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Public sector executive development in the Asia-Pacific: Different contexts but similar challenges

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Governments around the world invest considerable resources in enhancing the capabilities of their civil service administrations with the intention of improving the quality and effectiveness of public administration. While most developed and many developing nations have established professional bureaucracies that are, in Weberian terms, strong on procedural operations (consistency, routine, compliance and due diligence), they are also now facing huge challenges as governments increasingly require their administrative organs to be more managerial, perhaps more business-like, externally oriented and client-focused, and responsive to changing needs and priorities of government and society. Governments are also acutely aware that they now operate in a rapidly changing world, a globalised environment, where nations are increasingly interconnected and impacting upon each other in various ways. In these turbulent and uncertain times, governments have realised that they require higher level leadership, strategic and analytical skills within their bureaucracies to better steer the ship of state.

This present volume, *Sharpening the Sword of State*, explores in detail the various ways in which 10 jurisdictions around the East Asia-Pacific region enhance their administrative capabilities through training and executive development. It traces how modern governments across this region look to develop their public services and public sector organisations in the face of rapid global change. For many governments there is a delicate balance between the public interest in promoting change and capacity enhancement across the public service, and the temptation to micro-manage agencies and make political appointments. There is a recognition in the country case studies that training and executive development is a crucial investment in human capital but is also couched in a much wider context of public service recruitment, patterns of entry and retention, promotion, executive appointment and career development. The various expert contributors with proximate knowledge of their jurisdictions find that there is a richness of historical traditions and administrative cultures that still informs and structures much of the training and development agendas *in situ*, although many nations are increasingly experimenting with newer and more innovative executive development programs.

The focus on East Asia-Pacific was intentional. This is one of the fastest growing areas of the globe in terms of economic activity, trade, population density and rapid modernisation. It also includes nations with long-established traditions of governance as well as newer nations and jurisdictions still experimenting with governance structures. It is to be appreciated that many of the jurisdictions included in this volume have used public service training and executive development explicitly as a means of nation-building and to pursue a broader set of strategies aimed at reforming government to promote integrity and accountability, and reduce corruption. Rarely have we had assembled such an interesting and detailed account of executive development strategies and capabilities for the Asia-Pacific region.

The nine country contributions in this publication expand on and update papers discussed at an international conference held in Taipei on 'Building Executive Capacity in the Public Sector for Better Governance' (2011). They describe contemporary arrangements for developing public sector leaders in the context of major political, economic and social change, both within each of the countries concerned and across the region and globally. They encompass a range of countries across Asia and the Pacific with very different

norms and cultures, different sizes (both geographically and in terms of population), different histories and different stages of development. Not surprisingly, therefore, their approaches to public sector executive development differ; clearly, there is no universal model. Yet there are common challenges, and lessons that each country can draw from others' experiences or, at the very least, experiences elsewhere that can trigger valuable reflection on each country's approach. These challenges and lessons are relevant also to other countries in the region and beyond.

Contributors were asked to address a series of common questions. First, there were questions about context: political institution arrangements and the relationship between politics and administration, which can frame the responsibilities of public sector leaders and the skills and capabilities they need to have to be effective in their environment, and also the administrative culture of each country's public sector. Second, a set of questions was posed relating to what might be considered the 'demand' side of public sector executive development: the specific skills and capabilities that effective leaders should have, the level of investment in development and the processes for ensuring training and development deliver what is required. A third set of questions related to the 'supply' side: how are training and development provided and by whom, and how is the capacity of those providing such support maintained and enhanced?

These questions have helped to address the requirement for all cross-border learning: the need to 'learn about' before we can 'learn from' (Klein 1997; Marmor et al. 2005). Not surprisingly, in addressing these questions, the contributors raise further important questions about what they mean precisely when describing their countries' approaches to executive leadership. These papers could not possibly cover all such questions but, as Evan Berman commented at the conference, they can certainly provide an important first step towards learning from each other. There is also, of course, a further big step to adapt any lesson to the context of one's own country.

Contexts

Differences

Some differences in context do not need any explanation: Singapore, Hong Kong and Macau, as city-states, differ enormously from the geographic scales of China and Australia. China's population is at least one if not two or more orders of magnitude bigger than the others (Japan, Philippines and South Korea coming next, followed by Australia and Taiwan; Hong Kong, Singapore and Macau are substantially smaller again).

