Building strategic organisational learning implementation

for the Australian Public Service (APS)

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This dissertation contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my dissertation, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the *Copyright Act 1968*.

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Abstract

The main aim of this research project "Building strategic organisational learning implementation for the Australian Public Service (APS)" was to add to a better conceptual and pragmatic understanding of strategic organisational learning implementation in an Australian context, with particular reference to the APS during a period of change.

To achieve this aim, a qualitative research methodology utilising focus groups and semi-structured in-depth interviews with learning and development practitioners was employed, and interpretive content analyses were used to analyse the data collected.

The results showed what actively engaged practitioners believed to be important considerations in regards to the three conceptual elements and their component parts in terms of contributing to the success of a change initiative. Additionally, the results showed the crucial interrelationships occurring between the three conceptual elements and their component parts. In particular, the results highlighted that, in keeping with structuration theory, the organisational learning element is seen as a recursive rather than a linear process, in that it is purposefully engaged by virtue of the inputs to, and the outcomes of, both the strategy and implementation elements to which it is dynamically linked. The research has also highlighted the importance of leadership to the three conceptual elements, both singularly and collectively, and has suggested that this is an area that warrants further investigation as matter of priority within management research. Additional areas for future research were also identified.

A set of graphical-type schemata was developed depicting both the dynamic interdependent relationship between each of the three conceptual elements and at the same time interposing the ongoing, cyclic interplay that organisational learning presents between its other partner

elements. Additionally, these schema represent specific relationships between the different

components that make up each of the three conceptual elements.

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1.   Introduction

The main aim of this research project "Building strategic organisational learning implementation for the Australian Public Service (APS)" is to add to a better conceptual and pragmatic understanding of strategic organisational learning implementation in an Australian context, with particular reference to the APS during a period of change. In order to achieve this aim, the researcher has broken strategic organisational learning implementation into its three conceptual parts—*strategy*, *organisational learning*, and *implementation*—and will study each of them as independent elements as well as examining the interrelationships between them. In this regard, the researcher has produced an analytically derived schema to show the relationships identified between these three conceptual elements as a way of advancing our knowledge base on the subject matter. The research also has a practical focus through detailing suggestions as to how the resulting schema could best support usage of these three conceptual elements, as well as assisting practitioners to develop best practices regarding strategic organisational learning implementation.

1.2.   Study background

This section provides a background to the research. It presents the topic that is the focus of the research, as well as introducing the context of the research both in terms of the study setting and the period of change in which the conceptual elements are being studied.

1.2.1. Topic area

The topic that is the subject of the proposed research project is "strategic organisational learning implementation". The three separate conceptual elements represented in this topic— organisational learning, strategy and implementation—are multi-dimensional, complex

constructs with multiple definitions (Jerez-Gomez, Cespedes-Lorente and Valle-Cabrera, 2005; Kalman, 2007). Integrating these constructs adds to the complexity and is not something that has been achieved effectively (Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995); although strategy and organisational learning have been viewed as one and the same, with some researchers conceptualising strategising as a process of organisational learning (Mintzberg, 1994; Voronov, 2008).

1.2.2. Context—the research setting

The setting in which this research is situated is the Australian Public Service (APS). The following brief profile of the APS is taken from the 2009–10 *State of the Service Report* (Australian Public Service Commission, 2010):

- The APS consists of approximately 160,000 employees working across some 100 agencies.

- The APS classification structure consists of three broad classification bands—APS, Executive Level (EL) and Senior Executive Service (SES)—with these classification bands consisting of six, two and three levels respectively. The total workforce consists of approximately 72% APS1–6, 25% EL1–2 and 2% SES1–3 employees, with the remaining 1% being trainees and graduates.

- Just under 40% of all APS employees are based in Canberra.

- The APS workforce is a well-educated workforce, with over 55% of employees having graduate qualifications (Australian Public Service Commission, 2010).

The APS develops policy and provides services in diverse areas such as health care, social support and regulation, taxation, consumer protection, and immigration (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2010). The environment in which the APS provides these services is strongly influenced by trends such as increased rates of globalisation and technological change, which are leading to demands for higher levels of service and performance (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2010; Management Advisory Committee, 2010; Australian Public Service Commission, 2010). It is therefore not surprising that a number of reports have identified the need for the APS to start making substantial changes to how it thinks and operates (Management Advisory Committee, 2010; Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2010), and have discussed the potential improvements in business outcomes that can be achieved by paying more systematic attention to developing the capability of APS organisations and their people (Australian Public Service Commission, 2010; Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2010). This is accompanied by the recognition that capability building requires a systematic management approach to learning and development as an integral part of workforce planning (Australian Public Service Commission, 2010).

Whilst this need to develop the capability of the APS workforce has been articulated above, challenges in achieving this have also been identified (Australian Public Service Commission, 2009). These challenges as reported include:

- "increasing the capacity to manage organisational change or changes to functions and workloads

- improving the ability to attract and retain appropriately skilled employees

- developing capable leaders, managing succession, and knowledge management".

Additional challenges or barriers to the new ways of working include "risk aversion; failure of leadership; resource constraints; lack of direction and measurement; policy conflicts; hierarchical attitudes; silo mentality; legislative limitations; accountability concerns; and resistance to change" (Management Advisory Committee, 2010).

Consistent across these barriers and challenges is the concern expressed regarding leadership within the APS. This is backed up with data from consecutive *State of the Service* reports, which reported high dissatisfaction with leadership and leadership communication in 2009–10:

- only 43% of employees agree with the statement "the leadership is of a high quality" (down from 46% in 2008–09);

- only 32% of employees agree with the statement "communication between senior leaders and other employees is effective" (down from 37% in 2008–09); and

- only 40% of employees agree with the statement that "senior leaders discuss with staff how to respond to future challenges" (down from 43% in 2008–09) (Australian Public Service Commission, 2010).

In this setting, a study of strategic organisational learning implementation would seem worthwhile in making a contribution towards achieving the desired new ways of working. Definitions used in this research for the three conceptual elements that constitute strategic organisational learning implementation—strategy, organisational learning and implementation—are provided in section 1.5.

1.2.3. Context—the period of change

As the focus of this research is on strategic organisational learning implementation in APS agencies during a period of change, the researcher felt that it was important to focus on a

singular period of change. In March 2010 the Australian Government released a report *Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for Reform of Australian Government Administration*. In May 2010 the Prime Minister accepted all of the recommendations in the report and mandated their adoption across the APS (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2010). The Blueprint contains a series of recommendations for reforms to strengthen the APS to meet the challenges it faces in the new century (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2010). At the time of conducting this research, APS agencies were at different stages of incorporating, or considering how to incorporate, the recommendations from the Blueprint into their operations. Throughout this research project, the procedures and methodologies relating to the three conceptual elements would be adopted in light of the changes required by the Blueprint.

1.3. Research objectives

This section presents the objectives of the research by introducing the aim, the discussion of the research problem and the specific questions that the research seeks to answer.

1.3.1. Research aim

The main aim of this research project is to add to a better conceptual and pragmatic understanding of strategic organisational learning implementation in an Australian context, with particular reference to the APS during a period of change. In order to achieve this aim, the researcher has broken strategic organisational learning implementation into its three conceptual parts—strategy, organisational learning, and implementation—and will study each of them as independent elements as well as examining the interrelationships between them.

1.3.2. Discussion of the research problem

A strong and persistent theme in the organisational learning literature has been that of well-managed organisational learning providing sustainable competitive advantage for organisations

(Crossan, Lane and White, 1999; Jerez-Gomez, Cespedes-Lorente and Valle-Cabrera, 2004; Dai, Duserick and Dai, 2005; Saru, 2007; Dealtry, 2008; Andreadis, 2009; Sanchez, Vijande and Gutierrez, 2009; Vithessonthi and Thoumrungroje, 2011). There is also, however, acknowledgement in the literature that very little guidance is available to assist practitioners in the development and implementation of organisational learning strategy (Goh and Richards, 1997; Jerez-Gomez et al., 2005; Kalman, 2007; Lipshitz, Popper and Oz, 1996; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross and Smith, 1999; Yeo, 2007b). Additionally there would appear to have been limited research undertaken on organisational learning strategy in a public sector environment (Sharma, 2005; Yeo, 2007b) and during strategic change (Vithessonthi and Thoumrungroje, 2011). This paper seeks to rectify this problem by developing an analytically derived schema to show the relationships between organisational learning, strategy and implementation, and detailing suggestions to assist practitioners to develop best practices regarding strategic organisational learning implementation in an APS context, particularly during a period of change.

1.3.3. Primary research questions

For the research project to achieve the aim as stated in section 1.3.1 and address the research problem, the researcher proposes to provide answers to the following questions:

1. How is organisational learning viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?

2. How is strategy viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?

3. How is implementation viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?

4. How do organisational learning, strategy and implementation interact in APS agencies during a period of change?

1.4.   Justification and importance of the research

This section is used to justify the research and explain its importance. This includes explanations of the contributions to both knowledge and practice, as well as an introduction to ethical implications of the research.

1.4.1. Contribution to knowledge

As outlined in section 1.3.2, the literature provides limited guidance as to best practice approaches for the development and implementation of organisational learning strategy, with a particular gap in terms of this topic in a public sector environment. As such, the researcher intends for the research project to add to a better conceptual and pragmatic understanding of the implementation of strategic organisational learning in an APS context during a period of change.

1.4.2. Contribution to practice

The practical focus of this research project is on providing guidance to practitioners in the development of best practices regarding strategic organisational learning implementation in the studied environment.

1.4.3. Ethical implications

The Australian Government requires ethics clearances for any research involving human participation (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007a; 2007b); ethical clearance for this research project was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Newcastle with approval number H-2010-1228.

Section 3.5 of Chapter 3 discusses key ethical considerations of this research. These considerations include ensuring:

- a non-coercive approach to recruitment of participants and ensuring their informed consent to participate, including obtaining their permission to record the focus groups and interviews (Cook, 2005); and

- confidentiality by making sure that comments of participants are not directly attributed (Cook, 2005).

1.5. Definitions

Key themes in the literature have been used by the researcher to produce the following definitions of the three conceptual elements on which this research focuses. These definitions were arrived at through a process of taking a broad overview of the key concepts (as presented in sections 2.2.1–2.2.5 for organisational learning, 2.3.1–2.3.7 for strategy and 2.4.1–2.4.6 for implementation) and definitions associated with each of the conceptual elements, and honing in on aspects that appeared to be most closely aligned with the objectives of this research project. This honing in was achieved by collating the key concepts and definitions in Microsoft Word tables and then drilling them down into the final statement of definitions.

Organisational learning: There is a multitude of definitions of organisational learning in the literature (Chan and Scott-Ladd, 2004). These include organisational learning being defined as "a change process where organisations acquire knowledge and skills to deal with issues or problems in order to enhance processes or productivity" (Chan and Scott-Ladd, 2004) and "the coming together of individuals to enable them to support and encourage each other's learning" (Hodgkinson, 2002). In this research, organisational learning is defined as a process of developing new meaning and collective sense-making in order to enhance performance of the organisation in its environment.

Strategy: As with organisational learning, there are many definitions of strategy in the literature. These include "strategy as a pattern in a stream of decisions" (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985) and "the collusion over time of deliberate managerial intentions, the subsequent implementation efforts and the unanticipated emerging developments" (Sminia, 2009). In this research, strategy is defined as an evolving direction-setting process encompassing ongoing decision-making and learning.

Implementation: The implementation literature focuses primarily on how things are done and barriers to avoid, rather than providing a clear definition of this concept. In this research, implementation is defined as the tools and processes to translate strategy into action.

## *1.6.	Outline of the dissertation*

The dissertation has been structured into five chapters as follows:

- Chapter 1: Introduction

- Chapter 2: Literature review

- Chapter 3: Research methodology

- Chapter 4: Results

- Chapter 5: Discussion and conclusion.

Chapter 1 introduces the study background in terms of the topic, the study setting and the period of change in which the research is set. It is also used to introduce the research objectives for this study, and to outline the importance of the research in terms of its contribution to both knowledge and practice. It also provides an outline of the dissertation, as well as introducing the ethical implications and limitations of the research.

Chapter 2 presents a review of literature relating to the three conceptual elements on which this research focuses—organisational learning, strategy and implementation—and presents a conclusion that highlights the relationships between these three elements.

Chapter 3 presents the research methodology used to empirically investigate strategic organisational learning implementation for APS agencies. It discusses social science research paradigms and qualitative methodologies, and provides an explanation of the selection and justification of the intended research methodology. It also explains the research design and implementation adopted for this study, as well as the identified limitations and ethical considerations of the methodological approach.

Chapter 4 presents the data analyses procedures and the findings from the focus groups and the in-depth semi-structured interviews with learning and development practitioners in APS agencies in relation to the research problem and research questions.

Chapter 5 critically analyses the data presented in Chapter 4. The chapter explores contributions from this study in the context of the literature, the research questions, and implications for theory and practice. Chapter 5 also discusses the limitations of the research.

1.7. Limitations of the research

Section 3.4 of Chapter 3 discusses the limitations of the research design and strategies to address these limitations. These limitations relate to:

- the need to manage subjectivity due to the researcher being a key instrument of the research, as moderator of the focus groups and as the interviewer. Related to this issue is the need to ensure that the findings represent as truly as possible the perspectives of

the participants, rather than covertly reflect the biases and beliefs of the researcher (Morrow, 2005);

- possible limitations on the generalisability of results to other APS agencies not earmarked for participation; and

- the nature of participants in the research in regards to their roles as employees of the APS. The environment they operate in, and the public scrutiny they operate under, is cited as contributing towards a risk-averse attitude (Management Advisory Committee, 2010), which can be limiting in terms of initial openness to participating in research projects and, once participation has been agreed, can limit openness of responses.

