

Making AusAID smarter: a role for universities

by Joel Negin

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Over the past few years and with increasing momentum, AusAID has shifted from essentially being a project-focused contract manager to an agency that works more at the policy level on sector programming. Whereas AusAID used to fund managing contractors and NGOs to deliver discrete pieces of development activities, they now interact with multiple international agencies, with developing country governments, and with other partners on sector policy issues. For example, there has been a reduction by half of the amount of Australian aid spent through contractors. Phrases such as sector-wide approach, harmonisation, pooled funding, and aid effectiveness are heard more often than ever before.

The Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness highlighted the importance of these changes and the substantial impact of this momentum on how AusAID operates. As AusAID (along with a number of other development agencies) has made this change, they have run into a challenge: their human resource capacity. After years of building generalist staff who specialised in contract management and who did not have sector specific technical skill, AusAID must question whether they have found themselves without the skillset needed for the new type of work being undertaken. The Aid Review and other stakeholders highlight the need for skills such as high-level negotiation capacity, stakeholder management, diplomacy and sector policy design. These skills are critical to success and risk management as AusAID staff interact with government ministries, multilateral institutions and other development partners.

This is not a critique of AusAID individuals but rather an institutional shift from recruiting and training staff for one purpose and the significant change needed as the agency's work changes. Importantly, this static situation is not confined to AusAID — educational institutions have also been slow to provide the training fora for this new skillset.

Training for development practitioners in Australia is generally provided by Australian universities through Masters of Development Studies, Masters of International Development and Masters of Public Health (MPH) programs (and

equivalents). Yet the skills that are most needed in this new paradigm – management, leadership, negotiation, diplomacy – are not necessarily taught in those types of programs.

For example, most MPH programs continue to focus on biostatistics, epidemiology and health promotion. These skills are valuable for jobs working in communities, but do not add sufficiently to the capacity of someone being asked to negotiate a \$40 million five-year contribution to a government's maternal health pooled fund. Much of the development studies taught in Australia focuses on development theory and less on development practice.

Some would argue that the most appropriate place to learn the requisite skills would be a Masters of Business Administration program. But the profit-driven emphasis of such courses often does not suit the frontline challenges of development work.

The [Masters of Development Practice](#) program started by Columbia University's [School of International and Public Affairs](#) has attempted to bring together experts from a range of fields to provide focused training on how to work in the modern-day aid delivery environment. Students are taught about management, health, education, economics, infrastructure and are placed in developing country projects for three months between years one and two. Such a model approaches what might be needed.

Of course educational institutions are not AusAID training factories, but rather attempt to meet the needs of a diverse range of Australian and international students who might work for small NGOs, in communities or with their government ministries or international agencies. I would argue that Australian universities have a role to play in training future AusAID staff, but that they need to be more flexible by bringing in lecturers from public administration, development studies, sector experts and business leaders to better prepare young Australians – as well as people from around the world – to be able to make a positive impact in the complex, multi-faceted, multi-actor world of international aid and development.

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