The political frameworks differ substantially. The majority have explicitly democratic processes with elected political leaders, but institutional arrangements even among these vary widely, with practice also varying with regard to the relationship between politics and administration. Some, such as Australia and Singapore, have a history of a clear distinction between elected politicians and professional non-partisan public servants, while others, such as Japan and the Philippines, have a more blurred distinction. China is the main outlier, without a democratic tradition and where, formally, there is no distinction between politics and administration.

Most chapters describe the way administrative or non-political professional leaders in the public sector are developed. In China's case, however, the processes described relate mostly to leaders who in the other countries would be described as political. Leadership development in China's case therefore has a dual emphasis on political skills and authority and on capacity to manage the public sector and solve public problems. Yijia Jing's Chapter 3 describes the increasing emphasis on knowledge and professionalism among China's leaders and their executive training and development, while still retaining a focus on Communist Party loyalty in the face of the country's marketisation and opening up. To a degree, I suspect, this represents some emerging *de facto* distinction between politics and administration as more emphasis is given to 'merit' in senior appointments and more formal approaches are introduced to manage individual performance in the public sector (Chen et al. 2015).

Even where clear separation between politics and administration appears to exist, different political traditions affect approaches towards public service leadership and leadership development. Singapore's long tradition of a single party in power may well have contributed to its capacity to invest so heavily in the recruitment and career development of its leaders, as described by James Low (Chapter 9). Equally, perhaps, Su Tsai-Tsu and Liu Kun-I (Chapter 10) suggest that Taiwan's more recent democratisation has contributed to a degeneration of its civil service, which has become more passive and no longer insulated from electoral politics. Alex Brillantes Jr and Maricel T. Fernandez-Carag (Chapter 8) also report problems with the lack of political support for civil service professionalism in the Philippines, and Hon S. Chan and Joseph Wong Wing-ping (Chapter 4) highlight the challenge facing the Hong Kong Police Force in maintaining its political neutrality.

Administrative norms and cultures evidently vary, with important implications for how leadership development is pursued, and even for the objectives of leadership development. Singapore, for example, has a more directed career management tradition than Australia, where there is a more laissez-faire tradition, with individuals deciding which positions to apply for and promotion decisions being made on the basis of competition among those choosing to apply. Accordingly, Singapore's leadership development process is aimed more explicitly at succession management, though there are signs of Australia also looking to improve career management, particularly with its ageing public sector workforce and impending changing of the guard.

Associated with these variations in norms and culture are the differences across countries over the extent to which staffing decisions are centralised or devolved, and the extent to which there is a whole-of-public sector executive cadre rather than separate agency-based leadership teams. Despite its generally laissez-faire approach to career management and its devolved human resource management system, Australia has had a Senior Executive Service (SES) for more than 30 years and is looking to strengthen the role of the SES as a government-wide leadership cadre. This reflects a British-born tradition, shared with Singapore (and to some extent with Hong Kong), of a generalist administrative elite with broad experience across government functions and skills that can be easily transferred. The Philippines and Korea also have long emphasised service-wide executive development within a centralised framework.

The challenges the nine countries' governments face in serving their peoples vary. Some have highly developed economies while others, like China, are still very much in the developing stage (though growing very rapidly). Japan has been addressing the challenge of an ageing workforce for some years now—a problem of growing importance now to Australia and of inevitable concern to China in about 20 years. Others, like the Philippines, face the no less challenging problem of an oversupply of young people seeking work and improved wellbeing; China is also currently in this position, pending its future challenge of an ageing population.

More general training and education arrangements also vary across countries, some involving highly sophisticated and mature public and private institutions well able to serve both the public and the private sectors, others less developed, meaning that public sector executive development must rely on especially created civil service training organisations. In some cases, such as Singapore and the Philippines, dedicated civil service organisations established in the past, when wider education and training capacity was less developed, have adapted and flourished and continue to offer high-quality services. In other countries, there is increasing use of external education and training service providers with the public sector taking advantage of competition to gain the services it wants at an acceptable price.

Some convergence?