Chapter 5 discusses additional limitations that became apparent in the course of the field research. These relate to:

- possible limitations on the generalisability of results to periods of change other than those prescribed by the *Blueprint for the Reform of Australian Government Administration* (as discussed in section 1.2.3) or to business as usual; and

- possible limitations on the amount of data being generated in relation to specific components as a result of the structure of two of the interview questions. This possible limitation arose despite a trial interview being conducted.

1.8.   Summary

This chapter introduced the study background. In this respect, the chapter introduced the topic of the research, the study setting and the period of change in which the research is set. The topic was presented as a multi-dimensional and complex one, while the study setting and period of change pertain to the current operations of the APS. The provision of this information is

intended to be useful to other researchers to assist them in determining the degree to which the findings of this research might transfer to different settings.

This chapter also introduced the research objectives for this study by presenting the research aim, a discussion of the research problem—as identified from a review of the literature—and the research questions. Additionally, the chapter outlined the importance of the research in terms of its contribution to both knowledge and practice. These sections were included to present a business case for the conduct of this research project.

Other aspects introduced in this chapter include definitions of the three conceptual terms on which this research focuses, an outline of the dissertation, and an introduction to the ethical implications and limitations of the research.

Overall, this chapter has been written to set the scene for readers of this dissertation and to provide them with insights into the dissertation, which will facilitate their reading of it.

Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1.   Introduction

As explained in Chapter 1, the main aim of this research project titled "Building strategic organisational learning implementation for the Australian Public Service (APS)" is to add to a better conceptual and pragmatic understanding of strategic organisational learning implementation in an Australian context, with particular reference to the APS during a period of change. In order to achieve this aim, the researcher has broken strategic organisational learning implementation into its three conceptual parts—strategy, organisational learning, and implementation—and studied each of them as independent elements as well as examining the interrelationships between them. Each of these conceptual elements is thus to be taken as a different discipline requiring a separate review of the literature in its own right. As such, the principal aim of this chapter is to present a review of each of these literature bases so as to identify key notions and themes that can serve as the basis for an empirical study of the four research questions previously detailed in Chapter 1.

Section 2.2 explores key arguments that emerge from the organisational learning literature. This is followed in section 2.3 with an examination of arguments pertaining to strategy. Section 2.4 then presents the arguments identified in the implementation literature. This chapter then finishes with a conclusion that highlights the relationships between the three conceptual elements that are the focus of this research project.

2.2.   Organisational learning

It becomes readily apparent when reading the organisational learning literature that there is a lack of consensus regarding what the term "organisational learning" means (Chan and Scott-Ladd, 2004; Crossan et al., 1999; Matlay, 2000; Templeton, Lewis and Snyder, 2002; Berends,

Boersma and Weggeman, 2003). Indeed, rather than providing greater clarity, ongoing research into organisational learning is cited as having led to an increasing lack of clarity, consensus and even growing confusion (Kupers, 2008). An important reason for this lack of clarity is likely to be the complexity and multi-dimensionality of this construct (Jerez-Gomez et al., 2005; Jerez-Gomez et al., 2004). Another possible reason for this lack of clarity is the common tendency to refer to learning as both a product and as a process (Fenwick, 2006). Fenwick argues that the school of thought which presents learning as a product also views it as the achievement of learning outcomes by individuals or collectives; while that which views it as a process focuses on the act of participation in practices that create and use knowledge and meaning (Fenwick, 2006; Fenwick, 2008). Adding to this confusion, the terms "learning organisation" and "organisational learning" are frequently used interchangeably despite their focus being somewhat different (Matlay, 2000; Saru, 2007; Yeo, 2007b). Saru argues that the key differences are that organisational learning focuses more on analysis and description of how an organisation actually learns, while the learning organisation view focuses more on prescribing action for how organisations should learn (Saru, 2007).

Given that there is a wide diversity to the conceptual understanding of organisational learning, five major components of this diversity became apparent when reviewing the literature. These components were identified by the researcher following an extensive review of the organisational learning literature (as detailed below in sections 2.2.1 to 2.2.5). Initially, key themes from the literature were plotted onto a mind map to illustrate related concepts. Related concepts from the mind maps were then recorded on index cards, and these cards were then sorted into closely related themes. This process clearly identified each of these themes as a component part of organisational learning that were finally warranted for further exploration in this research. These components—shared understandings, structure and culture, knowledge

creation, leadership and vision, and identification of patterns of decisions—are each discussed in turn in sections 2.2.1 to 2.2.5. In addition to distinguishing these five components of organisational learning, this review of the literature has highlighted the strategic importance of well-managed organisational learning as a means of providing sustainable competitive advantage. Section 2.2.6 discusses this latter aspect.

Table 2.1: Overview of the organisational learning literature organised into key themes

Shared understandings	
Studies	**Key themes**
Andreadis, 2009; Gummesson, 2006; Jerez-Gomez, Cespedes-Lorente and Valle-Cabrera, 2004; Yeo, 2007b	Organisations as complex open systems
Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Chanal, 2004; Choo, 2001; Fenwick, 2008; Espinosa, Harnden and Walker, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2009; Tynjala, 2008	Cooperative problem solving and the creation of shared meanings and new knowledge
Structure and culture	
Studies	**Key themes**
Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Rebelo and Gomes, 2011	Structure and culture can act as enablers or barriers to organisational learning occurring
Bierly, Kessler and Christensen, 2000	Culture shaping values and contributing to sense-making
Algesheimer and Gurau, 2008; Berends et al., 2003; Friesl, Sackmann and Kremser, 2011; Sewell 1992	Culture shaped by structure
Bierly, Kessler and Christensen, 2000	Culture supportive of learning if liberating structures are in place
Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Coulson-Thomas, 2003; Jerez-Gomez, Cespedes-Lorente and Valle-Cabrera, 2005	Cultures that impede learning
Chan and Scott-Ladd, 2004; Coulson-Thomas, 2003; Jerez-Gomez, Cespedes-Lorente and Valle-Cabrera, 2005; Yeo, 2007b	Learning requires a blame-free culture open to new ideas, innovation and a high degree of experimentation
Knowledge creation process	
Studies	**Key themes**

Berends et al., 2003; Fenwick, 2008; Lloria, 2007	Knowledge creation through ongoing work processes
Leadership and vision	
Studies	**Key themes**
Hodgkinson, 2002; Hoe, 2007; Yeo, 2007b	Contribution of vision to organisational learning
Bierly et al., 2000; Hodgkinson, 2002; Senge et al., 1999; Voronov, 2008	Role of managers facilitating vision
Bierly et al., 2000; Castiglione, 2006; Garcia-Morales, Matias-Reche and Hurtado-Torres, 2008; LeBrasseur, Whissell and Ojha, 2002	Leadership behaviours necessary to facilitate shared vision
Identification of patterns of decisions	
Studies	**Key themes**
Choo, 2001; Espinosa et al., 2007; Johanessen, Olaisen and Olsen, 1999	Learning through decision-making processes
Jensen and Rasmussen, 2004; Johanessen et al., 1999; Sanchez et al., 2009; Senge et al., 1999; Yeo, 2007b	Identifying and changing mental models

2.2.1. Shared understandings

Organisations are often conceptualised as complex open systems with parallels to living organic systems (Andreadis, 2009; Yeo, 2007b; Gummesson, 2006; Jerez-Gomez et al., 2004). In keeping with this view of an organisation as an open, complex system is the notion of the interdependencies between an organisation's component parts. People in organisations do not work in isolation—as they work together, people interact and modify their behaviours. This process often leads to learning through cooperative problem solving, and the creation of shared meanings and new knowledge (Fenwick, 2008; Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Choo, 2001; Tynjala, 2008; Espinosa, Harnden and Walker, 2007). In this sense, the collective acts as the facilitator of individual critical reflection as well as providing a forum for sharing meaning and the development of a common understanding of the newly created knowledge (Fenwick, 2008). From this perspective, learning can also be seen as a social process that evolves when there is a

community of collaboration (Espinosa et al., 2007) and of common enterprise (Chanal, 2004). This sharing process allows a common meaning to be given to available information (Sanchez et al., 2009). This shared knowledge and understanding is considered to be critical in terms of determining the strategic capability and competitive advantage of an organisation (Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995). As such, the development of shared understanding as people work together in new ways is an important component of organisational learning.

2.2.2. Structure and culture

When organising the organisational learning literature into themes through the use of a mind map and index cards manipulations, the researcher noted that culture and structure were commonly discussed together and thus treated them as such in this research. Additionally, such an approach is common in the social sciences, with anthropologists' use of the term "structure" including the realm of culture (Sewell, 1992). Proponents of structuration theory argue that cultural schema, including the rules of social life, are major components of social structures (Algesheimer and Gurau, 2008; Berends et al., 2003; Sewell, 1992).

The development of shared understanding is likely to be strongly impacted by the cultural and structural characteristics of an organisation. As such, elements of an organisation's structure and culture can act as enablers or barriers to organisational learning occurring (Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Rebelo and Gomes, 2011). The culture of an organisation shapes its employees' values, thereby influencing the manner in which organisational members behave and interact—as such, it serves as a sense-making mechanism, thus contributing to the development of shared understanding (Bierly, Kessler and Christensen, 2000). Culture, in turn, is shaped by the organisation's structure (Friesl, Sackmann and Kremser, 2011). Thus the likelihood that an organisation's culture will be supportive of organisational learning is enhanced if

liberating structures, which overcome learning barriers and empower employees to challenge conventional wisdom amongst other freedoms, are in place (Bierly et al., 2000). To the contrary, a culture that may impede organisational learning is likely to be one where risk taking, openness in communication and teamwork are not valued (Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Jerez-Gomez et al., 2005; Coulson-Thomas, 2003). A culture where these characteristics are present has been proclaimed as essential for crafting a learning strategy (Slocum, McGill and Lei, 1994), with some authors maintaining that learning requires a culture open to new ideas, innovation and a high degree of experimentation (Coulson-Thomas, 2003; Chan and Scott-Ladd, 2004; Jerez-Gomez et al., 2005) and which is also blame-free (Yeo, 2007a). Organisational learning can therefore be facilitated by ensuring the presence of enabling features of the structure and culture of an organisation.

2.2.3. Knowledge creation process

The previous discussion of learning occurring as people work together alludes to the notion that organisational learning may be viewed as an ongoing and continuously renewing process. Viewing organisational learning as an ongoing process thus suggests that all activities undertaken by individuals and groups as they think about and undertake their daily work will be contributing towards their meaning-making and the construction of their social reality (Fenwick, 2006), as well as towards the creation of new knowledge (Fenwick, 2008) and changes in practices (Berends et al., 2003). Voronov provides some structure to this process view by describing strategic organisational learning as an ongoing process that takes the form of a self-reinforcing cycle of learning, focusing, aligning and executing (Voronov, 2008). As such, organisational learning is being dynamically facilitated as knowledge is created, shared and applied while people carry out their ongoing work behaviours (Lloria, 2007). This has been

hypothesised as a specific form of structuration in which organisational learning is being realised in organisational practices (Berends et al., 2003).

2.2.4. Leadership and vision

The previous discussions regarding organisational learning occurring as people develop shared understanding and create new knowledge alludes to the importance of a shared vision of the desired new way of working. Organisational learning is seen as a key enabler for the emergence of a shared vision, whilst at the same time the existence of such a vision is seen as making a critical contribution towards organisational learning (Hodgkinson, 2002; Hoe, 2007; Yeo, 2007a). The role of managers and leaders in facilitating the emergence of such a vision is strongly supported in the literature (Senge et al., 1999; Hodgkinson, 2002; Bierly et al., 2000; Voronov, 2008). To facilitate the emergence of a shared vision, leaders need to influence the sense-making and meaning construction of organisational members (Voronov, 2008). Leadership style is likely to be a determining factor in the successful facilitation of this process, with a transformational style characterised by behaviours such as building trust, inspiring confidence and instilling pride argued to be most suitable (Bierly et al., 2000; Garcia-Morales, Matias-Reche and Hurtado-Torres, 2008; Castiglione, 2006; LeBrasseur, Whissell and Ojha, 2002). Thus the literature suggests the notion that organisational learning is likely to be achieved as a result of leadership behaviours that facilitate the emergence of a shared vision.

2.2.5. Identification of patterns of decisions

In addition to organisational learning occurring through the sense-making and knowledge creation processes discussed above, there is support in the literature for the notion that it occurs through decision-making processes (Johanessen, Olaisen and Olsen, 1999). This can involve examination of patterns of actions about best ways to work and to make decisions (Choo, 2001).

It can also involve improving the efficiency and effectiveness of cognitive structures within the organisation, which are responsible for management decisions (Espinosa et al., 2007). The most appropriate decision-making pattern or mode will be influenced by factors such as the degree of uncertainty around both the goals to be pursued, and the methods and procedures available to attain the goals (Choo, 2001). Indeed, sense-making itself has been cited as contributing towards the decision-making process, as it assists with the identification of pre-existing individual and collective patterns that can be applied to the improvement of decision-making (Snowden, 2005). Assisting individuals and groups in identifying and potentially changing their action patterns and their associated mental models is considered a core issue in organisational learning, through the contribution to helping people see the world in a new way (Johanessen et al., 1999; Senge et al., 1999; Jensen and Rasmussen, 2004; Sanchez et al., 2009). As such, it is seen as empowering individuals to integrate quality and quantity into their work processes (Yeo, 2007a). In such a way, it can be seen that organisational learning can arise as a result of new patterns of decisions about best ways to work being identified.

