social responsibility. Ecological devastation and social deprivation are intrinsically linked, so the three pillars of sustainability – environmental quality, social equity and economic development – need to be managed holistically in order to deliver balanced and sustainable outcomes.

Motivating organisational change is important to the process by which government can become more sustainable. However, achieving the cultural shift required is a significant challenge, particularly in large organisations. Previous change programs have failed due to isolated attempts at making change (Doppelt, 2003). That is, there has been a tendency to address policy and actions in an organisation, but not incorporate capacity building of employees, or vice versa. These lessons highlight the necessity to use a systemic approach when making change towards sustainability. The rationale for this project came from the need to avoid repeating the mistakes of earlier attempts to make organisational change towards sustainability in Australia. To enable the implementation of a more effective change process, this project sought input from participants actively engaged in the Australian Public Service (APS).

About the project

The Australian Government Department of the Environment and Water Resources (DEW) engaged the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES) and Urbis JHD to investigate the question of how to promote organisational change, learning, and transformation for sustainability within the public sector.

The project used a participatory inquiry approach, through facilitated focus groups. This process allowed the issues to be identified by those who know, work with and engage with them every day. Participants reflected on their knowledge and practical experience, and worked collaboratively to identify and implement opportunities in the APS for change towards sustainability. A process of Education for Sustainability supported them in this task.

Participatory inquiry is the engagement with, and exploration of, sustainability questions to stimulate new ideas for action. As a methodology, it is useful for exploring the dynamics and characteristics of systems. It brings people together, enabling cooperation and strengthening the relationships which support change.

Who was involved

Australian Government departments and agencies were invited to participate in the project, and a final group of 11 were selected, representing a range of agency types and sizes:

♦ Australian Bureau of Statistics

♦ Australian Taxation Office

♦ Australian Crime Commission

♦ Centrelink

♦ Australian Public Service Commission

Education for Sustainability is an on-going learning process which actively involves participants in change, enabling them to reflect critically on their experiences, learn how to make change, and take action.

It involves five key components:

♦ visioning (imagining a better future)

♦ critical thinking and reflection

♦ participation in decision making

♦ partnerships

♦ systemic thinking.

- Department of Defence
- Department of Health and Ageing
- Department of the Environment and Water Resources
- Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources
- Prime Minister and Cabinet
- Tourism Australia.

Aims of the project

The project aimed to:

1. Identify organisational drivers of sustainability within the Australian Government, based on individual and collaborative experiences
2. Build increased cross-department/agency networks to develop better solutions for sustainability
3. Increase participants' levels of understanding of sustainability and their capacity to engage in change for sustainability
4. Inspire and motivate participants to make change towards sustainability within their own departments and agencies, and across the Australian Government as a whole.

This summary document draws on the collective experience and understanding of the project participants and presents some of the insights and recommendations that arose during the project.

Sustainability and the APS

Public sector organisations are social systems operating in dynamic situations, and subject to a large array of environmental, social and economic variables. The various roles of the APS include those of service provider, policy maker, ideas shaper, influencer, consumer, and purchaser. The APS is a large corporation with competing objectives, and subject to changes in politics and policies. With increasing emphasis on efficiency, effectiveness and delivering outcomes, the APS is pulled in several directions.

According to the responses of various participants, the meaning of sustainability and its status in the APS is not clear. Overall, participants saw the APS as an organisation that manages a range of competing demands; consideration of sustainability varies and it may not even be on the agenda. Each agency has different reasons for being interested in sustainability, and until the relevance of the concept is explored and communicated throughout the APS, it is unlikely to be given appropriate importance. The range of factors involved creates a turbulent operational context, which requires a tailored and holistic approach to change. Transitioning the APS towards sustainability will require significant shifts at the individual, organisational and institutional levels.