Despite these wide differences in the context in which countries are addressing their executive development needs, the country chapters reveal some interesting common challenges from shared pressures.

All the country chapters refer to globalisation and the increasing international agendas their governments must address. Executive development must recognise these agendas and prepare leaders to manage them.

These agendas, as well as the varying domestic ones, also seem increasingly to demand capacity to work across government and more closely with the community and business. This adds to demands for whole-of-government executive development approaches with perhaps stronger central direction than some have applied in the past.

All the countries have been experiencing changes in the role of the state, whether through marketisation in China and democratisation in South Korea, the Philippines and Taiwan, or through new public management and more recent public sector reforms not only in Australia, Singapore and Japan but also across all the countries covered in this volume, which have led to increased opening up of public services and greater involvement by the private and not-for-profit sectors in the provision of public services and in the policy process.

The increasing demands on government in all countries, whatever their stage of economic development, are also placing more pressure on the professional skills and capacities in the public sector, particularly among the executive leadership. This in turn is leading to the need to invest more in development and, perhaps, to be more demanding about the formal levels of education and competence of leaders and to rely less on informal on-the-job training gained solely through experience. On-the-job training remains critical, but it is becoming more carefully planned and managed and integrated with formal training activities.

A possible consequence of these common challenges is that, notwithstanding the wide differences in political-administrative relationships, improved executive development with increased investment requires commitment from the political leadership. Many countries, including Korea, Singapore and Taiwan, have already demonstrated strong interest from political leaders (including the President, in Korea's case) in administrative leadership development but, even in Australia, political engagement has proven to be critical to such initiatives.

Demand-side arrangements

Who sets the objectives and determines the content?

The objectives of executive development are set explicitly or implicitly by those most concerned about the performance of current and future public sector leaders. Singapore's tightly managed career system is closely controlled from the centre. Its determination to attract and retain the very best and brightest from Singapore's universities is reflected not only in its executive development but also in its elite selection and

promotion management and its highly generous remuneration policies (extraordinarily so relative to the other nations). China's unique party framework also involves close control from the centre.

Countries with less tightly managed career systems still have centrally or collectively set requirements for executive development and selection and some centrally determined programs and activities for senior-level staff identified as having potential for top positions. But to varying degrees these are complemented by agency-level policies for other staff and by agency-level programs aimed to complement the executive skills development offered across government to those with potential for the top positions.

This attempt to balance central and agency-level requirements may be illustrated best by the Australian approach. Despite its devolved authority to make employment decisions, the Public Service Commissioner must 'certify' SES appointments. There is also a service-wide approach to executive development for the SES, which all agencies have been encouraged to adopt, though they often complement this with their own leadership programs and activities. The Centre for Leadership and Learning has been established in the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) to offer and regularly update a suite of programs based on the earlier 'Integrated Leadership System' that was developed cooperatively with agencies to guide middle-level and senior executive development across the APS (APSC 2004; Podger 2004).

The Philippines' framework, developed by the Career Executive Service Board, would seem to provide guidance to Philippines' agencies that is similar to that provided by the APSC, though perhaps with a somewhat firmer hand.

The Hong Kong Police Force's arrangements represent an exemplar of a comprehensive agency-based approach. While Hong Kong also has a civil service-wide approach to executive training and development, the police force has responded not only to its own technical and professional requirements but also to its broader leadership and personnel management requirements, consistent with whole-of-government approaches. In this way, it ensures training and development of Hong Kong police are much more closely tied

to its own workforce planning requirements and to the culture of professionalism and shared learning it is looking to promote across the police force.

The Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG), described by Peter Allen and John Wanna (Chapter 2), represents an important further advancement in shared leadership development, not only across agencies within a jurisdiction but also across jurisdictions. Two national governments and eight sub-national governments own ANZSOG and, through its board, determine the programs and their content. Participating universities are also represented on the board. While ANZSOG focuses on an elite group of current and emerging leaders, and provides only a limited range of programs, it is influencing the wider range of leadership activities of all 10 jurisdictions.

Who pays? How much?