2.2.6. Strategic importance of organisational learning

Sections 2.2.1 to 2.2.5 have explored the five components of the diversity of the organisational learning construct that emerged from a review of the literature. Additionally, this review of the literature supports the discussion of the research problem in Chapter 1, which argues that there is a solid body of literature that supports the notion that well-planned and managed organisational learning is seen as a means of providing sustainable competitive advantage (Senge et al., 1999; Garcia-Morales et al., 2008; Bierly et al., 2000). To this end, organisational learning is seen as a strategic capability (Smith, Vasudevan and Tanniru, 1996) and is attributed with contributing to the creation, transfer and institutionalisation of knowledge that drives organisational adaptation (Snell, Youndt and Wright, 1996; Berends et al., 2003). Similarly

organisational learning is attributed with contributing to organisational renewal and growth (Yeo, 2007a) and an enhanced ability to manoeuvre in response to a dynamic environment (Vithessonthi and Thoumrungroje, 2011). Bapuji and Crossan report on a number of studies where organisational learning is attributed with impacting on the performance of a firm through enhancing the survival and effectiveness of acquisitions, diversifications and foreign entries; increasing customer orientation; facilitating innovation and the implementation of information systems; and business process re-engineering (Bapuji and Crossan, 2004). A number of authors suggest that sustainable competitive advantage is likely to be achieved through the contribution of organisational learning to growth and profitability (Dealtry, 2008), the maintenance and improvement of a firm's competitiveness (Jerez-Gomez et al., 2005) and the enhancement of value creation capability (Sanchez et al., 2009; Peters, Gassenheimer and Johnston, 2009). Indeed, some authors go so far as to suggest that well-managed organisational learning is critical to the very survival of an organisation (Kalman, 2007; Lipshitz et al., 1996). Andreadis supports this argument by suggesting that organisations that ignore the importance of learning as a core competency are likely to suffer the consequences of inefficiency, stagnation and cultural decline (Andreadis, 2009).

Whilst learning is occurring regardless of the presence of an organisational learning strategy, the literature does suggest that it is the strategic intent to align the learning with the strategic direction of the organisation, which is important if competitive advantage is to be achieved (Brudan, 2010; Yeo, 2007b). Goh and Richards maintain that deliberate intervention by leaders is required to establish the necessary internal conditions for the organisation to operate in a learning mode (Goh and Richards, 1997). This suggests that leaders need to consider what these necessary conditions are within their organisations, and then plan for and undertake whatever actions are required to create the conditions, rather than leaving things to chance. Indeed, the

presence of a corporate strategic learning strategy is seen as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the creation of a learning organisation (Rowley, 1998). Adding to the argument for a planned and strategic approach to organisational learning is the fact that learning is not always positive and can in fact strengthen existing negative features of the workplace if not managed effectively (Tynjala, 2008).

This argument regarding the need for a planned and strategic approach to organisational learning suggests that for an organisational learning strategy to be effective a number of criteria must be considered and met. These criteria include developing and implementing the strategy in a manner that is both aligned to the organisation's overall strategy and sensitive to its operational context (Nandakumar, Ghobadian and O'Regan, 2010). The need for alignment is well supported in the literature as the following examples illustrate. Support functions in organisations such as human resources and training are generally advised to align their work activities and practices with corporate strategy (Kalman, 2007; Luoma, 2000; Valle, Martin, Romero and Dolan, 2000; Stone, 2009). This is often achieved through identifying projects that strengthen the organisation's core competencies (Kalman, 2007). Such alignment helps provide the supportive environment necessary for implementation of organisational learning through facilitation of learning and development initiatives (Saru, 2007).

Not surprisingly, this need for alignment results in each organisation's learning strategy being unique. As such, there is no single emergent ideal proposition for a learning strategy, as it must be shaped by the overarching and uniquely customised structure and strategy of the individual organisation (Dealtry, 2002). Similarly, the unique context of each organisation means that managers seeking to implement the lessons learned in studies reporting on developing learning organisations would have to ensure that there is some degree of concordance between their

organisations and those featured in the various studies, and then select intervention strategies accordingly (Goh and Richards, 1997).

2.2.7. Summary

This review of the organisational learning literature has reiterated the argument that organisational learning is a complex and multidimensional construct. In order to reach an appreciation of this and achieve greater conceptual clarity, it is necessary to identify and understand the various components that constitute the construct. Five components that constitute the diversity of the organisational learning construct were identified in sections 2.2.1 to 2.2.5. The first of these components is that pertaining to organisational learning arising from the development of shared understanding as people work together in new ways. The next component presented in this chapter relates to the aspect of organisational learning facilitated by enabling features of the structure and culture of the organisation. The third component examined is that of organisational learning being facilitated as knowledge is created while people are undertaking the business of the organisation. The fourth component presented in this literature review pertains to the organisational learning that is achieved as a result of leaders demonstrating the necessary behaviours to facilitate the emergence of a shared vision of desired new ways of working. This is followed by the fifth and final component identified in the literature, which conceptualises organisational learning as arising from the identification of new patterns of decisions about best ways to work. Examination of the literature pertaining to these five components has identified both commonalities as well as interrelationships. These interrelationships include the impact of culture and leadership on sense-making and the development of shared understanding by organisational members (Bierly et al., 2000; Voronov, 2008) which, in turn, impact on decision-making patterns and acceptance of a shared vision within the organisation (Snowden, 2005; Voronov, 2008).

In addition to identifying and clarifying the above five components of organisational learning as covered in sections 2.2.1 to 2.2.5, and most specifically in subsection 2.2.6, the argument running through there is that organisational learning should not be considered as an afterthought, but rather should be systematically planned and managed during change. This is due to its strategic importance through contributing to sustainable competitive advantage if done in this manner (Senge et al., 1999; Bierly et al., 2000; Garcia-Morales et al., 2008).

Developing an appreciation of the five identified organisational learning components singularly and collectively is important in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the broader organisational learning construct. Systematically planning and managing organisational learning in APS agencies requires consideration as to how each of these five components of organisational learning might be facilitated in such a context. This will be explored in this research project in order to answer the first research question: "How is organisational learning viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?"

2.3.   *Strategy*

The strategic management literature is rich with discussions of strategy and the strategic process, yet strategy is still a concept that is not well understood (Hubbard, Samuel, Cocks and Heap, 2007; Henderson and Zvesper, 2002). It would appear that like organisational learning, the characteristics of multidimensionality and complexity inherent in strategy lead to some confusion over the concept (Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Kalman, 2007; Luoma, 2000; Slocum et al., 1994).

Given that there is a wide diversity to the conceptual understanding of strategy, a review of the major components of that diversity will be explored in order to provide greater conceptual clarity to this topic. Seven key components of this diversity became apparent when reviewing

the literature. These components were identified by the researcher following an extensive review of the strategy literature. As with organisational learning, key themes from the literature were initially plotted onto a mind map to illustrate related concepts. Related concepts from the mind maps were recorded on the index cards and these were then sorted into closely related themes. This process clearly identified each of these themes as a component part of strategy, which warranted further exploration in this research. These components—organisational context, degree of flexibility, employee involvement, leadership, patterns of behaviour, strategy as learning and strategising as a continuous process—are each discussed in turn in sections 2.3.1 to 2.3.7.

Table 2.2: Overview of the strategy literature organised into key themes

Organisational context	
Studies	**Key themes**
Gummesson, 2006; Yeo, 2007a	Organisations in interdependent relationships with their environments
Allen and Helms, 2006; Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Chanal, 2004; Combe and Botschen, 2004; Henderson and Zvesper, 2002; Nandakumar et al., 2010; Sanchez et al., 2009; Slater, Olson and Hult, 2006	Complexity and stability of environment as strategic considerations
Degree of flexibility	
Studies	**Key themes**
Henderson and Zvesper, 2002; Hubbard et al., 2007; Mintzberg, 1987; Mintzberg 1994; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Slater et al., 2006; Sminia, 2009	Deliberate and emergent strategy
Employee involvement in the strategic process	
Studies	**Key themes**
Carmeli, Sheaffer and Halevi, 2009; Mintzberg, 1994; Rok, 2009	Problem of strategy as senior management domain
Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Hubbard et al., 2007; Stewart and O'Donnell, 2007	Strategic involvement distributed down hierarchy

Leadership	
Studies	**Key themes**
Atwood, Mora and Kaplan, 2010; Hodgkinson, 2002; Hoe, 2007; Mintzberg, 1994; Rok, 2009; Stewart and O'Donnell, 2007	Link between strategy, vision and leadership
Patterns of behaviour	
Studies	**Key themes**
Combe and Botschen, 2004; Mintzberg, 1987; Mintzberg, 1994; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Snowden, 2005	Link between patterns of behaviour and strategy
Strategy as learning	
Studies	**Key themes**
Mintzberg, 1994; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Stewart and O'Donnell, 2007; Voronov, 2008	Strategy creation as a learning process
Strategising as a continuous process	
Studies	**Key themes**
Cobbold, Lawrie and Issa, 2004; Nielsen-Englyst, 2003; Sminia, 2009	Strategising as a continuous process of adjustment

2.3.1. Organisational context

As discussed in section 2.2.1, organisations do not exist and function in isolation; rather, they are complex systems operating in interdependent relationships with their environments (Yeo, 2007b; Gummesson, 2006). As such, strategy and the strategic process cannot be entered into without consideration of each organisation's unique operating environment. Factors such as the degree of complexity and stability of the internal and external environments need to be taken into consideration throughout the strategic process (Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Nandakumar et al., 2010; Henderson and Zvesper, 2002; Combe and Botschen, 2004; Sanchez et al., 2009). Indeed, it has been argued that an organisation's strategy can only be effective in providing sustainable competitive advantage if the strategy matches the external environment and internal conditions of the organisation (Nandakumar et al., 2010). Similarly, the strategic orientation of the organisation, in terms of its high-level decisions concerning how the

organisation positions itself in that operating environment, will have a strong influence on the form and content of the organisation's specific strategies, as well as on the processes that are utilised to develop and implement strategy (Slater, Olson and Hult, 2006; Allen and Helms, 2006).

2.3.2. The degree of flexibility

Most definitions of strategy fit somewhere along what Mintzberg and Waters describe as an emergent–deliberate continuum—with the emergent end of the strategy continuum aligning with the concept of strategic learning, and the deliberate end aligning with a planned analytical approach (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Mintzberg and Walters refer to emergent strategy as being "realised despite, or in the absence of, intentions" (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). This reference to "despite intentions or absence of intentions" implies that a certain degree of spontaneity or flexibility is going to be a part of any emergent organisational strategy.

Yet, and despite the notion of a continuum suggesting that emergent and deliberate approaches to strategy might be mutually exclusive, Mintzberg suggests the opposite is in fact the case, with viable strategies having both deliberate and emergent qualities (Mintzberg, 1994; 1987). Hubbard et al. suggest that such a combination thus requires the notions of "clarity" with "fuzziness" as an important feature of the strategic process. In successful Australian organisations, strategy needs to be clear (deliberate) enough to provide guidance but fuzzy at the edges (emergent) to allow for flexibility (Hubbard et al., 2007).

In section 2.3.1 the impact of the operating environment was introduced. One aspect of strategy that will be strongly influenced by the operating environment is the degree of flexibility that is desirable in terms of the degree to which the organisation is best suited to a more deliberate or emergent strategic approach (Henderson and Zvesper, 2002). Recent research suggests the

trend is towards a more dynamic view of strategy that is more in tune with the competitive reality of fast-paced change (Chanal, 2004). A number of authors discuss "deliberately emergent" approaches to strategy, where managers control the strategic process but allow the content to emerge as a result of evolving situations, input from others and the process of learning (Mintzberg, 1987; 1994; Sminia, 2009). This approach assists in providing both focus for organisational members while at the same time allowing for responsiveness and adaptability to change (Slater et al., 2006).

2.3.3. Employee involvement in the strategic process

An additional but related component to the operating environment and the degree of flexibility is the extent of employee involvement in the strategic process. One potential problem with traditional managerial approaches to strategy formation is that they are frequently based on the strategic process being the exclusive domain of senior management (Mintzberg, 1994; Carmeli, Sheaffer and Halevi, 2009; Rok, 2009). This can create the problem where those making the strategy are too removed from the operation of the organisation to develop viable strategies. Mintzberg and Waters cited this as an advantage of a more emergent approach to strategy that enables managers to "surrender control" to employees who are closer to the action, and thereby possess information current and detailed enough on which to base realistic strategies (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Surrendering control to those lower down the organisational hierarchy is supported by an approach that considers leadership across the organisation as more important than leaders themselves. A number of authors discuss the importance of a more distributed approach to leadership in contributing to emergent strategy and organisational success (Stewart and O'Donnell, 2007; Hubbard et al., 2007). It is also argued that this involvement of strategic participants lower down the hierarchy is an important factor in

understanding how strategy formulation and organisational learning interact (Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995).

2.3.4. Leadership

Another interdependent strategic component is leadership. Whether or not an organisation takes a distributed leadership approach to the strategic process, leaders will, by dint of their office, continue to play an important role in the formulation, promotion, implementation and review of strategy. One leadership function critical to the strategic process is leaders working across their organisation to facilitate the development of a shared vision (Mintzberg, 1994; Rok, 2009). Organisational learning is seen as critical in enabling the emergence of such a vision (Hodgkinson, 2002) and, in turn, shared vision is attributed with contributing towards organisational learning capabilities (Hoe, 2007). The leadership style that will therefore be important in contributing to endorsement of a shared vision as part of the strategic process will be one that is supportive of learning (Atwood, Mora and Kaplan, 2010). Such a style will assist in establishing trust and commitment among employees, and is likely to be characterised by behaviours such as extensive consultation and information sharing with employees (Stewart and O'Donnell, 2007; Atwood et al., 2010).