A sustainable government is a *learning organisation* that responds to its internal and external environments by continually developing its policy, capability and practice. Sustainability requires new forms of governance that facilitate engagement with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders and factors that are inextricably entwined. Public perception can exert political pressure on agency operations, and is one of the external factors to be considered by APS agencies. Given the heightened awareness and demands for action of the general public on environmental and social issues, such as climate change and quality of life, agency heads need to respond appropriately. There are also internal influences of note. Finance is a significant determinant of actions. Making the change towards sustainability requires money, time and effort, and many departments and agencies in the APS lack the resources to commit to an issue such as sustainability, which is outside of their core business.

The SES is not seeing sustainability as a core outcome. The APS in general is not feeling an urgent push to go in this [sustainability] direction.

Comment from participant

Some agencies see the other issues they deal with outweigh sustainability needs. 'I am doing this, I can't do that!'

Comment from participant

Global Imperative for Change towards Sustainability

Sustainability as a global imperative and its set of principles dates back several decades[1]. Sustainable development is a priority of the United Nations (UN), and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development reviews the state of sustainable development initiatives on a world-wide basis (UNDESA, 2007). Furthermore, 2005–2014 has been declared the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, with a view to integrating the values, principles and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of learning to encourage changes in behaviour that will allow for a more sustainable and just society for all (UNESCO, 2006).

In response to increasing pressure to embody sustainability and manage environmental problems holistically, the governments of other nations have started to advocate and implement whole-of-government approaches to overcome organisational problems and meet emerging sustainability challenges. The Australian Government has now also adopted a whole-of-government approach across the APS, because sustainability requires policy coordination and leadership, and needs to be delivered effectively across organisational boundaries.

Although Australia has been slower than other countries to demonstrate leadership and take action for sustainability, toward the later stages of this project the beginnings of a political shift in attitudes to sustainability emerged in Australia. This was evident in discussions on issues such as climate change and water, which began to dominate the media. Key political figures made statements that indicated to participants a potential policy shift in this area and emphasised the need for the APS to prepare and build capacity to respond to sustainability requirements.

Opportunities in Change

In addition to addressing the ethical imperative, sustainability in the APS can potentially offer benefits such as financial savings from efficiency gains, enhanced public relations and image, and better prospects for employee recruitment. Following are some of the opportunities from changes towards sustainability:

♦ **Ecological footprint**

As at June 2006, 146,434 staff were employed by the APS in 82 different agencies (17 departments, 58 statutory agencies and 7 executive agencies) (APS, 2006b). The land and office space required to house that number of employees, the waste generated, and the energy and water used to run those facilities means that the ecological footprint of the organisation is substantial. For example, in 2003/2004, procurement of goods and services by Australian Government agencies was valued at over $17 billion (ANAO, 2005). The impact of government procurement includes:

♦ greenhouse gas emissions from energy consumption in buildings and vehicles

♦ waste to landfill from paper, equipment and office refurbishments

♦ consumption of scarce natural resources such as fresh water.

Sustainability improvements in the APS can lead to efficiencies in energy and water use, and reduced consumption and waste. In this time of global climate change, it is essential to decrease the ecological footprint of large organisations such as the APS.

◆ Policy influence

Given the influence that government has on sustainability in business, industry and the community through such mechanisms as legislation, regulation, policy and funding, it is imperative that it demonstrates stewardship (Environment Canada, 2004). National policy needs to encompass sustainability. This is recognised by the United Nations Millennium Development Goal[2] Number 7 – ensure environmental sustainability – which specifically states that the principles of sustainable development are to be integrated into national policies and programs. The global community has generally adopted this goal[3], Australia could demonstrate stronger support.

As one of the largest organised entities in Australia, the APS has enormous potential to affect conditions through its own operations, particularly considering its procurement practices. If Australian Government agencies were to implement green procurement policies and adopt more stringent procedures the improvements could extend to all aspects of the supply chain, from the manufacture of each product through to its mode of transportation. For example, the European Union (EU) is setting sustainability standards in its procurement processes. If suppliers and contractors cannot demonstrate that their products and processes meet its standards, the EU will not consider them (Kershaw, 2007).

