

The Australian Psychological Society Ltd

Submission to

The Productivity Commission's New Research Study on the Health Workforce

Interim Report

From the Australian Psychological Society

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Australian Psychological Society – Interim Report to the Productivity Commission – May 2005

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the new research study on the health workforce to be undertaken by the Productivity Commission. The APS will be lodging a formal submission with the Commission by 31st July 2005. In the interim, the APS would like to provide the Commission with background information about the attempts undertaken by the Society to accurately quantify and analyse the psychology workforce across Australia.

Background

The APS is the largest professional association for psychologists in Australia representing more than 14,000 members. The APS represents, promotes and advances the interests of psychology and the psychology workforce and works to increase awareness among government bodies, the media and the public about the value of psychological services at an individual, community and organisational level.

Membership of the APS is not compulsory. However membership entitles psychologists to a range of services including access to resources and networking opportunities. The APS also provides members with professional support and advice on professional, ethical, and workplace issues and marketing, careers and professional development. Apart from the provision of direct services to members, the APS is also responsible for the annual formal accreditation of psychology courses delivered through Australia's tertiary education sector and operates a range of professional development activities which are pre-requisite for membership of specialist colleges.

Health and Non-Health Psychologists

While approximately 50% of psychologists work in the health sector, the other 50% are employed in non-health psychology fields such as organisational, sport, educational, forensic and some parts of community and counselling psychology. The following comments refer generally to psychologists in the health field and not those members working in other designated fields.

Relationship with Psychology Registration Boards

While membership of the APS is voluntary, it is compulsory for all practicing psychologists to be registered with State Registration Boards. This power is vested in the States through s.51 of the Commonwealth of Australia's Constitution which gives the states and territories the power to regulate the health professions and establish statutory practitioner registration schemes.

The APS and Workforce Planning

The APS recognises the significant implications of the Productivity Commission's research study and believes that planning for a skilled, viable

and flexible workforce equipped to manage the projected escalation in demand for services over the next decade and beyond, will depend in part upon the ability to capture, record, analyse and manipulate accurate data. Accurate data facilitates the creation of viable workforce profiles. Viable workforce profiles in turn provide a reliable basis for contributing to the forecasting of trends in service delivery. The ability to accurately measure projected growth or to monitor trends in workforce mobility will ensure that problems of supply and demand can be monitored and addressed with the application of appropriate strategies or interventions. However the APS acknowledges that the difficulties in profiling the health workforce are legion due to the involvement of various loosely linked systems and the overall complexity of the political, industrial and financial environments which characterise Australia's health sector.

Action taken

Recognising that the Registration Boards have the potential to provide the best avenue for access to good workplace and workforce data for psychologists, the Australian Psychological Society in 2002, wrote to Registration Boards to facilitate an arrangement whereby each of them would survey their members once a year for workforce data. The proposal was considered at each Board meeting and by February 2003, all but one of them had agreed to send out a survey with their renewal of registration forms during 2003. The Department of Health NSW was already conducting a survey each year to collect workforce data (Attachment 1).

On the 24th December 2002, the APS notified the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare about the project and requested any assistance that they could provide. In early 2003, the AIHW offered to assume responsibility for the project and re-designed the proposed survey instrument to be used in the process (see Attachment 2). However recently the AIHW indicated to the APS that there may be insufficient resources to process the data.

Future directions – An Interim Measure

In response to the need by the APS to secure accurate and current information on the psychology workforce, the APS has now developed its own survey as an interim measure (Attachment 3). However, feedback from the survey will be limited to APS members who comprise only approximately 60% of all registered psychologists.

Recommendations

The APS supports the guiding principles underlying the National Health Workforce Strategic Framework 2004, in particular Principle 6 which recognises that "health workforce policy must be informed by the best available evidence and linked to the broader health system" and the strategy to "lead, encourage and support a health workforce research, planning and policy development agenda, including national supply and demand studies, to

meet the population and consumer health care needs".¹ The APS acknowledges that limiting the survey to APS members will provide an incomplete but still useful reflection on workforce patterns, mobility and structure which will inform future planning and facilitate forecasting of trends to a limited extent.

However in order to contribute to the overall analysis of the allied health workforce with the rigour intended by the Productivity Commission and in the spirit of the National Health Workforce Strategic Framework, the APS believes that a survey which directly involves the State and Territory Registration Boards is pre-requisite to achieving the most reliable outcome. The APS would be willing to work with the Government and the registration boards to achieve this objective.

¹ National Health Workforce Strategic Framework – Australian Health Ministers’ Conference, April 2004, p. 22