2.3.5. Patterns of behaviour

An additional strategic component relates to patterns of behaviour. Strategy itself has been conceptualised as a "pattern in a stream of decisions" (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985), with the strategist him or herself being seen as a "pattern recogniser" (Mintzberg, 1987), and successful strategy resulting from organisations recognising and converging on patterns of behaviour that work for them in their environments (Mintzberg, 1994). This is supported by the argument that humans are pattern-processing intelligences who make decisions based on patterns matched to

their experiences (Snowden, 2005). Consideration of patterns of behaviour has been argued as being particularly important for organisations operating in unstable external environments, where recognising emergent patterns of behaviour appropriate to the external changes is considered an essential part of the strategic process (Combe and Botschen, 2004).

2.3.6. Strategy as learning

The preceding discussions regarding strategic components—particularly those covering flexibility in section 2.3.2, employee involvement in section 2.3.3 and leadership in section 2.3.4—allude to the strong relationship between learning and strategy. In particular, emergent strategy, synonymous with a high degree of flexibility, is aligned to the concept of strategic learning (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Additionally, the involvement of employees in the strategic process contributes to an understanding of how strategy formulation and organisational learning interact (Stewart and O'Donnell, 2007) while the leadership approach influences the development of a shared vision leading to shared understanding (Mintzberg, 1994). Mintzberg argues that strategy-making is a learning process and describes this as a two-way relationship. He suggests that the very process of deliberately thinking about and creating strategy is, in itself, a process of learning, while on the other hand, emergent strategies can develop inadvertently, often as a result of the process of learning about a particular situation (Mintzberg, 1994). Voronov supports this view of strategising as a process of organisational learning (Voronov, 2008).

2.3.7. Strategising as a continuous process

As indicated in the opening of this discussion regarding strategy, there is a lack of conceptual clarity about the concept of strategy. This lack of clarity is exacerbated by strategy itself being viewed as both a process and a product (Sminia, 2009) in a similar way to organisational

learning, as discussed in section 2.2. Sminia argues that when presenting strategy as a product this is referring to the realised strategy, while viewing it as a process refers to the process by which it is realised (Sminia, 2009). The very notion of emergent strategy suggests that it evolves as part of a continuous process of adjustment to changes in the environment (Cobbold, Lawrie and Issa, 2004). This process view has been represented in different ways. One representation is of strategy formation as a process consisting of a series of defined phases (learning, reviewing, aligning and redirecting) with different outcomes for each of these phases (Nielsen-Englyst, 2003). An alternative, less structured view of strategy formation as a continuous process represents it as a complex and meandering process of change (Sminia, 2009). Both of these approaches are consistent with the notion of strategising as a continuous process.

2.3.8. Summary

Section 2.3 explained that strategy is a complex and multidimensional construct, and the achievement of conceptual clarity requires the identification and appreciation of the different strategic construct components. This review of the literature identified seven components, which were each discussed and examined separately in sections 2.3.1 to 2.3.7. The first of these relates to the organisational context and the impact of the operating environment on the form of the desired strategy. The environment, in turn, influences the second strategic component, which relates to the degree of flexibility required in the strategy. In this regard, strategic approaches fall somewhere on the deliberate–emergent continuum. The third strategy component presented relates to the degree of employee involvement in the strategic process, with some support being provided in the literature for the involvement in the process of employees down the hierarchy. The fourth component examined strategy as patterns of behaviour, while the fifth pertains to the leadership style and behaviours necessary for the

development and implementation of strategy. The final two components identified present strategy as both learning and as an ongoing, continuous process.

Examination of the literature pertaining to these seven components has identified both commonalities as well as interrelationships. The interrelationships include strong impacts of four of the other components on the degree of flexibility required in the strategy. The four components with such an impact are:

- organisational context in terms of the degree of complexity and stability of the internal and external environments (Henderson and Zvesper, 2002);

- the level of employee involvement in terms of "surrendering control" to employees who are close to the action (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985);

- leadership approach in terms of the degree to which leaders consult about strategic issues across the organisation and are supportive of learning (Stewart and O'Donnell, 2007; Atwood et al., 2010); and

- patterns of behaviour in terms of the importance of recognising emergent patterns of behaviour appropriate to changes in the external environment as part of the strategic process (Combe and Botschen, 2004).

These components—degree of flexibility, organisational context, level of employee involvement, leadership approach and patterns of behaviour—in turn influence other components, particularly the degree to which strategy becomes both a learning experience and a continuous process (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Stewart and O'Donnell, 2007; Cobbold et al., 2004).

Gaining an understanding of these seven components is important in gaining comprehensive insights into the broader strategy construct. Consideration as to how these components of strategy might be taken into account in APS agencies during a period of change will be explored in this project in order to answer the second research question: "How is strategy viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?"

2.4.   Implementation

Significant time and effort can be put into crafting deliberate strategies or creating the environment in which emergent strategies will evolve. Despite these efforts to develop strategies that suit an organisation in its operating environment, there is still no guarantee that the desired outcomes of the strategy will be achieved. Implementation or execution of strategy is considered to be one of the keys to success in Australian organisations (Hubbard et al., 2007) yet it has received limited attention in the strategic management literature (Atkinson, 2006).

The following review of the implementation literature was undertaken following the conduct of the focus groups. This approach was taken in acknowledgement of the fact that there was very limited publicly available literature pertaining to implementation issues regarding strategic organisational learning in the specific setting being studied (the APS during a particular period of change).

As with organisational learning and strategy, there is a wide diversity to the conceptual understanding of implementation, and six major components of this diversity became apparent when reviewing the literature. The researcher identified these components following a review of the limited implementation literature pertaining to implementation of strategic organisational learning. As with organisational learning and strategy, key themes from the literature were initially plotted onto a mind map to illustrate related concepts. Related concepts from the mind

maps were recorded on the index cards and these were then sorted into closely related themes. This process clearly identified each of these themes as a component part of implementation, which warranted further exploration in this research. These components—organisational structure, management and leadership approach, cultural issues, goal setting and monitoring, performance management, and communication processes—are each discussed in turn in sections 2.4.1 to 2.4.6.

Table 2.3: Overview of the implementation literature organised into key themes

Organisational structure	
Studies	**Key themes**
Lloria, 2007; Whitford, 2010; Yeo and Ajam, 2010	Organisation around bureaucratic principles
Espinosa et al., 2007; Schutz and Bloch, 2006; Sveiby, 2007; Sy and Cote, 2004	Bureaucracies operating as silos
Burley and Pandit, 2008; Newbold and Pharoah, 2009; Sanchez et al., 2009; Schutz and Bloch, 2006	Mechanisms to overcome negative impacts
Management and leadership approach	
Studies	**Key themes**
Newbold and Pharoah, 2009; Yeo, 2007a	Importance of management commitment to implementation
Cultural issues	
Studies	**Key themes**
Rebelo and Gomes, 2011; Vithessonthi and Thoumrungroje, 2011	Management impact on culture
Newbold and Pharoah, 2009; Vince and Saleem, 2004; Yeo, 2007b	Culture as enabler or barrier to implementation
Goal setting and monitoring	
Studies	**Key themes**
Atkinson, 2006; Schutz and Bloch, 2006; Sorensen, 2011; Yeo, 2006; Yeo, 2007a	Relationship between goal setting and implementation
Brudan, 2010; Kossoff, 2006; Newbold and Pharoah, 2009	Cascading approach to goal setting
Performance management	
Studies	**Key themes**
Brudan, 2010; Newbold and Pharoah, 2009; Watson and Harmel-Law, 2009; Yeo, 2007a	Need for integration and alignment between strategy and performance management
Communication	
Studies	**Key themes**
Atkinson, 2006; Brudan, 2010; Schutz and Bloch, 2006	Communication assists implementation through overcoming barriers

2.4.1. Organisational structure

Traditional hierarchies that characterise many public sector organisations are structured on the basis of bureaucratic principles including centralised authority, narrow spans of control, and horizontal or vertical specialisation of tasks (Lloria, 2007; Yeo and Ajam, 2010; Whitford, 2010). Such structural arrangements often result in organisations operating as silos or stovepipes with limited communication, collaboration, knowledge sharing and learning occurring across them (Schutz and Bloch, 2006; Sveiby, 2007; Sy and Cote, 2004; Espinosa et al., 2007) exacerbated by groupthink within the silos (Schutz and Bloch, 2006). The existence of such structural arrangements (for example silos), while often inevitable and indeed desirable to enhance operational efficiency and effectiveness (Lloria, 2007), can create a barrier to the implementation of strategy (Schutz and Bloch, 2006). A range of mechanisms are suggested as having the potential to overcome the negative impacts of these structural arrangements. Potential negative impacts include groupthink (Schutz and Bloch, 2006) and poor communication (Sy and Cote, 2004). Such mechanisms can therefore assist with strategy implementation. The suggested mechanisms include:

- utilising information distribution mechanisms such as interdepartmental meetings, shared databases and files, and cross-training (Sanchez et al., 2009);

- using cross-functional teams (Newbold and Pharoah, 2009);

- identifying interdependencies and using boundary-spanning people and tasks to translate and transfer lessons learned (Burley and Pandit, 2008); and

- pursuing consistent and coordinated goals, enhancing personal communication between managers and colleagues, and clarifying work processes and responsibilities (Schutz and Bloch, 2006).

2.4.2. Management and leadership approach

As indicated in the earlier discussions of organisational learning and strategy in sections 2.2.4 and 2.3.4, leaders play a significant role in strategic organisational learning processes. Yeo discusses the role of both top managers and frontline supervisors in contributing to the successful implementation of learning strategy. He stresses that for the implementation of any organisational learning initiative to be successful, top management commitment and leadership are necessary as is clear direction from supervisors (Yeo, 2007b). Newbold and Pharoah stress the fundamental importance of commitment, support and role-modelling from senior executives. They suggest that this contributes to successful implementation through the impact it has on employee buy-in to the learning process. They also advise on ensuring such commitment through clarifying the leadership behaviours required and making executives accountable through mechanisms such as service level agreements (Newbold and Pharoah, 2009).

2.4.3. Cultural issues

The approach taken by organisational leaders will have a strong influence on the creation and management of the culture of the organisation (Rebelo and Gomes, 2011). Commitment and role-modelling by the executive can be used to shape a culture that is strongly supportive of learning (Vithessonthi and Thoumrungroje, 2011). In such situations, learning itself becomes part of the cultural fabric of the organisation, which is considered essential for learning in and of organisations (Rebelo and Gomes, 2011). The existence of such a culture is likely to contribute

towards successful implementation of an organisational learning strategy. Indeed, it may be considered as a key success criterion for the implementation of such a strategy (Newbold and Pharoah, 2009). Without attention to cultural issues, the organisation's culture can become a barrier to the successful implementation of an organisational learning strategy. Cultures hostile to learning are likely to be defensive and cautious cultures (Vince and Saleem, 2004). In such cultures, a vicious cycle may emerge that prevents successful implementation of learning strategy, as caution prevents people trying new things and leads them to blaming others for problems. Blame may, in turn, prevent learning occurring through reflective processes and minimise the likelihood of effective communication across the organisation, which can exacerbate learning barriers between organisational silos (Vince and Saleem, 2004; Yeo, 2007a).

2.4.4. Goal setting and monitoring

The successful implementation of most management initiatives has a strong dependent relationship with the goal-setting process (Schutz and Bloch, 2006; Sorensen, 2011; Atkinson, 2006). There are likely to be significant implementation difficulties if clarity is lacking in terms of desired outcomes; these outcomes need to be clearly articulated in the form of specific and measurable goals. In turn, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to determine the success of implementation unless a review process can be conducted as to degrees of achievement of these goals. A "cascading" approach to defining objectives can be a key success factor for the implementation of an organisational learning strategy (Newbold and Pharoah, 2009). In such an approach, high-level objectives are articulated in the business strategy, and these are cascaded down to the team and individual level through mechanisms such as the performance management system (Brudan, 2010). Clarifying deliverables and accountability, and monitoring performance, is an important part of this process (Kossoff, 2006). The importance of goal setting

in the successful implementation of organisational learning strategy would appear to be as critical in a public sector environment as it is in the private sector (Yeo, 2006; Yeo, 2007b).

2.4.5. Performance management

As suggested in the preceding section, the articulation of individual goals through the performance management system is an important aspect contributing to successful implementation of organisational learning strategy (Brudan, 2010). In fact, the integration and alignment of the organisational learning strategy with both the performance management system and the organisation's broader human resource management system will be a critical success factor for its implementation (Newbold and Pharoah, 2009; Yeo, 2007b). If there is a disconnect between the organisational learning strategy and any of the human resource management subsystems—such as performance management, rewards and recognition, or career progression—then there are likely to be problems with strategy implementation. Indeed, some performance and rewards management systems, such as those based on time billing, are seen as potentially incompatible with implementing components of an organisational learning strategy, such as workplace learning and human resource development strategy (Watson and Harmel-Law, 2009).

2.4.6. Communication

One implementation issue that potentially ties all the other ones together is communication. Communication will be important in contributing to minimising negative impacts of organisational structural arrangements, developing confidence in management, shaping culture, and the setting and articulation of goals through the performance management system (Atkinson, 2006; Brudan, 2010; Schutz and Bloch, 2006). Communication patterns and information-sharing processes in organisations unfortunately can just as easily act as barriers to,

as they can facilitators of, the implementation of strategy (Atkinson, 2006). In order to prevent such barriers arising, effective and open communication and information-sharing processes need to be utilised (Atkinson, 2006; Schutz and Bloch, 2006). This includes providing opportunities for dialogue and feedback; taking steps to avoid information overload; and recognising and using various communication channels, including both formal and informal information-sharing processes, to ensure sharing of both tacit and explicit knowledge (Yeo, 2007b; Burley and Pandit, 2008; Atkinson, 2006).