Policy influence also operates at another level. Government policy drives the operations of the APS. A 2005 audit of the APS by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) revealed a number of areas where policy adherence was lacking. For example, although most agencies were undertaking some energy efficiency initiatives, most were not complying with government policy in areas such as energy audits (ANAO, 2005).

◆ Room for improvement

In December 2005, the ANAO tabled a cross-portfolio audit on the implementation of sustainable procurement practices across 71 Australian Government agencies involving $17 billion. The audit identified a small number of better-practice examples of green office procurement across the government; however, overall there were significant shortcomings (ANAO, 2005):

◆ *Performance in managing motor vehicle emissions, reducing or recycling general office waste and conserving water has been variable, and in the majority of cases, poor.*

◆ *Implementing Environmental Management Systems (EMS) has been slow and few agencies have met the timetable originally envisaged by the government.*

◆ *The audit identified an absence of specific requirements in waste management and water conservation and identified shortcomings in agencies meeting the government's stated objective to be at the forefront of environmental purchasing practices.*

The ANAO concluded that sustainable development has not, as yet, been integrated into Australian Government operations. A total of 16 ANAO recommendations were put forward to improve performance in sustainable office practice. In particular, the final recommendation (no. 16) sought to strengthen the sustainability framework for Australian Government operations[4].

♦ **Significant benefits**

There is significant potential for the Australian Government to deliver improved sustainability outcomes in its operations and through the delivery of policy and programs. Benefits for government operations could include:

♦ cost reductions

♦ resource savings

♦ environmental performance improvement

♦ improved APS morale

♦ staff health.

Benefits beyond government operations include policy outcomes such as:

♦ better transport design and management

♦ improved urban design

♦ better natural resource management

♦ improved conservation of the environment

♦ more efficient water use.

♦ **Become a leader**

A key issue for participants in this project was the necessity for the APS to clearly position itself by leading practice in change towards sustainability. This is particularly so given that responsibilities are placed on the community to embrace sustainability, yet the APS itself does not yet demonstrate a commitment to change. As a keystone for society, the public service must lead with policies and activities that are consistent with its messages to the community concerning sustainability. Communities are demanding that government responds effectively to sustainability issues, and this pressure can be expected to intensify. APS operations should set a model of best practice in sustainability as an objective. Public sector organisations should not simply pass on extant knowledge, but act as catalysts for change. In this sense, the APS should make the change towards sustainability, encouraging all sectors of society to follow its lead.

Mechanisms for Change

Changes in organisational culture and governance can leverage government transformation towards sustainability. A primary reason why organisational change efforts often fall short of desired goals is the failure to influence employee attitudes and behaviour by creating a new organisational culture and structures to support it (Cao et al, 2001; Doppelt, 2003).

Four main mechanisms of change were suggested by project participants:

1. **Leadership**
   Strong leadership demonstrates a commitment to sustainability.

2. **Governance**
   Governance can support and direct the change.

3. **Resources and tools**
   Resources and tools can provide a basis for reporting and the means to inform and affect change.

4. **Knowledge and capacity**
   Knowledge and capacity build the organisational culture and the ability to commence efforts and embed change.

Leadership

Effective leadership is fundamental to the performance of the APS. It allows agencies to deal with the complexity, risk and uncertainty that characterises the modern public sector environment. Given time, organisational change can grow organically from the ground up. However, considering the urgency of issues such as climate change, the drive for change towards sustainability must come from elsewhere.

Leadership and commitment by the Senior Executive Service (SES) is necessary for the mechanisms for change and a cultural shift to occur. Participants in this project agreed that senior government leaders need to take a strategic perspective, not only of a particular federal agency, but across the federal, state and local government organisations. Change needs to be coordinated and approached strategically with a government-wide perspective.

Governance

During discussions, participants identified a need for sustainability efforts to be effectively measured. Agencies require ways to measure a condition and then convert it into a series of operational and performance indicators. Participants further recognised the need for effective reporting and communication. Reporting processes and mechanisms for accountability will require a realignment of resources and the setting of priorities that respond to the specific sustainability needs of different agencies.

