

PUBLIC SECTOR INNOVATION

Monday 15 September, 2008. 9am–5pm
Venue TBC, Canberra

TOPIC BRIEF

Public sectors are always innovating, but we have not always recognised this, or explicitly sought to strengthen this aspect of government. In the past, improvements in the public sector were not badged as innovation outcomes per se. Governments tended to focus on compliance with procedures, due process and financial accountability – engendering a 'steady state' ethos.

This situation has changed due to the increased prominence of innovation as a major feature of national policy landscapes. Arguably, the emphasis on innovation in the private sector has influenced thinking in the public sector. Many governments have adopted notions of strategy, outcome measurement, accounting practices and inter-organisational coordination derived from business. Similarly, an emphasis on social inclusion and more explicit social advocacy stances emulate practices in civil society. The result is that modern governments tend to operate in more complex contexts than in the past and articulate attempts at improving performance in service delivery more explicitly as innovation.

This shift in the policy narrative highlights some important contradictions and challenges. Businesses make money by taking risks and we require governments to handle the risks and uncertainties that markets cannot cope with. Yet, pressures for greater transparency and accountability may have led governments to adopt more risk-averse management methods and procedures than business – creating a misalignment between missions and the capability to deliver these missions. From this perspective, innovation in public service delivery requires governments to develop and deploy ways of managing some types of risk that exceed performance parameters in the business sector – mainly with regard to the consequences of acting too late and/or locking into worse solutions than might otherwise have been deployed (eg dealing with major threats such as possible pandemics, climate change, national security etc).

The determinants of innovation in public services include the:

- receptiveness of governments to research findings and external ideas
- ability to respond to research findings and external ideas
- internal capacity and capability to innovate through strategic planning and programme design (particularly when this may disrupt established government business processes, administrative principles and procedures)
- extent of staff exchanges between the public service and business, academia and civil society.

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KEY QUESTIONS

1. What types of innovation are taking place in the public sector – do we require new concepts?
2. To what extent is the demand for public sector innovation from Ministers and the general community aligned with the capability to innovate?
3. How effective are open innovation mechanisms, alliances and outsourcing as public sector innovation enablers?
4. Has the adoption of business-like practices enhanced or hindered public sector innovation?
5. Do departments have sufficient internal research capability, inter-departmental coordination and mechanisms for managing conflicting scientific advice to allow for innovative responses to findings from academic research?

Latest details regarding speakers, venue, agenda and resource materials are available on the workshop website <http://repp.anu.edu.au/ripp/public>

To contribute to the debate around policy review on this topic and the other research and innovation policy dialogue topics in the workshop series, contact the Research and Innovation Policy Project.

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