2.4.7. Summary

A review of the implementation literature has identified six key components that individually and collectively impact on the likelihood of successful implementation of an organisational learning strategy. The first component pertains to organisational structure, and suggests that structures which arise from bureaucratic organising principles can have adverse effects on implementation. The second component relates to the management and leadership approach, and argues that the approach taken will have a significant impact on the success of implementation. The third component examined is that of the impact of the organisation's culture. As with the previous components, it is argued that culture can be a facilitator or a barrier to implementation. The fourth and fifth components presented pertain to goal setting and monitoring, with the fifth specifically looking at performance management linkages. As with the previous components, it is argued that implementation difficulties can arise if appropriate consideration is not given to these aspects. The final implementation component examined in this literature review is that relating to communication which, it is argued, potentially ties in with the other five components and can be seen to be barriers or facilitators of strategy implementation. Examination of the literature pertaining to these six components has identified both commonalities as well as interrelationships. These interrelationships include the impact of

the approach to leadership on the culture of the organisation (Rebelo and Gomes, 2011) which, in turn, impacts upon the degree to which organisational structural arrangements act as barriers to implementation of learning strategy (Vince and Saleem, 2004). A strong relationship was also identified between the goal setting and performance management processes (Brudan, 2010), while communication processes were seen to influence a number of other components including structural arrangements, confidence in management, culture, goal setting and performance management (Atkinson, 2006; Brudan, 2010; Schutz and Bloch, 2006).

As with organisational learning and strategy, gaining an understanding of these six components is important in developing comprehensive insights into the broader implementation construct. This project will explore how these components of implementation might be taken into account in APS agencies during a period of change in order to answer the third research question: "How is implementation viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?"

2.5. Overall conclusion

The interdependencies identified between various components within each of the three conceptual elements have been outlined in the associated summaries in sections 2.2.7, 2.3.8 and 2.4.7. Upon reviewing the combined literature bases of the three conceptual elements in this research project, it is apparent that there are substantial interrelationships between all three conceptual elements as reviewed in this chapter. This observation is in keeping with the view of an organisation as an open system, with interdependent parts and interdependencies with its operating environment (Andreadis, 2009; Yeo, 2007b; Gummesson, 2006; Jerez-Gomez et al., 2004). In keeping with this systems approach, the three conceptual elements can also be considered to be subsystems operating most overtly within a period of organisational change. The literature suggests that the strongest link between these subsystems and organisational

change arises from the approach to leadership taken within the organisation. Leadership is cited as influencing sense-making and shared visions, and thereby impacting upon the organisational learning and strategy subsystems (Voronov, 2008; Rok, 2009; Mintzberg, 1994). Additionally, a leadership style and associated behaviours that are supportive of learning are seen as particularly significant for the implementation of organisational learning strategy and therefore impacting upon all three subsystems (Atwood et al., 2010; Newbold and Pharoah, 2009). Leadership is also identified as having a strong impact on the culture of an organisation (Rebelo and Gomes, 2011), and thereby indirectly having an additional impact on the three subsystems due to the impact of culture on these subsystems (Newbold and Pharoah, 2009; Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Jerez-Gomez et al., 2005).

In addition to being enhanced by systems thinking, an understanding of the complexities of the relationships between the three conceptual elements and their component parts is further informed through the use of structuration theory as the theoretical frame for the research. One of the key principles of structuration theory, duality of structure, whereby structure is both the medium and the outcome (Giddens, 1982; Akgun, Byrne and Keskin, 2007; Allison and Merali, 2007), provides a useful theoretical frame for examining the relationship between organisational learning, strategy and implementation. The usefulness of this approach is in part informed by the fact that learning and strategy had each separately been identified as being simultaneously products and processes in sections 2.2 (Fenwick, 2006) and 2.3.7 (Sminia, 2009) respectively.

Furthermore, this theoretical frame supports an approach whereby the research heeds an argument that organisational learning needs to be seen as a function of rather than be taken as an independent matter when viewed in the context of strategic and implementation issues that would feature during organisational change. In other words, organisational learning appears to

be activated and purposefully engaged by virtue of the dynamism of strategy and implementation as they progress during such change.

This review of the literature pertaining to organisational learning, strategy and implementation has been used to inform the development of the research questions that this research project is seeking to answer. Chapter 3 describes the methodology for undertaking the project to seek answers to these questions.

Chapter 3. Research methodology

3.1.   Introduction

This chapter presents the research methodology to be used to empirically investigate practitioner perspectives of strategic organisational learning implementation for APS agencies during a period of change. The selected methodology to be adopted is a qualitative one—with focus groups, and semi-structured in-depth interviews with learning and development practitioners—and utilises interpretive content analyses to analyse the data collected. The chapter commences with a discussion of social science research paradigms and methodologies, and then provides an explanation of the selection and justification of the research methodology that was employed. It then explains the research design and implementation adopted for this study, including the structure and conduct of the focus groups and interviews, and the recruitment and selection of participants. The identified limitations and ethical considerations of the methodological approach are also explained. Chapter 4 explains the data analyses procedures employed.

3.2.   Selection and justification of research methodology

This section explains the selection of, and provides a justification for, the research methodology. It includes an explanation of social science research paradigms, methodologies and data sources before justifying the use of a qualitative methodology for the research.

3.2.1. Social science research paradigms

The assumptions implicit in most social science research are underpinned by philosophical bases, which are referred to as research paradigms. These paradigms influence how the research should be conducted and how the results should be interpreted (Bryman, 2004). Key

philosophical dimensions that constitute the different research paradigms are ontology, epistemology and axiology (Hill and Wright, 2001).

Ontology involves the consideration of how people see the world and attempts to understand what people see as their reality (Hill and Wright, 2001). The two end points on the ontological continuum are objectivism and constructionism (Bryman, 2004). Objectivism is based on the idea that phenomena being studied have their own objective realities that are fixed and concrete regardless of what the researcher does (Bryman, 2004; Sheehan, 2004). This approach leads to the researcher remaining apart from participants so that decisions can be made objectively. At the other end of the continuum, constructionism takes an alternative view and sees the phenomena being studied as having emergent realities that are constructed by social actors (Sheehan, 2004; Hanson and Grimmer, 2007). These social actors could be the researcher, research participants or any other parties. This approach leads to researchers becoming closely involved with participants as they seek to develop a clear understanding of their world.

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. It is concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge, including analysing the nature of knowledge in a particular discipline. The two ends of the epistemological continuum are positivism and interpretivism. Positivism is based on the notion of a unitary objective reality (Morgan and Drury, 2003; Kim, 2003) and presents facts as universal truths (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran, 2001; Kim, 2003). In contrast, interpretivism is based on the view that the world being studied potentially has multiple realities based on the interpretations of participants and researchers alike (Kim, 2003). While these views might appear on the surface to be diametrically opposed, arguments can be presented to support the notion that all research is interpretive to some degree (Gummesson, 2003).

Axiology is the philosophical study of values and, in relation to research, is concerned with what role personal values play in the research process (Hill and Wright, 2001). The opposing axiological stances are: one that promotes research as being value-free and involving the denial of the influence of values; and an alternative approach that includes and makes explicit the values of researchers and participants.

Having examined the nature of research paradigms, it is instructive to look at the two dominant research paradigms in social research: the positivist and interpretivist paradigms. The positivist paradigm is in keeping with objectivist ontology, positivist epistemology and value-free axiology; while the interpretivist paradigm adheres to constructionist ontology, interpretive epistemology and an axiology inclusive of values (Hill and Wright, 2001; Hanson and Grimmer, 2007; Kim, 2003). These two paradigms differ on a range of other dimensions, including the types of reasoning they employ (Bryman, 2004; Cavana et al., 2001). Research underpinned by the positivist paradigm employs deductive reasoning where theory guides the research; while research that is underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm employs inductive reasoning where theory is an outcome of the research. They also differ in the research methods they utilise and the criteria by which they are judged (Kim, 2003; Bryman, 2004; Cavana et al., 2001).

3.2.2. Research methodologies

In the main, a researcher who adopts the positivist paradigm will generally utilise quantitative research methodologies, while one who adopts the interpretivist paradigm will generally utilise qualitative methodologies. A summary of the key differences between quantitative and qualitative research is presented in Table 3.1. A discussion of some of the key quantitative and qualitative research methods follows.

Table 3.1: Differences between quantitative and qualitative research

	Quantitative research	Qualitative research
Orientation to theory	Deductive, testing of theory	Inductive, creation of theory
Ontological orientation	Objectivism	Constructionism
Epistemological orientation	Positivism	Interpretivism
Axiological orientation	Value free	Value laden, values made explicit
Researcher skills	Scientific, statistical procedure and translation skills	Interpersonal communication, observation, interpretive skills
Sample size	Generally large	Generally small
Quality criteria	Reliability, replication, validity	Trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability)
Research methods (data collection)	Questionnaires, structured interviews, structured observation, content analysis	Ethnography, participant observation, focus groups, oral histories, unstructured and semi-structured interviews
Data format	Numbers from precise measurement	Words from documents, observations and transcripts
Data analysis	Use of statistics, tables and charts and how they relate to hypotheses	Extraction of themes or generalisations from evidence and organising it to present a coherent picture

Sources – adapted from: (Bryman, 2004; Cavana et al., 2001; Lukas, Hair, Bush and Ortinau, 2005).

Quantitative research is based on measuring the phenomena under investigation and using statistics to analyse the data collected. Due to the focus on measurement, structured interviews, questionnaires, observations and content analysis are the methods employed when undertaking such research. Design considerations for the research instrument will be critical for the success of quantitative research projects. Key design considerations will include clarification of concepts, including selecting the variables to represent the concepts and determining the level of measurement (Hair, Babin, Money and Samouel, 2003).

Qualitative research is aimed at understanding the rich and complex nature of human phenomena. Key data collection methods employed by the qualitative researcher include participant observation, ethnography, focus groups, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, and oral histories.

Participant observation is a research method whereby researchers aspire to gather more information and greater depth of knowledge than they would utilising methods that would involve them looking in from the outside (Vinten, 1994). In such observations, the researcher engages in the information environment and thereby undergoes the integrated experience of those in the situation (Rowley, 2004).

Ethnography is a qualitative research method that involves long-term participant observation where the researcher is immersed into a social group, culture or environment over an extended period (Agafonoff, 2006). A key consideration when selecting participant observation or ethnography as research methods is the degree of involvement with, and detachment from, members of the social setting which the researcher aspires to (Bryman, 2004).

The focus group is a research method that collects data through the interaction of participants involved in discussing the research topic. In essence, it is a form of group interview in which

there is an emphasis on a defined topic and the accent is on the joint construction of meaning (Bryman, 2004). A number of benefits arise from focus groups as a result of group interactions and social forces, including the generation of a wider range of information and chains of ideas flowing from group interactions (Stokes and Bergin, 2006).

Interviews are widely utilised as qualitative research methods. The two main types of interview used in such research are unstructured and semi-structured interviews. In unstructured interviews, the researcher uses a brief set of prompts to deal with the range of topics under consideration (Bryman, 2004). In such interviews, the interviewer does not commence with a planned set of questions, as the objective is to allow some preliminary issues to surface, which the researcher can choose to probe depending on the relevance to the objectives of the research (Cavana et al., 2001). In the semi-structured interview, the researcher has a list of topics or questions in an interview guide; however, there is flexibility in how the participant replies (Bryman, 2004). In such interviews, the researcher is free to use his or her initiative in probing participants' responses (Hair et al., 2003).

3.2.3. Data sources

In addition to considering suitable research methodologies, another key decision to be made by the researcher relates to the source of the expected data. Data can be categorised as originating from primary, secondary and tertiary sources. Primary data is that collected by the researcher on site, utilising a range of methods for the purpose of conducting the current study; while secondary data is an existing source that has been collected for some other purpose (Hair et al., 2003). Tertiary sources are publications such as encyclopedias and texts that sum up secondary and primary sources.

Secondary and tertiary sources have the advantage of having already been collected, thereby potentially offering time and money savings to the researcher. These advantages are countered by the fact that they have not been collected for the specific research project and therefore are likely not to be fit for purpose. With this in mind, the researcher elected to rely on primary data sources for this research project.

3.2.4. Justification for using qualitative methodology for the present research

Sections 3.2.1, 3.2.2 and 3.2.3 explained the dominant social science research paradigms, methodologies and data sources respectively. In section 3.2.4, the insights gained from these discussions are used to provide a rationale for using a qualitative research methodology for this project. In particular, the characteristics of qualitative research as detailed in Table 3.1 are used to guide this discussion.

Table 3.1 informs the reader that qualitative research is based on a constructionist ontological orientation, an interpretivist epistemological orientation and a value-laden axiological orientation. This research is about exploring meanings and gaining an understanding of the thoughts and feelings of participants in relation to strategic organisational learning implementation in their respective APS agencies. The qualitative ontological, epistemological and axiological orientation is collectively suited to developing an understanding of the rich and complex nature of human phenomena in such a situation for the following reasons. Firstly, a constructionist ontological orientation recognises that the APS settings being studied potentially have multiple realities based on the interpretations of participants. Secondly, an interpretivist epistemological orientation allows the researcher to be closely involved with the learning and development practitioners in order to develop a clear understanding of their world. Finally, a

value-laden axiological orientation acknowledges that APS life is not value-free, and therefore includes and makes explicit the values of both the researchers and participants.

Table 3.1 also outlines the data collection, format and analyses approaches for the study of a particular phenomenon as employed in both qualitative and quantitative research. As this research is about exploring thoughts, feelings and meanings rather than measuring the amount, strength or size of a phenomenon, narratives (words) rather than measurements (numbers) are considered here to be the required element of this research project. The collection and analysis of words as the intended dataset thus denotes the use of a qualitative, over that of a quantitative, research methodology.

The reasons listed above are the primary reasons the researcher adopted a qualitative methodological approach underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm. Secondary reasons for adopting such an approach are that it is also in keeping with the researcher's own skills, experience, and world view and the sample size for the study.