The process for change is not something that can be dealt with via traditional avenues – such as by DEW alone. The Department of Finance and Administration (DOFA), Treasury, and the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) are well placed to direct sustainability, given their positions as leading agencies within the APS. They need to promote stewardship and sustainability as part of their basic mission and describe how their activities support these mission objectives. Agency executives must engage stakeholders early and communicate regularly to gain support for sustainability decisions.

Resources and tools

Evidence suggests that organisations can moderately improve their environmental performance through the formulation of new policies and the implementation of new management systems aimed at improving environmental performance and meeting sustainability obligations (Dunphy et al 2003; Doppelt 2003; Stone 2000). However, fiscal constraints can hinder sustainability execution. The federal government needs to leverage resources enterprise-wide, ideally together with state and local governments, and potentially also with commercial partners. Policy, frameworks and legislative requirements also need to be established and communicated in such a way that the concepts and actions to achieve sustainability are clear to all APS members.

Clearly, policies and actions related to sustainability need to be far reaching and deal not only with environmental issues, but also within social, economic, health, education and related fields. The APS currently has few mechanisms that allow the organisational change required to attain sustainability. Resources such as the *Greening of Government* program[5] could offer a means to change, but it would be in an ad hoc fashion with no fundamental cohesion with frameworks and legislation. As such, tools like this will fall short of their potential.

Knowledge and capacity

Sustainability can be considered a state of mind relating to how government conducts its daily business. For organisational change to occur, all levels of the APS require the knowledge and the capability to respond appropriately to the challenges, and to employ the mechanisms for change discussed above. This can be aided by networking, capacity building, knowledge sharing and promoting good practice.

Networking

The usually slow evolution of government business practices needs to be expedited. Participants in this project recognised the need for forming quality partnerships which provide opportunities for networking – to gain more knowledge, to learn from others' experiences, and to share practices. Partnerships and cooperation can help achieve fiscal and sustainability successes, and they must link with the agency's mission.

Capacity building

International and Australian literature and research (Dunphy et al 2003; Doppelt 2003; Parry 2000; Stone 2000; Giblin 1999; McAdam et al 1998) indicate that organisations can achieve more sustainable outcomes when organisational change is accompanied by capacity building programs which promote a shift in corporate culture and governance towards sustainable thinking and acting. The implementation of effective organisational change strategies transforms both the structural and human dimensions of organisations through promoting capacity building that is cross-sectoral, team-based, organisational and institutional. The APS must ensure that its range of immediate and pressing challenges don't distract it from reflecting on its current trajectory and where it should be headed to build the capacity to deal with the likely challenges of the near future.

Knowledge sharing

Extending from notions of networking and capacity building is the idea of sharing extant knowledge. Establishing a cross-agency knowledge management group would help to ensure that knowledge and experience for achieving change toward sustainability is accessible and shared throughout the APS.

Another way to share knowledge is to learn from overseas experience. For example, understanding the lessons and challenges from other countries, such as the United Kingdom's *Learning to Last* program, which assists leaders and sustainability champions to move forward in a manner that will avoid mistakes that have already been made elsewhere.

Promote good practice

The Australian Public Service Commission openly supports the promotion of better practice throughout the APS (APSC, 2006c). In the case of enhancing sustainability in the APS, project participants felt it was necessary to consider current change mechanisms and tools, including Environmental Management Systems and Triple Bottom Line Reporting processes, to gauge their effectiveness. Ensuring that reporting processes make use of effective tools encourages an ethos for good practices to be established across the APS.

Agencies with large footprints, such as transport and resource agencies, need to be involved in delivering operational outcomes that are more sustainable. The reach of key agencies spans all sectors of the APS and beyond. It would also be useful to establish a diverse set of case studies of sustainability initiatives across the APS that can be accessible to all members for ideas, suggestions and practical solutions that work.

DEW should work with the Department of Finance and Administration and the Cabinet Implementation Unit to design a simple sustainability index against which new policy proposals and programmed implementation plans can be measured.