Responsibility for funding executive development activity corresponds very broadly with the extent to which the requirements are set centrally or distributed. In Singapore, half the funding is provided centrally. In Australia, very little is funded centrally, although the national and state/territory governments have injected substantial capital into ANZSOG and each government has made a centralised commitment to participant numbers. Nonetheless, almost all the costs of training and development—whether through ANZSOG or the wide range of other programs provided through the APSC and other jurisdictions' central personnel agencies—are met by each agency for its employees.

In some countries, the centrally provided funds are directed to the government supplier of training programs, while in others the funds support the participants. In China, there is a mix, with the centre subsidising participants and trainers, while agencies are responsible for meeting the remaining costs of their participating staff. The benefits of funding via participants and their agencies include placing competitive pressure on service providers and requiring providers to respond more carefully to the demands of participants and their agencies (that is, 'customer focus'). Funding direct to the supplier, however, may better ensure investment in research and trainer development and thereby lead to better-quality programs in

the future, despite the danger of complacency arising from having a monopoly supplier. It would be interesting to test further the experience countries have had in these respects.

While it is hard to be sure about the definitions involved, there appear to be wide variations in the levels of investment in executive development. Several countries, such as Korea, Singapore and Taiwan, the Hong Kong Police Force and Macau, appear to be investing about 3 per cent or more in training and development programs (in terms of total administrative expenses and days or hours dedicated to development activities, which is often referred to as a 'good practice' benchmark). Others—for example, Australia—seem to be spending nearer to 1 per cent, although there are suggestions this is increasing as Australia's tradition of career public servants learning constantly on the job (like lifetime apprentices) has been shifting, with greater mobility and advances in technology and knowledge requiring more formal education and training.

What is the content?

It is hard to draw comparisons of content as different countries describe their programs using their own terminology and without any common definitions. The Taiwan chapter, for example, refers to a progression from 'management capabilities' to 'leadership development' and then 'strategy development', linked to 'core competencies'; the chapter on the Hong Kong Police Force refers to a progression from 'vocational skills' to 'professional development' and on to 'executive development'.

Australian distinctions and definitions, while not fully explained in Chapter 2, might provide a useful framework for further international comparisons. The Integrated Leadership System distinguishes between leadership, management and technical skills, suggesting that the importance of technical skills generally declines at executive levels while the importance of leadership and management skills increases. It also implies that the development of technical skills is the responsibility of individual agencies but, as the management and leadership responsibilities increase, a stronger role in executive development needs to be played by the centre.

The precise balance between these three sets of skills or capabilities will depend on the precise responsibilities of the (executive) position, as technical or particular professional skills may still be critical for top executives in some agencies (for example, police, Treasury, attorney-general's) or particular executive positions in other agencies (for example, chief medical officer, chief scientist, chief economist).

Nevertheless, as people rise up the ranks, their sphere of control tends to widen, their budget responsibilities increase, their time horizon lengthens, their breadth of critical relationships broadens and the impact of their decisions increases. Accordingly, their management responsibilities increase and the management skills they require change—from supervising small numbers of staff and managing a number of tasks, to managing small budgets and planning projects and activities, to broader business planning and program management and to strategic planning and capability building. Similarly, leadership capabilities become more important and shift—from being a productive member of a team, to leading small teams and to leading and positioning agencies and achieving whole-of-government outcomes or even multi-jurisdictional ones.

A distinction between management and leadership has been emphasised in the leadership literature of the past 30 years or more (see, for example, Burns 1978; Kotter 1996), with that on leadership focusing, for example, on collaboration and empowerment rather than direction, and relating more to a changing rather than a static environment. The capabilities required for leadership have been articulated in the Australian model as:

- achieving results
- communicating with influence
- cultivating effective working relationships
- shaping strategic directions
- exemplifying personal integrity and commitment.

As a person takes on a more senior role, the specific skill requirements for each of these capabilities change and deepen. Behind these capabilities there is also the theme of constant learning and building 'learning organisations'.

More recently, Australia has also begun to draw on Harvard's 'Knowing, Doing, Being Framework' (Nohria and Khurana 2010) focusing on, respectively, learning specific management and technical skills, applying them in the public sector environment to build leadership capabilities (identified above) and to strengthen self-awareness, social skills and situational awareness.