Having provided a rationale for the selection of a qualitative research design, the justification is now provided for the use of the specific qualitative methods selected for this project, focus groups and semi-structured in-depth interviews. A primary reason for the selection of these specific methods over other qualitative methods, such as ethnography and participant observation, is that they both allow capture of the cognitive thought processes and emotive feelings of the participants, which may not be readily apparent if these alternative methods were to be employed (Cavana et al., 2001). Such procedures also result in an additional benefit: the assurance of information being taken from the participant's verbatim responses, thereby minimising observer bias in the reporting of information (Cavana et al., 2001). Additional reasons for selecting these methods over other qualitative methods include that they are generally less

intrusive, time-consuming and disruptive to workplaces, and they can be directed more precisely at the focus of the research (Bryman, 2004). The reason that more than one research method was used was because it enabled any emergent issues to be addressed (Hill and Wright, 2001), and also assisted in verifying that the research accurately reflected the evidence (Cavana et al., 2001) and enhanced the trustworthiness or credibility of the findings (Bryman, 2004).

An explanation as to how these two research methods were utilised is provided in the next section, which covers research design and implementation.

3.3.   Research design and implementation

A research design is basically the framework for the collection and analysis of the data (Bryman, 2004). This section provides an overview of the research design. It also provides a description of the structure of the focus groups and subsequent individual interviews, including how participants were recruited and how these data collection events were conducted in the field.

3.3.1. Overview of the research design

A wide range of factors must be considered in any research design. These include the nature of the problem (Bryman, 2004) and the purpose of the research (Cavana et al., 2001). The nature of the problem will be influenced by factors such as the context or environment in which the research is to be conducted, and the various specific topics of the research. The environment of this research was APS agencies during a particular period of change (a description of the APS and the APS environment was provided in section 1.2.2 in Chapter 1, and a description of the period of change was provided in section 1.2.3 also in Chapter 1) and APS learning and development practitioners in particular. The topics of concern relate to the conceptual notions of strategic organisational learning implementation as they are perceived to be employed in that context.

The broad operational design of the research project as a whole is summarised below.

Step 1: Identify the key features of organisational learning and strategy as separate concepts from a review of the literature, and use that information as a background for approaching focus group discussions. As described in sections 2.2 and 2.3 in Chapter 2, these features were identified through a process of organising and sorting the themes from the literature through the use of mind maps and index cards. These focus groups were primarily used to gather a more up-to-date, Australian-centric understanding as to implementation issues from an APS practitioner's perspective to supplement the limited Australian literature on implementation openly available in this regard.

Step 2: Conduct focus groups with learning and development practitioners from APS agencies to capture real-time notions of how implementation is considered today in the APS by actively engaged practitioners. Deliberations from the focus groups then guide the development of a pool of open-ended questions in relation to the conceptual element of implementation for use in the individual interviews.

Step 3: Conduct individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews with APS learning and development practitioners. These interviews are used to get a narrative of how individual practitioners deal with each of the conceptual elements of organisational learning, strategy and implementation both separately and in terms of their perceived relationship amongst these three elements.

Step 4: Undertake data analyses (discussed in Chapter 4).

Having described the overview of the research design in this section, sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.3 provide details as to the structure and conduct of the focus groups and semi-structured interviews themselves.

3.3.2. Structure of focus groups

As outlined in section 3.3.1, the purpose of the focus groups was to develop a better understanding of contemporary implementation issues as perceived by focus group participants in order to guide the development of a pool of open-ended questions regarding these issues for use in the subsequent individual interviews.

A range of factors impact upon the decision as to how many focus groups to conduct. These factors include logistical considerations, for example time and money. Due to the scope of this research project, these factors were the primary considerations in determining the number of focus groups conducted.

Key structural considerations in relation to populating focus groups include the number of participants and their degree of homogeneity. There appears to be quite a high level of consensus that the ideal size for a focus group is in the range of four to ten participants (Walden, 2006; Cook, 2005; Bryman, 2004). A key consideration regarding the degree of homogeneity to aim for is the research project's objective (Cavana et al., 2001). Focus groups are usually more effective if group members are homogenous in certain key features related to the project objective (Cook, 2005; Walden, 2006). Such homogeneity was aimed for with the selection of learning and development practitioners as the target group for the focus groups (and interviews). This was due to the overall aim of this research project being to add to a better conceptual and pragmatic understanding of strategic organisational learning implementation in an Australian context, with particular reference to the APS during a period of change. As learning and development departments are generally charged with primary responsibility for strategic organisational learning initiatives (Coulson-Thomas, 2000) learning and development practitioners have exposure to these initiatives. Focus group membership was restricted to

supervisory and above level practitioners to ensure participants had adequate exposure to strategic issues. As such focus group members had a high degree of homogeneity in regards to exposure to strategic organisational learning initiatives in their agencies.

Based on consideration of these factors, the research design included five focus groups with four to eight participants in each group. All focus group members shared the characteristic of being learning and development practitioners in APS agencies (whose employment classification was APS6 and above)[i]. Also, each focus group, based on logistical considerations, consisted of participants from within the one agency. Prior to the first focus group being conducted, a trial focus group was run. This provided the opportunity for feedback from its participants and other refinements to be made before the actual focus groups commenced.

3.3.2.1. *Recruitment and selection of participants*

Having identified the number of participants required for the focus groups and the features they needed to have in common, it was necessary to determine how to recruit and select participants. Participation in the focus groups was invited through direct contact with professional officers in the learning and development departments at APS agencies. Agencies were selected randomly from the list of agencies in the *State of the Service (SOS) Report* (Australian Public Service Commission, 2009) with a mix of medium and large agencies approached to participate in the study. The *SOS Report* defines a large agency as one with more than 1,000 employees, a medium agency as one with 251 – 1000 employees and a small agency as one with 20 – 250 employees (Australian Public Service Commission, 2009). The learning and development branches of selected agencies were contacted initially by phone (contact numbers are available on agency websites and in the white pages). This initial contact was used to explain the nature of the research program and to ask if they were willing to further assist in the study.

When initial contact individuals agreed to assist, they were asked to then identify a (neutral) contact person who was subsequently emailed several orientation documents—the information statement and consent form—and asked to distribute them to learning and development practitioners (APS6 and above). The rationale for targeting employees at level APS6 and above was twofold. Firstly, this ensured that participants had enough exposure to strategic issues to make a meaningful contribution. Secondly, this minimised the likelihood of issues pertaining to hierarchy and associated power creating problems with participants now likely feeling freer to contribute in such circumstances.

This method of selection is a form of purposive sampling where participants are recruited due to the knowledge they possess about a particular issue (Hair et al., 2003) and to ensure information-rich cases relevant to the research questions (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007b). Such an approach to participant recruitment for qualitative research in general, and focus groups in particular, is well-supported in the literature (Hill and Wright, 2001; Stokes and Bergin, 2006; Walden, 2006).

3.3.2.2. *Conducting the focus groups*

A range of factors impact on the conduct of focus groups. Issues to consider in this respect include venue considerations, timing, degree of structure, level of moderator involvement and data capture methods used. These issues are discussed below.

A suitable venue needs to be selected to conduct the focus groups (Walden, 2006; Cavana et al., 2001). Most medium to large APS agencies have purpose-built meeting rooms that are set up to facilitate the smooth conduct of meetings. These settings include ensuring privacy and attention to comfort, and as well occupational health and safety issues, such as lighting and ergonomic

seating. For this research project, the neutral contact person already identified in each agency was asked to book a meeting room for the duration of the scheduled focus group.

Timing issues include time of day and length of session. (Walden, 2006) suggests that the scheduling of the sessions is crucial for optimum attendance. Given the participants were learning and development practitioners who may have been disinclined to participate during core business hours, the focus groups were scheduled at a time to minimise disruption to each agency, with lunchtime and end-of-day sessions offered. This scheduling also impacted upon the duration of the focus groups, with each group planned for one hour with refreshments available throughout the session. One hour falls within the length of session recommended in the literature, which ranges between one and three hours (Jacques, 2006; Cook, 2005; Walden, 2006).

The optimal degree of structure in a focus group is directly related to the purpose of the study. As the focus groups were being used in an exploratory manner, the researcher used general, open-ended questions based on a review of the organisational learning and strategy literature to draw out a broad range of responses regarding notions of how implementation was being considered in the APS at that time by actively engaged practitioners. Key notions that arose from the focus group deliberations were then followed up in the subsequent semi-structured interviews.

To maximise contribution in the focus groups, the researcher acted as moderator and adopted the following role: keeping the group focused while encouraging free flow of ideas; and maintaining the group dynamics while encouraging responses from all participants. This included being attentive to any issues of hierarchy and associated power to ensure that such issues did not impact upon all focus group members contributing freely. This approach to moderation is

well supported in the literature (Bryman, 2004, Jacques, 2006; Walden, 2006). Additionally, contribution was further encouraged through neutralising the environment for participant responses by getting them to respond to a fictitious scenario rather than based on their actual experiences. A detailed description of the planning and conduct of the focus groups is provided in Appendix 1.

There is wide consensus in the literature that some form of electronic recording is essential in capturing the large volume of data that are produced in focus group sessions (Bryman, 2004, Cook 2005; Walden, 2006). In deciding to record the groups, the researcher should be aware that it may impact participant responses (Cavana et al., 2001) and that it is crucial to obtain prior permission from participants to record the session on audio tape (Cook, 2005). In this research project, the researcher used digital audio recording to allow capture of the participant responses. The recorder was placed in an unobtrusive location in each venue, and participants' permission to record the sessions was obtained before the focus groups commenced.

3.3.3. *Structure of interviews*

A key consideration when using interviews in qualitative research is the degree of structure. Semi-structured interviews enable achievement of a balance between having the flexibility to ensure the world view of participants emerges whilst allowing coverage of a fairly specific focus (Bryman, 2004). As the focus of the interviews was to determine the views of actively engaged practitioners on the three conceptual elements as defined in this project—both as separate constructs and in terms of the relationships between them—semi-structured interviews were considered to achieve the appropriate balance of flexibility and focus.

3.3.3.1. *Recruitment and selection of participants*

The same considerations applied in relation to recruitment of participants for the interviews as for the focus groups. Consideration needed to be given to the number of participants, their characteristics, and how they were targeted and approached. Determining an ideal number of participants for qualitative interviews is difficult, and the size of the sample to support convincing conclusions will vary from situation to situation, with smaller samples being acceptable in situations that do not require significant comparison between groups (Bryman, 2004). The research design for this project included twelve to sixteen (depending largely on logistical considerations as they arose in real time) one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Logistical considerations, in particular those pertaining to the scope and timeframe for the research, led to thirteen interviews being conducted (details regarding these data collection events are provided in Table 4.1). Prior to the first interview being run, a trial interview was conducted. This provided the opportunity for refinement to be made before the actual data collection process commenced.

As with the focus groups, a purposive sampling approach was taken to the interviews, with participants targeted based on their knowledge in relation to the conceptual elements being investigated in this project. Following the focus group sessions, each participant was asked if they were interested in participating in a follow-up, one-on-one interview to explore further and in-depth any emergent issues they saw arising from their session. A selection of those who agreed was asked to participate in an interview with the proviso that a maximum of two participants per agency were interviewed. The information statements and consent forms relevant to this part of the study were administered to those agreeing to take part. Finally, interview participants were asked at the conclusion of the interview if they knew of a learning and development practitioner whom they thought could also be eligible to participate in the

study. To avoid breaches of disclosure of personal information relating to a third party without their prior consent, the interview participants, who agreed to assist here, were asked to pass on a copy of the participant information statement and consent form to third parties whom they thought may be eligible to participate. They were advised to inform any such third party that they could contact the researcher directly to indicate interest in participating. This technique utilised a form of snowball sampling, where the initial respondents were used to help identify other respondents in the target population (Hair et al., 2003).

3.3.3.2. *Conducting the interviews*

The same considerations discussed in the section on the conduct of focus groups applied in relation to venues and timing for the interviews. To minimise disruption to participants, all interviews were scheduled for meeting rooms or private offices in the participant's workplace. Timing was set at one hour at a mutually convenient time to allow enough time to explore issues in depth whilst recognising the busy work schedules of participants.

The researcher employed a pool of open-ended questions as the central data gathering technique throughout the interviews. The open-ended questions evolved from insights flagged in the literature for two conceptual elements—organisational learning and strategy—and from the focus group deliberations verified against the literature for the third conceptual element— implementation—the latter done in order to capture real-time notions of how implementation was considered today in the APS by actively engaged practitioners. A pool of possible questions from the above secondary and primary information sources was compiled in order to form a working set of questions/cues, which were utilised during the one-on-one interview sessions with respondents. The questions/cues were applied in a narrative-style of researcher– respondent conversation, with the researcher guiding or cueing the respondent non-directively

as his or her thoughts and feelings were unfolding during the course of the conversation. A detailed description of the planning and conduct of the interviews is provided in an interview protocol at Appendix 2; the following provides an overview of this process. For all three conceptual elements:

- to provide a common focus for a period of change, interviewees were asked to respond in relation to a current major reform initiative for APS agencies, the *Blueprint for Reform* (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2010) (the complete Blueprint is an 81-page document, a brief excerpt from which has been provided in the focus group and interviews planning protocols in Appendices 1 and 2— refer also to section 1.2.3 in Chapter 1). When interviewees were asked to consider a component of organisational learning, strategy or implementation "in this situation", this was in reference to the context as described in the *Blueprint for Reform*;

- a series of open-ended questions/cues were used as the central data-gathering technique throughout the interviews;

- the open-ended questions/cues evolved from insights flagged in the literature for two conceptual elements—organisational learning and strategy—and from the focus group deliberations verified against the literature for the third conceptual element, implementation;

- the questions/cues were applied in a narrative-style of researcher–respondent conversation, with the researcher guiding or cueing the respondent non-directively as his or her thoughts and feelings were unfolding during the course of the conversation;

- whilst the questions/cues were sequenced on a cue card for visual reinforcement (see the interview protocol in Appendix 2), interviewees were given the option of selecting the order of discussion, both in terms of which of the three conceptual elements they would like to discuss first, second and third and in terms of the order of responding to the questions/cues in relation to each component within the conceptual elements;

- once all components pertaining to each conceptual element had been explored, interviewees were asked which they considered to be the most and least important of the components relating to that particular conceptual element in terms of contributing to the successful implementation of the desired reforms. Participants were not limited to one most or least response, and were not forced to make a choice if they could not; and

- once all components on each card had been explored, interviewees were asked to comment on any perceived relationships they believed existed between the three conceptual elements.