DEW should develop mandatory sustainability and environmental guidelines along the lines of the Commonwealth Procurement Guidelines.

Set up a central source of procurement information for Government on endorsed eco-efficient product options.

Suggestions from participants

Capacity building can best be described as enhancing the effectiveness of individuals, organisations and systems to achieve or define outcomes, by strengthening the knowledge base, competence, resources, networks, infrastructure and other forms of support.

Ryan & Rudland, 2002

We must all do more knowledge sharing – perhaps a key group (like this one) that is not too large and unwieldy could succeed where other EMS Forums have failed?

Suggestion from participant

Taking the Next Steps

Cultural change is necessary to support sustainability in the APS. This requires:

♦ **commitment** from all levels of management, particularly senior levels

♦ **direction** and clear focus to be provided by policy frameworks, such that everyone associated with the organisation understands its goals and procedures

♦ **reporting mechanisms** to measure progress towards goals, thus enabling an understanding of where an agency or department easily meets targets or where it is struggling to adapt and change

♦ **supporting materials and processes** to enable information, lessons and learning provisions to be utilised and shared

♦ **organisational culture and values** which position change toward sustainability as core business.

A critical success factor for achieving a cultural shift is an **imperative for change** which drives the processes and mechanisms required to action change. Without strong 'higher order' imperatives, any good work done within an organisation will play at the margins rather than generate overall systemic change.

Recommendations

The need for leadership and strategic alignment throughout departments, policies and activities has been discussed. Government policy influence can be exerted at several levels:

♦ federal policies and programs

♦ collaborative efforts in partnership with other jurisdictions

♦ guiding policies for the operative functions of the APS

♦ the daily decisions made within the APS itself.

In particular, specific recommendations were made with respect to the operations of the APS:

1. Develop a framework for sustainability within the APS

♦ This framework should clearly articulate and support change towards sustainability in the APS.

♦ It needs to encompass all aspects of APS operations such as energy, waste and water management, vehicles and office procurement.

♦ The framework needs to be mandated at the top.

♦ Consideration needs to be given to short, medium and long-term targets and priorities.

♦ The findings and recommendations of the ANAO Audit of Green Office Procurement should be incorporated.

2. Establish an interdepartmental sustainability committee

♦ This committee would play an integral part in developing the sustainability framework for the APS and cutting across boundaries.

♦ It would also establish a network of sustainability champions to

review and support policy change, and share knowledge, resources and approaches to influencing cultural change.

3. Clarify and communicate the concepts

♦ In order to move forward, it is essential for the APS to clearly establish what sustainability means to the organisation as a whole.

♦ However, given the diversity of businesses and services provided by the APS, it is likely that further investigation will be required to develop a clear sustainability concept.

♦ Malmborg (2003) argues that inter-organisational partnership and collaboration is a fundamental component of sustainable development, but the success of outcomes is directly related to the participants' ability to hold a shared understanding of sustainability. This highlights the need for cross-sectoral, team-based, organisational and institutional capacity building approaches.

4. Facilitate the learning process

♦ Investigate options for the Australian Public Service Commission to include education about and for sustainability in professional development and training programs for all APS employees.

♦ Include sustainable education training in induction programs for SES.

♦ Establish learning networks to share knowledge and experiences.

5. Develop the necessary resources and tools to support change

♦ Develop and implement reporting mechanisms to measure progress towards targets.

♦ Expand existing resources such as the *Greening of Government* program established by DEW.

♦ Consider the value of exploratory processes, such as participatory inquiry, to build the capacity to make change towards sustainability.

♦ Given the increasingly dynamic nature of government departments and agents, ongoing collaboration and capacity building programs are necessary to explore changing human and structural characteristics of government organisations and the context in which they operate.

6. Make the APS ready for change

♦ Develop capacity for the entire APS (aligned with senior leadership) to guide, interpret and lead the shift towards sustainability, allowing for a smoother transition and more effective response to community demands.

♦ Continue to research and review the experiences of international governments (e.g. in the UK), to learn from their mistakes and successes.