The various chapters in this volume reflect strong interest in developing similar leadership capabilities and management skills among their public sector executives, and to building learning organisations. Pan Suk Kim (Chapter 6) refers to the Korean competency framework that emphasises 'thinking, working and building relationships'. The Philippines chapter describes its programs for Career Executive Service Officers, with its foundation program focusing on 'knowing oneself', 'relating to others' and 'leading the organisation' and its specific leadership and management competencies including communication, networking, leadership, change management, performance management and strategic thinking. Taiwan also emphasises communication skills.

Many of the capabilities and skills involved are sometimes called 'soft skills' but they are anything but 'soft', and developing them requires careful effort. There is a danger in the leadership rhetoric, however, that it becomes too generic and loses its sharpness and hardness. The Singapore approach described here has a hard edge throughout. The Senior Management Program includes translating policy intent into implementation, public consultation and public communications; the Leadership in Administration Program for top executives involves thinking critically about the future of Singapore and how the public service should respond, and also includes policy implementation, specific management skills and organisational leadership and learning about political, economic and social developments in Singapore and across the region.

It would be useful therefore to consider in more detail the content of the programs and measures identified by governments and agencies as likely to develop their future executives. Most are looking to a mix of activities, not relying solely on education and training programs. The Hong Kong Police Force devotes only one-quarter of its effort to formal education and training programs, placing much more emphasis on mentoring, coaching and careful career management. Australia

is now utilising a 10:20:70 template for its development activities: 10 per cent in the classroom, 20 per cent in structured self-learning and 70 per cent on the job. Singapore and Australia are also encouraging mobility to widen the experience of future leaders, testing individuals in challenging projects and programs, placing some in jobs outside the public service and complementing education and training programs.

The content of the education and training programs is also focused on practical skills. A number of countries emphasise their practical or case management style; the Hong Kong chapter refers to its 'problem-based' approach as distinct from a 'curriculum-based' approach. Hiroko Kudo (Chapter 5) refers to Japan's emphasis on shared learning and participant-led training with a practical orientation. ANZSOG also makes much use of case studies and group learning, though it also tries to explore theory as well as practice to ensure participants are trained for the challenges they may face in the future and not just learning the experience of past challenges.

While there are slightly different emphases, all are pursuing content-rich programs. ANZSOG's Executive Master of Public Administration (EMPA) curriculum, for example, includes: delivering public value, managing public sector organisations, designing public policies and programs, leading public sector change, governing by the rules, decision-making under uncertainty and government in a market economy.

A common theme for nearly all the countries is the need to ensure future public sector executives are globally aware. Some, such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Macau, provide some or all senior executives with study trips, while others are offering positions in other countries' executive development programs. All ensure within their training and development programs some exposure to international developments, using educators and trainers from elsewhere to complement homegrown teachers. As a conference participant noted, the costs of sending executives to Harvard may be prohibitive, but it may be possible to bring some Harvard or similar international experts home for a visit.

Who, if anyone, evaluates and how?

Most countries have been reviewing their executive development programs, mostly through central agencies working with the training and development providers. The Taiwan chapter highlights the use of scientific methods to evaluate its programs. ANZSOG, with a board of senior jurisdiction representatives and university leaders, also uses formal evaluation processes. The board has called for formal reviews of its EMPA program and its research activity, each time establishing a small team of independent experts who have surveyed and consulted widely with practitioners, academics and program participants before providing reports later made public on ANZSOG's website.

A challenge for any review or evaluation is whether the performance of those who undertake executive development has been improved by the experience and whether the performance of their agencies in delivering public services has materially improved as a result. Intermediate results are more easily measured, such as the promotion success of participants, the views of their supervisors on the extent and usefulness of the knowledge and skills gained and the views of participants. The ANZSOG review in 2007 of its EMPA program warned against relying too heavily on participants' views, as there is a risk they reflect the 'entertainment' value of the program rather than its usefulness and effectiveness.

Trends

All the countries are looking to increase investment in executive development and to ensure greater end-user control. Despite the wide variation in extent of centralisation or devolution in their public administration culture, all are ensuring a significant whole-of-government approach and, within the different content of the programs, all are giving more emphasis to leadership capabilities and are looking to ensure senior executives are well exposed to international developments and thinking and that they learn about working across borders. There is also increasing recognition that executive development requires much more than education and training programs.

