

DETERMINING OPTIMUM TRAINING PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES FOR GOVERNMENT PROCUREMENT PROFESSIONALS

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ABSTRACT. Training for government procurement officers is undertaken in a variety of ways, including formal and informal, combining internal and external training and education. This paper provides a practical and personal overview of the experiences within the governments of Queensland, Australia, and Papua New Guinea in relation to procurement training and education, and discusses whether this training should be tailored to meet the specific government entity, or should reflect what is generally available as 'best practice' procurement training. The paper proposes that procurement training and education needs to provide qualifications that are both nationally and internationally recognised, rather than be specific to the government entity, in order to enhance the professionalism of the government procurement officer.

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INTRODUCTION

The Australian Government, much like any government, spends a large amount of taxpayers' money in buying goods and services. To this end, it is imperative that government procurement officers are fully trained to be able to carry out the various activities, from procurement of simple items, to complex procurement and contract management. There is an incredible range of training available to government procurement officers, from bespoke in-house non-accredited courses specific to government departments and covering basic to complex procurement processes, to external courses provided by training organisations, professional bodies, government funded colleges and universities. The question is, should they concentrate on the tailored government courses (and at what level), or should government procurement officers be exposed to commercially available 'best practice' procurement training? Which would make them better government procurement officers?

THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE: AN EXAMPLE

In Australia, there are various approaches to training within Commonwealth and State Government Departments. It is true to say that in years gone by, the focus was on procurement training that contained generic elements, but was tailored to suit the particular government entity. An example of this is the Queensland Government, which from 2000 introduced a four level capability based (Dooley and Jeffrey, 2003) training programme; Level 1, a two day basic procurement course, Level 2, a three day intermediate procurement course, Level 3, consisting of three by three day Advanced Procurement courses, and Level 4, consisting of three by three days Strategic Procurement courses. Successful completion of each level provided Certification at that level, which in some cases was a requirement for specific positions. Further pathways (Levels 5 to 8) were developed external to government through University qualifications (Dooley and Tonkin, 2004). The whole Procurement

Certification process was adopted under licence by the New South Wales Government, and many other jurisdictions (including the Governments of Ireland and Canada), were interested in adopting this model. The model was also subsequently adopted by the United Nations.

In 2005, the need to offer a pathway towards recognised qualifications was introduced (many students were demanding this), where the training incorporated nationally recognised competency units (it should be noted that the competencies gained through the study were not sufficient for students to obtain a full qualification). Students would then also be assessed as meeting those competencies, but were then forced to take the results to external bodies for ratification and further study, before any qualifications could be issued. Out of the thousands of government procurement officers undertaking the training, very few were ever successful in gaining a qualification through this process.

In 2008, the Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply (CIPS) Australia, after becoming the premier procurement professional body in Australia in 2007, assessed the Queensland government courses at Level 3 and Level 4 as meeting the CIPS Level 3 and Level 4 standard, meaning that students who were successful in gaining the Level 4 Certification, could now enrol in the CIPS Level 5 Advanced Diploma through CIPS Approved Study Centres. Interestingly, today the United Nations has also incorporated the CIPS qualifications into their Certification process (UNDP, 2012).

Also in 2008, the Australian Procurement and Construction Council (APCC), in conjunction with a range of government bodies throughout Australia, prepared a report outlining a number of levels and roles of procurement practitioners, including the training required at those various levels, and aimed to collaborate between APCC and CIPS with the 'potential to deliver an improved national training program' (APCC, 2008, p.25).

In 2012, the Queensland Government will be offering the full Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications of Diploma and Advanced Diploma of Government (Purchasing and Contracting) for students successfully completing the Level 3 and Level 4

qualifications, in addition to maintaining the recognition from CIPS. Courses will meet the requirements of both the VET qualifications and CIPS, as well as retaining some information specific to the Queensland Government, particularly at the lower levels.