As with the focus groups, digital audio recording was utilised to capture the data from the interviews, with permission being obtained before each of the interviews commenced.

3.4. Limitations of the proposed research design

The research design—which has the researcher as a key instrument of the research, as moderator of the focus groups and as the interviewer—could be considered to be a limitation of this study. This approach necessitated management of subjectivity to assist in meeting the requirements of trustworthiness, a criterion against which the quality of qualitative research is to be judged (see Table 3.1). The management of subjectivity was important to ensure that the findings represented as truly as possible the perspectives of the participants rather than covertly

reflecting the biases and beliefs of the researcher (Morrow, 2005). The management of such subjectivity was enabled through researcher reflexivity, which is described below.

Researcher reflexivity is put forward as a means by which researchers can understand how their own experiences and understandings of the world affect the research process and thereby acknowledge their subjectivities (Payne, 1996; Morrow, 2005). (Bryman, 2004) advises that reflexivity is in recognition of the fact that research cannot be value-free. By being self-reflective about issues such as their methods, values, biases, decisions and mere presence in the situations they are investigating, Bryman argues the researcher can avoid "untrammeled incursion of values in the research process". Throughout this research project, the researcher was self-reflective about such issues. This was achieved by following Kim's advice to bracket preexisting ideas of the phenomena, and assume a moral responsibility to accurately represent subjects and contexts (Kim, 2003). This included keeping a journal in which notes were recorded about how the research was going. These notes had a particular focus on the behaviours of the researcher, and were recorded after each focus group and interview was concluded. These notes were, in turn, discussed with the researcher's supervisor during regular catch-up sessions.

A limitation of the focus group method is that it can lead to a form of groupthink by those participating in it (Bryman, 2004), which may lead to ideas not being put forward, particularly by less vocal group members, and may also lead to an illusion of consensus when in fact individual participants do not really endorse what has been put forward (Stokes and Bergin, 2006). Skilled facilitation on the part of the moderator is necessary to minimise the likelihood of this occurring. The skills necessary to maximise the effectiveness of the focus groups, minimise the likelihood of groupthink and minimise the likelihood of issues pertaining to hierarchy and associated power creating problems with participants feeling free to contribute, include the ability to:

- quickly develop rapport with group members so they feel comfortable making contributions;

- keep and/or bring the group on topic without disrupting the flow of the group or losing its place; and

- probe effectively to gain a deeper understanding of issues raised by group members (Jacques, 2006).

There are also limitations on the generalisability of results to other APS agencies not earmarked for participation. (Morrow, 2005) suggests that qualitative researchers should aspire to be judged on an alternative criterion to generalisability—that of transferability. This can be done by ensuring that the researcher provides enough information about:

- various aspects of the research such as their role in it, how the research is conducted, who the participants are and what their relationships are to the researcher; and

- about characteristics of the APS workplace and workforce.

This then provides further information for the reader to decide on the degree to which the findings might transfer to different settings.

A potential additional limitation relates to the nature of participants in the research in regards to their roles as employees of the APS. The legislative and political environment they operate in, as well as the public scrutiny they operate under, is cited as contributing towards a risk-averse attitude (Management Advisory Committee, 2010). Such an attitude can be limiting in terms of initial openness to participating in research projects, and once participation has been agreed can limit openness of responses. Assurance of protection of privacy is a critical control for this limitation. Such assurance was given in the information statement that was provided to all participants prior to gaining their agreement to participate in the research, and was reiterated in

the consent form which they, in turn, signed before participating in the focus groups and interviews.

3.5.   Ethical considerations

The Australian Government requires ethics clearances for any research involving human participation (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007a; 2007b); as such, it is necessary to obtain the necessary clearance before commencing the research.

Key ethical considerations for all researchers include maintaining high standards of responsible research, reporting the research responsibly and respecting research participants (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007a). Completing the required ethics clearance, including undertaking a peer review process, ensures these considerations are taken into account.

One of the specific ethical considerations in relation to the focus groups and interviews in this research is ensuring a non-coercive approach to recruitment of participants and ensuring their informed consent to participate. This necessitates providing participants with enough information regarding the purpose of the research, how it will be conducted and how it will be reported so that they can make an informed decision as to whether to participate. This includes obtaining their permission to record the focus groups and interviews (Cook, 2005).

Another critical ethical issue, and one that is difficult to achieve in focus groups, is that of confidentiality. One strategy that can be employed to assist in achieving confidentiality is ensuring that comments of participants are not directly attributed (Cook, 2005). This was achieved by allocating alphanumeric codes to participants and using these codes throughout the data analysis as well as when quoting from participant comments.

To ensure all ethical considerations by the present student researcher have been adequately addressed, ethical clearance was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Newcastle with approval number H-2010-1228.

3.6. Summary

This chapter outlined the research paradigm, design considerations and methodologies adopted in the research. The chapter highlighted which research paradigm was selected to underpin the research design in order to ensure the research itself achieved the desired objectives of this study.

The chapter also underscored the importance of good design if this research program is to stand up to scrutiny, and if potential limitations and ethical considerations are to be addressed. The discussion presented in this chapter was primarily for the purpose of ensuring that the research conducted for this study can stand up to such scrutiny by meeting the quality criteria for qualitative research: trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability). Collectively, the design of the research process, focus group and interview protocols, and a rigorous approach to data analyses, ensured adequate attention was paid to the trustworthiness criterion and to ensuring that the identified potential limitations and ethical considerations were addressed. This, in turn, contributed towards a rigorous and credible research project.

Chapter 4. Results

4.1.   Introduction

The previous chapter explained and justified the selected research methodology to collect the data for this qualitative research project. This chapter presents the data analyses procedures, and the findings from the focus groups and the in-depth semi-structured interviews with learning and development practitioners in APS agencies in relation to the research problem and research questions.

The researcher looked for answers to the following questions:

1. How is organisational learning viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?

2. How is strategy viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?

3. How is implementation viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?

4. How do organisational learning, strategy and implementation interact in APS agencies during a period of change?

This chapter discusses answers to these questions, which arose from the data analyses.

4.2.   Overview of data analyses procedures

The method of data analysis used in this research project was interpretive content analysis. Content analysis can be both quantitative and qualitative, with the qualitative approach being based on the analysis of themes (SSABSA, 2004; Bryman, 2004). This approach is referred to as thematic analysis.

4.3. *Focus groups*

As outlined in section 3.3.1 of Chapter 3, the purpose of the focus groups was to gather an up-to-date understanding of implementation issues from an APS practitioner's perspective due to the limited literature available in this regard. Data gained from focus groups was then used to develop a pool of open-ended questions in relation to the conceptual element of implementation for use in the individual interviews. Five focus groups with a total of twenty-two participants were undertaken for the initial data collection in this project. As the focus groups were used in an exploratory manner, the researcher used general, open questions based on a review of the organisational learning and strategy literature to draw out a broad range of responses to capture real-time notions of how implementation is considered in the APS today by actively engaged practitioners (see Appendix 1).

4.3.1. Data analyses focus groups

A three-stage approach was used to analyse the data from the focus groups. In the first stage, key phrases from the focus groups that were perceived by the researcher as relevant to implementation of organisational learning within the conceptual strategic framework were transcribed into an Excel spreadsheet. In this round, the researcher was generous in terms of deciding which phrases were relevant to minimise the likelihood of eliminating valid data at this step and to ensure a comprehensive database existed for the following stages of data analyses. This process of transcribing key phrases was essentially the first round of coding, as it required interpretation and attribution of meaning of selected aspects of the textual data.

In the second stage, words on the initial worksheet that the researcher considered to be most significant were colour-coded and then copied into a new worksheet. The criteria used to determine the most significant words were in terms of the degree to which the researcher

perceived them to be important to the implementation of organisational learning in the strategic context. This second round was used to distil the data down to what the researcher perceived to be the essence of the issues pertaining to implementation as generated from the focus groups.

In the third stage, these issues were then combined into similar clusters or themes which seemed to go together operationally in yet a third worksheet.

4.3.2. Results from the focus groups

The focus group results as shown by the clusters that emerged from the data indicated that respondents perceived there to be a number of key themes in relation to implementation of organisational learning strategy. These key themes related to the following components of implementation:

- the presence or absence of silos, specifically referring to structural arrangements within the APS and APS agencies;

- the approach taken to management and leadership, specifically how leadership commitment is demonstrated;

- decision-making processes, specifically how decisions are made and by whom;

- the importance of clear and explicit goals;

- the need for alignment between learning and development and performance management; and

- the importance of communication processes, specifically how messages are to be shared.

These six components were then checked against insights from the sparse literature available on implementation as detailed in Chapter 2 to enhance development of the interview questions/cues for the individual interviews to follow. This checking process revealed a good match between what practitioners in the focus groups identified as important implementation issues and those that are presented in the literature. Five of the components that were considered important by practitioners in the focus groups were present in the literature. These related to structural issues, specifically those pertaining to silos within organisations (Sy and Cote, 2004; Schutz and Bloch, 2006; Sveiby, 2007), the importance of a committed leadership approach (Yeo, 2007b; Newbold and Pharoah, 2009), the importance of setting clear goals and objectives (Newbold and Pharoah, 2009; Kossoff, 2006; Yeo, 2006; Yeo, 2007b), the need to align performance management and learning and development (Yeo, 2007b; Newbold and Pharoah, 2009), and the importance of effective communication processes (Burley and Pandit, 2008; Yeo, 2007b). Only one issue identified by practitioners, decision-making processes in terms of how decisions are made and by whom, did not emerge as a critical issue in the literature. In turn, only one issue that was identified as important in the literature, the presence of a culture supportive of learning (Newbold and Pharoah, 2009; Vince and Saleem, 2004), did not emerge from the focus group data. As a result of the above analyses, the researcher, in developing the interview protocol, decided to focus on the five components that were common to the data clusters and the literature, and the sixth component from the implementation literature. The rationale for retaining these six issues is as follows. Given that five of those six issues were in agreement between the focus groups and the literature, the researcher considered the precedent of the literature to be more reliable when judging efficacy where there was a lack of agreement of the remaining considered issues. As the literature is the

established scientific understanding of what is known in the field, the researcher used it as the arbiter as to what is critical from an implementation point of view.

4.4.   Interviews

This section explains how results were obtained from the interviews. It covers interviewee demographic data, the process of conducting the interviews and a description of how the data from the interviews were analysed.

4.4.1. Interviewee demographic data

A total of thirteen individual one-hour, in-depth interviews were conducted with learning and development practitioners from different APS agencies. These participants were from nine different agencies, with a maximum of two participants from any one agency interviewed. Seven of the participants had also taken part in focus groups and had agreed to a follow-up interview. The remaining six participants were identified through the snowballing recruitment approach (as described in Chapter 3).

The State of the Service Report (Australian Public Service Commission, 2009) defines a large agency as one with more than 1,000 employees, a medium agency as one with 251–1000 employees and a small agency as one with 20–250 employees. Based on these definitions, nine respondents came from large agencies and four from medium-sized agencies. As with the focus groups, participants were selected through a purposive sampling approach, with the selection criteria being learning and development practitioners in APS agencies (APS6 and above). These criteria were narrowed down further for the interviews, with interviewees targeted from the executive level (EL) 1 and above ranks to ensure adequate exposure to strategic issues in their agencies. The APS is organised into three broad classification tiers: APS1–6 representing entry-level to supervisory positions, EL1 and EL2 representing middle and senior management

positions, and senior executive service (SES) representing senior management positions. Based on this classification approach, four EL1, eight EL2 and one SES1 learning and development practitioners were interviewed. All respondents also had considerable experience in an APS environment, with only one reporting less than five years APS employment. Five interviewees had five to ten years service, four had eleven to twenty years service and three had more than twenty years service. A summary of the demographic details per interviewee is provided in Table 4.1. These details provide useful contextual data which confirm that participants represented the views of different-sized agencies, and were senior and experienced enough to be able to discuss strategic issues openly. Interviewees have been identified throughout this chapter as I1 to I13, based on the order in which contact was made with them. This was done to ensure confidentiality.