Supply-side arrangements

Most of the countries concerned have a major government-owned provider of training and development services though many are increasingly using other service providers as well, particularly for more specialist training. In most cases, the government-owned provider receives some funding directly from government.

Australia (and New Zealand) is the main exception to this. ANZSOG, while owned jointly by the participating jurisdictions, does not itself deliver the training but works through a network of participating universities with some core components of the training provided centrally through contracted staff from Australia and New Zealand and elsewhere. As explained in the Australian chapter, ANZSOG is also only one part of the system of executive development training, with the remainder provided by a range of education institutions and private sector training organisations operating strictly on a fee-for-service basis, sometimes based on panel contracts negotiated by the APSC and similar bodies in other jurisdictions.

The formality of the training varies. Some, such as in Taiwan and for the Hong Kong Police Force, requires accredited training to support the competency-based occupational structure. Executive training and development similarly may have a formal, competency-based style although this is often complemented by an array of less formal short-course training programs provided by various public and private suppliers. Again, Australia is somewhat of an outlier with its more devolved and laissez-faire approach to human resource management, traditionally giving less emphasis to formal, accredited training, but that has been changing over the past decade or two. Partly tied to the increasing reliance on a graduate workforce, there has been a steady increase in postgraduate certificates and degrees, and training that is recognised towards such certificates and degrees.

An important by-product of more accredited training is the discipline education institutions themselves place on the quality of the courses and the assessment of the participants. The participants also value the accreditation, seeing the benefits attached for future job prospects. On the other hand, control by the education institutions can limit end-user influence and make modifications for changing requirements harder to achieve.

Several chapters, including those on Taiwan and South Korea, express concern about the quality of the executive development effort by education and training providers, particularly where the trainers are poorly paid. Enhancing the capability of the providers is seen as a priority, but the budgetary implications will be difficult to overcome. Differentiating programs targeted towards the high fliers, as is done in Singapore and Australia, can limit the costs involved but requires acceptance of this elite approach. The approach may not disadvantage others if, as seems to have happened in Australia, the elite programs have influenced a wider array of other executive training and development, increasing demand, the resources available and the quality of the teaching.

Another important factor in ensuring the capability of training and development providers is to fund research linked to the training. Most countries surveyed in this volume have been building up case studies that can be widely drawn on. Others, such as ANZSOG, go substantially further to support research into areas of public administration that can be drawn on in teaching, and to encourage practitioners to conduct and use research. These keep the teaching programs up-to-date both with current practice and with developments in public administration theory.

Trends

There seem to be several common trends and issues. As mentioned earlier, there is more emphasis on ensuring suppliers of executive development services are meeting the demands of the market—the requirements of top management in the government.

There appears to be a breaking down of monopoly suppliers so that, even where there remains a dominant government supplier, it is complemented by other organisations including higher education institutions and private companies and is thereby subject to some competitive pressures.

If not already doing so, countries appear to be giving more weight to accredited education and training organisations, and are increasingly concerned about the capability of the training providers and looking for ways to review the quality and effectiveness of learning programs and methods.

Conclusion

Constant themes throughout this volume include not only the importance of public sector executive development but also the desire for executives to have an international focus and to be ‘world-class’ leaders able to deal with and influence international agendas.

All the countries recognise the need to invest in executive development but the costs are high, particularly if the training includes international engagement, and more effort is required to ensure value for money.

A common theme is the need to ensure the supply of executive development services is responsive to the demands of top management and the government, and to ensure these demands are carefully developed and analysed and constantly reviewed.

The skills and capabilities being developed vary, but it seems that all are giving more emphasis to leadership and management skills—the ‘soft’ skills concerned with effective working relationships within agencies, across government, across jurisdictions and beyond government—and in shaping rather than directing strategic change. They also rely heavily on public service values and integrity. Complementing these are more specific management and technical or professional skills. Encompassing them all is an attitude of continuous learning and the capacity to build learning organisations.

Such executive development requires a mix of strategies, with increasing emphasis on learning through experience to complement formal education and training programs. A challenge for all countries is how to assess the effectiveness of the learning methods used and how to build capacity among those responsible for providing education and training services.

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