In Summary

Public sector change toward sustainability requires approaches to bring about change in both human behaviours and interactions, and in institutional structures, as they mutually reinforce and act upon each other. Capacity building programs are increasingly recognised as a vital component of sustainability and organisational change, contributing to government gains in environmental performance and the delivery of environmentally sustainable outcomes.

The APS is learning how to work in this new environment, although there are still some risks and difficulties in ensuring that financial frameworks support collaboration, and in developing the appropriate agency culture and capability (APSC, 2006d). The onus is on all agencies, and on all APS employees, to lead by example and make the change towards sustainability through a whole-of-government approach. This means working effectively across departments, and across state, territory and local government boundaries. It will involve developing the capacity of leaders so that they can successfully drive and implement future reform and ensure the APS has the organisational capacity to deal with the challenges ahead. APS leaders have an important role to play in fostering the right culture for its future – one that facilitates creativity and innovation, where employees are willing, and supported, to incorporate sustainability into the organisation.

Endnotes

[1]   For example, see *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987).

[2]   The UN developed eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education, all by the target date of 2015. They form a blueprint agreed to by all the world's countries and the world's leading development institutions (www.un.org/millenniumgoals/).

[3]   An exception to this is the United States.

[4]   It is worth noting that DEW has initiated several actions in response to the ANAO audit.

[5]   For more information go to www.environment.gov.au/settlements/government/purchasing/policy.html.

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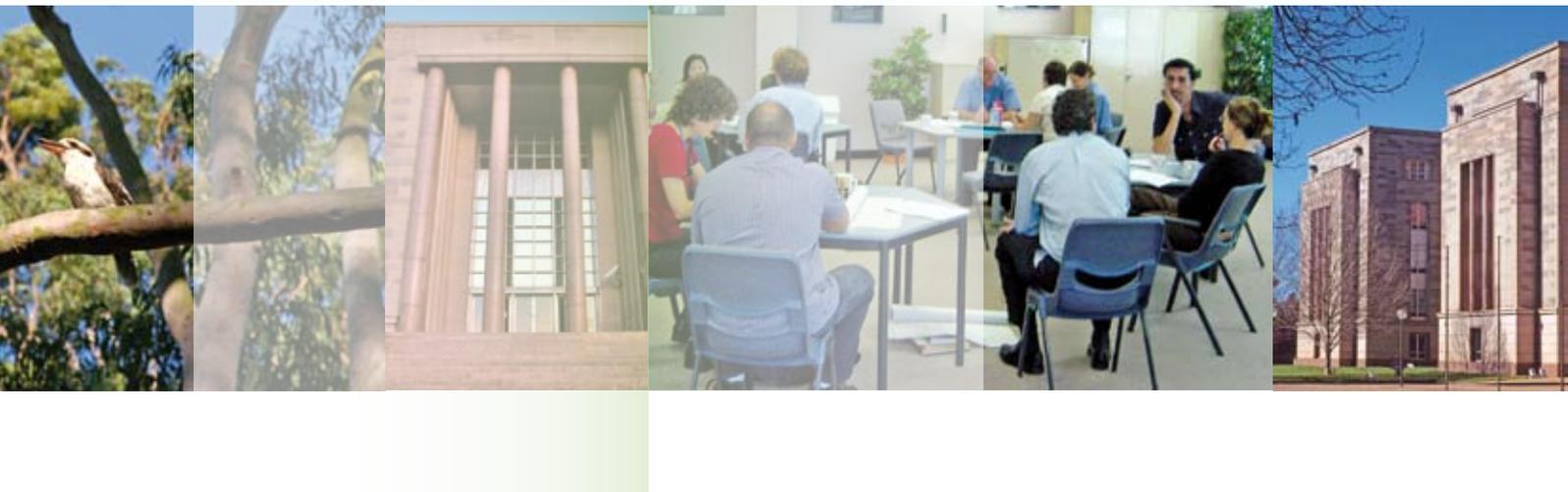
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