THE PAPUA NEW GUINEA EXPERIENCE

In 2009, funding was provided by AusAid to allow CIPS Australia to deliver procurement training to the Papua New Guinea Government. This training incorporated the CIPS International Certificate and CIPS Advanced International Certificate of Purchasing and Supply to a wide range of government employees in various departments. Over the past three years, around 120 government procurement employees have taken advantage of this training, many of whom have been successful in gaining the qualifications. The materials are generic CIPS materials, which do not focus specifically on government procurement, let alone Papua New Guinea procurement; however, trainers incorporated activities and case studies that related to the Papua New Guinea situation, as well as the policies and procedures of the Good Procurement Manual (CSTB, 2008). As a result of their involvement in progressing procurement education in Papua New Guinea, CSTB were awarded the CIPSA Leadership Award in 2009.

THE CASE FOR TAILORED TRAINING

There is no question that public sector procurement differs from private sector procurement, primarily because they are dealing with taxpayer funds, so the need to maintain transparency and probity throughout the process is paramount. In some jurisdictions such as the United Nations or the European Union, negotiations are conducted either not at all, or through stringent processes, unlike the

private sector, that assumes that negotiations will occur. This view is echoed in a report conducted by the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC, 2010, p.9):

'Lack of expertise is a problem for new staff, staff from the private sector who are not aware that the public sector does things differently..'

For this reason, and others, training for public sector procurement staff is often tailored to suit the way the public sector undertakes procurement. In many cases, this also means specific add-on training relevant to the department or agency in question; in Queensland for example, each department sets their own procurement policies and procedures, including thresholds.

THE CASE FOR EXISTING RECOGNISED TRAINING

However, the need for bespoke training needs to be offset against developing procurement professionals who are not just recognised within government, but also within the profession as a whole; to be exposed to the full range of procurement activities and strategies, but then to adapt those to suit public sector procurement. McCue et al (2007, pp. 255-256) provided this insight:

"Still, more than ever in the past, the reform we are seeing now at the state level is an interest in increased professionalism, greater education and efforts towards professional certifications".

In the United Kingdom, Australia and much of the world, the professional certification is provided by CIPS through the various qualifications leading to MCIPS (full Member of CIPS), and in the United States by the Institute of Supply Management (ISM) through their Certified Professional in Supply Management (CPSM) certification. Both programs are not specific to government, although they contain components of public sector purchasing, or even electives that can be studied.

As discussed earlier in this paper, the UN training programmes are now linked to CIPS. In the Queensland, NSW and Western Australian public sectors (and in all sectors through the APCC), a link is also being made to CIPS, either through recognition or the incorporation of CIPS units. On a global level, in addition to the UNDP, the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) has seen the need to engage CIPS training for its staff to introduce internationally recognised standards (UNOPS, 2012). It is important to note that in most cases the CIPS qualifications do not replace, but are complementary to, existing training; however, there is not a need to run eight separate courses (in the Queensland government example) focusing on public sector procurement, but only an adjunct training program to provide the specific detail. As discussed by Kling (2011), there will also be an ongoing need to link the various VET, professional certification and University education programs to provide a seamless pathway for procurement practitioners, be they public or private.

The need for public sector procurement staff to take on professionally certified procurement training is therefore based on the following:

- a. the need to be certified as meeting an internationally recognised standard;
- b. the need to be exposed to 'best practice' procurement and strategies, then adapt them to the public sector;
- c. the need to use a range of tools and techniques to deliver value for money to the organisation they represent;
- d. "the cultivation of a community of peers" (APCC, 2008, pp.27).

CONCLUSION

It is time for public sector entities everywhere to adopt internationally recognised certifications and qualifications for their procurement staff. This will not mean the end of public sector specific training; rather an adjunct to this, recognising that the public sector has unique issues and problems to deal with. However, professional

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certification will provide long-lasting benefits to both government procurement professionals, and to the organisations they represent.

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