Table 4.1: Interviewee demographic data

Interviewee	Agency size	APS classification level	Length of time with APS
I1	Large	EL2	> 20 years
I2	Large	SES1	11–20 years
I3	Large	EL2	> 20 years
I4	Large	EL1	11–20 years
I5	Large	EL1	< 5 years
I6	Large	EL1	11–20 years
I7	Medium	EL2	5–10 years
I8	Medium	EL2	11–20 years
I9	Medium	EL2	> 20 years
I10	Medium	EL2	5–10 years
I11	Large	EL2	5–10 years
I12	Large	EL2	5–10 years
I13	Large	EL1	5–10 years

4.4.2. Interviews conduct

The planned procedures for conducting the interviews and the interview protocol were discussed in Chapter 3. For all three conceptual elements:

- to provide a common focus for a period of change, interviewees were asked to respond in relation to a current major reform initiative for APS agencies, the Blueprint for Reform (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2010) (the complete Blueprint is an 81-page document; a brief excerpt from it has been provided in the focus group and interviews planning protocols in Appendices 1 and 2—refer also to section 1.2.3 in Chapter 1). When interviewees were asked to consider a component of organisational learning, strategy or implementation "in this situation", this was in reference to the context as described in the Blueprint for Reform;

- a series of open-ended questions/cues were used as the central data-gathering technique throughout the interviews;

- the open-ended questions/cues evolved from insights flagged in the literature for two conceptual elements—organisational learning and strategy—and from the focus group deliberations verified against the literature for the third conceptual element—implementation;

- the questions/cues were applied in a narrative-style of researcher–respondent conversation with the researcher guiding or cueing the respondent non-directively as his or her thoughts and feelings were unfolding during the course of the conversation;

- whilst the questions/cues were sequenced on a cue card for visual reinforcement (see the interview protocol in Appendix 2), interviewees were given the option of selecting the order of discussion, both in terms of which of the three conceptual elements they

would like to discuss first, second and third and in terms of the order of responding to the questions/cues in relation to each component within the conceptual elements;

- once all components pertaining to each conceptual element had been explored, interviewees were asked which they considered to be the most and least important of the components relating to that particular conceptual element in terms of contributing to the successful implementation of the desired reforms. Participants were not limited to one most or least response, and were not forced to make a choice if they could not; and

- once all components on each card had been explored, interviewees were asked to comment on any perceived relationships they believed existed between the three conceptual elements.

4.4.3. Data analyses interviews

Data from the interviews were also initially transcribed into an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was formatted based around the eighteen interview questions/cues from the interview protocol (refer Appendix 2). The first round of interpretive analysis involved deciding which comments made by interviewees were particularly informative, poignant and significant and transcribing them into the appropriate cell on the spreadsheet as close to verbatim as possible. Essentially, this step was an informal content analysis, with the criteria to judge the comments being the eighteen questions themselves. In undertaking this step, erring on the generous side was useful, as it minimised the likelihood of eliminating valid data and ensured a comprehensive database for further data analyses to come.

This step was followed by the first round of coding, which involved transferring the data into three new spreadsheets, one for each of the conceptual elements in the project. Each

spreadsheet was set up to have the components (interview questions/cues) represented by columns and the respondents by rows. The data in each cell were then examined critically to look for key and secondary ideas, which were colour-coded accordingly. To minimise bias and enhance the objectivity of this step, the cells were examined randomly rather than in a systematic "down-column across-row" manner.

The second round of coding involved examination of these key and secondary ideas. This was done to look for the underlying thoughts of the expressions, thereby drilling down to the essence of each piece of data. The purpose of this step was to dig into the responses to reveal more insight into what participants were saying in response to the interview questions/cues.

The next step involved transferring the results of the above process into a new worksheet with additional columns for similarities and dissimilarities. The data from the second round of coding were examined to look for similar notions, which were transferred to the new column set up for this purpose. The same process was repeated, but this time looking for dissimilarities in the data. This step, like the preceding coding steps, involved making judgement calls on the data.

This process of going backwards and forwards through the data and drilling down into it provided insights into respondents' perceptions of the three conceptual elements and how individual practitioners perceived the notions of organisational learning, strategy and implementation both separately and in terms of the relationship between them. Such an approach, based on meaningful coding and making links between the interpretation of themes, is supported in the literature for studies based on similar subject matter (Li, Brake, Champion, Fuller, Gabel and Hatcher-Busch, 2009; McDowall and Saunders, 2010). Throughout this process, the researcher repeatedly returned to the actual digital recordings to listen to them to ensure that data snippets were not being taken out of context. To facilitate this, times on the digital

recording had been included in the data spreadsheets so that the researcher could readily return to the specific mention in each interview and listen to a minute or so either side to clarify the context.

Interviewees' nominations as to which components within each of the three conceptual elements they perceived to be the most and the least important in terms of contributing to the successful implementation of the desired reforms were also captured on a data analyses spreadsheet, and these results were then collated and transcribed into the tables that appear in this dissertation (Tables 4.2, 4.4 and 4.6).

4.5. *Organisational learning*

The interview procedure described in section 4.4.2 was applied in order to answer the research question: "How is organisational learning viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?" The data collected in this manner were analysed using thematic analysis as described in section 4.4.3.

The results in this section have been presented in the order from most to least important components pertaining to organisational learning, as nominated by interviewees, in terms of contributing to the successful implementation of the desired reforms. These most and least nominations for the different organisational learning components are presented in Table 4.2, and the key considerations relating to all the components examined in relation to organisational learning are presented in Table 4.3.

It should be noted that there was no relationship identified between the question ranking nominations and the order in which they were presented. As noted in section 4.4.2, interviewees were given the option of selecting the order of discussion from cue cards (as

presented in Appendix 2). There was no apparent relationship between the order in which components were listed on the cue cards and the order in which they were nominated by interviewees. This can be seen by comparing the order in which questions were presented on the cue cards with the question nominations as represented in Tables 4.2, 4.4 and 4.6.

Table 4.2: Organisational learning components—most/least nominations

Component	Question nominations
People developing shared understanding as they work together in new ways	Most = 7 Least = 0
Leaders instilling a shared vision of new ways of working	Most = 7 Least = 0
Knowledge creation as an ongoing process	Most = 2 Least = 4
Development of wisdom enabled by the organisation's structure and culture	Most = 0 Least = 2
Identification of new patterns of decisions about best ways to work	Most = 0 Least = 6

4.5.1. People developing shared understanding as they work together in new ways

In order to explore this component of organisational learning, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

People working together in new ways plays an important role in developing shared understandings. How might such organisational learning be facilitated in this situation?

Respondents felt it was important that in order for this form of organisational learning to occur, organisations need to have in place mechanisms to encourage relationship building, and sharing that will facilitate mutual learning. Such mechanisms would include cross-functional work teams, networking forums, collaboration systems, group discussions and committees.

"Teams are what work best here and we do use cross-functional teams—put together task forces e.g. for change implementation—team type approach seems to work and get results." (I3)

"Better systems being introduced (IT and collaboration) to allow that sharing to occur." (I5)

"Involves networking across agencies and departments—it is about developing relationships and plugging into networks—can happen within/across levels, agencies, disciplines." (I7)

"Create opportunities by making networking valued and creating space for people to do it and to reflect." (I11)

This aspect of organisational learning was considered to be the equally most important component in contributing towards the successful implementation of the desired reforms, along with leaders instilling a shared vision (see Table 4.2). Seven out of the thirteen interviewees nominated this as the most important component, with four of these seven also nominating it equal to leaders instilling a shared vision. These respondents appeared to see a connection

between these two organisational learning components. No respondents nominated this aspect to be the least important component of organisational learning. These results appeared to be supported regardless of APS agency size, APS classification level and time served within the APS.

4.5.2. Leaders instilling a shared vision of new ways of working

In order to explore this component of organisational learning, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

> Leadership also plays an important role in championing organisational learning. How might leadership go about this to instil a shared vision of new ways of working here?

Respondents argued that the most important considerations for this component were that leaders need to use open, two-way communication of their visions for the purpose of getting it shared all around. They also need to lead by example as active role models of the change.

> *"As a leader it is about showing support for and actively modeling—working towards the change."* (I1)

> *"It comes back to communication at all levels—helps to build the culture—if people feel leaders are open and transparent and clear where they want the organisation to go and what values they support you'll get a much better feel than if you are uncertain."* (I2)

> *"Number 1 is congruency e.g. if everyone is talking about being collegiate and then you dictate, then staff will see the incongruence and you will get dissonance—so the espoused versus the actual, the role-modeling going on—*

this needs to be in place to get the 'instilling' happening and the acceptance of

the possible new ways of working." (I13)

As described above, this component of organisational learning was nominated as the equal most important one in terms of contributing towards the successful implementation of the desired reforms, with seven out of thirteen respondents nominating it as most important and four of these seven also nominating it equal to people developing shared understanding (see Table 4.2). No respondents nominated it as least important. These results appeared consistent regardless of APS classification level and time within the APS; however, the demographic variable of agency size does appear to have some influence with all seven respondents who nominated this dimension as most important coming from large APS agencies. Closer inspection of the datasets does not provide any clues as to why this latter finding might be so indicated.

4.5.3. Knowledge creation as an ongoing process

In order to explore this component of organisational learning, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

Knowledge creation as an ongoing process is an important component of organisational learning. How might this be facilitated in this situation?

Respondents argued that an important consideration for this aspect of organisational learning is showing that knowledge is valued through having in place mechanisms that encourage the creation and sharing of it, such as communities of practice, mentoring, succession planning and grey masters. They also suggested that it is necessary to develop knowledge optimisation systems.

"Knowledge itself presents some challenges for organisations—it is not just about information or processes but the value add that people give to that, so knowledge is often in people's head and that's where it is quite difficult so it comes back to the culture in the organisation about sharing knowledge." (I2)

"Create the time and space for people to share that knowledge—sit down and 'shoot the breeze'—what have we learned—are we able to generate a new definition of something and smart enough to recognise it?" (I9)

"Having a belief system and then some practices in place where we say these are the things that are important to us and we are going to make sure that everyone knows about them and we are going to repeatedly tell them to people to make sure we capture everybody." (I13)

An alternative view was presented by one respondent who articulated the benefits of seeking to bring in new knowledge via actively recruiting from outside the organisation.

"Not being as narrow minded when we recruit—not recruiting the same as what we have got—making the APS not as hard to get into for external people and recognise the wealth of knowledge they could bring." (I10)

In comparison to the other aspects of organisational learning, this component was considered to be of moderate to low importance in contributing towards the successful implementation of the desired reforms. Only two respondents nominated it as the most important component and four respondents nominated it as the least important one (see Table 4.2).

4.5.4. Development of wisdom enabled by the organisation's structure and culture

In order to explore this component of organisational learning, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

> How might structural and cultural elements of your agency be used to facilitate organisational learning in this situation?

Respondents felt that for this aspect of organisational learning to occur, it was necessary to develop a visible learning culture: one that recognises continuous learning from all opportunities and embraces learning by everyone. They also believed it was necessary to develop structural elements that facilitate information-sharing and involvement across the organisation such as cross-organisation committees, integrated functions and a flatter structure.

> *"If you have a culture that embraces L&D and is seen to—it has to filter right through the organisation and everyone gets something out of it that is valuable—lots of factors influence culture—they have to be managed."* (I2)

> *"You've got to have a structure that enables you to be able to move across and up and down (higher duties/projects) and allows you then to create a learning culture."* (I8)

One respondent provided an alternative but complementary position in relation to cultural elements by asserting that the culture of the organisation drives the type of wisdom that is developed through role-modelling what is important.

> *"Culture predominantly drives the wisdom through role-modelling—the culture tells the people what is important."* (I13).

This same respondent also presented an alternative view in relation to structural elements by stressing the importance of the "golden rule": structure follows strategy.

> *"Need to follow the golden rule "structure follows strategy" if you don't, the people get lost—if I am clear about strategy and organise the structure to get that and group the work together in logical groupings and individual tasks— can then design jobs around that and can then look for people with best fit— then learning needs for each job fall out very quickly—aligns to wisdom in that people won't go to wisdom if those fundamentals are not in place."* (I13)

In comparison to the other aspects of organisational learning, this component was considered to be of moderate to low importance in contributing towards the successful implementation of the desired reforms. No respondents nominated it as the most important component and two respondents nominated it as the least important one (see Table 4.2).

4.5.5. Identification of new patterns of decisions about best ways to work

In order to explore this component of organisational learning, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

> How might new patterns of decisions about best ways to work be identified in
>
> this situation?

Respondents did not believe that this aspect of organisational learning made a significant contribution, with six out of thirteen respondents nominating it as the least important component and no respondents nominating it as most important (see Table 4.2). Two of the six

respondents who nominated this aspect as least important also nominated knowledge creation as an ongoing process as the equally least important aspect.

There was some support for the use of a research-based approach using evidence to support the decision-making process as well as the decision itself. There was also some support for questioning the existing decision-making patterns including where decision-making powers sit in the organisation.

> *"The best way of coming up with new ways to make decisions about best ways to work is to show the evidence that it has worked somewhere else …. people understand things better if they can see how things have worked that the same sort of ways in which decisions are made has worked somewhere else."*
> (I6)

> *"Key thing is who makes the decisions—probably a need to sit down and look at whether it is still appropriate that the same people still make those decisions."* (I9)

4.5.6. How organisational learning is perceived in APS agencies

Towards answering the first research question, "How is organisational learning viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?", and based on analyses in the above sections, the researcher presents Table 4.3 as a fundamental distillation of that dataset. The *Importance* column is based on the nominations column taken from Table 4.2 and arranged here in hierarchical fashion, where (a) *high* represents those nominations with the highest most to least nominations ratio, (b) *medium* represents those nominations with a mixed ratio of most to least nominations ratios, and (c) *low* represents those nominations with the lowest most to least

nominations ratios. The *Component* column is then a reordering of the individual components detailed above to match up with their associated row in the *Importance* column. Finally, the *Key Considerations* column represents the crucial aspects of organisational learning obtained in response to its component under concern.

Table 4.3: Organisational learning considerations

Importance	Component	Key considerations
High	**People developing shared understanding as they work together in new ways**	• equal most critical component and linked with leaders instilling a shared vision—no new learning without this • need mechanisms to encourage relationship building, sharing and mutual learning
	Leaders instilling a shared vision of new ways of working	• equal most critical component and linked with developing a shared understanding—no new learning without this • need to use open two-way communication of the vision to get it shared • need to lead by example and be active role models of the change
Medium	**Knowledge creation as an ongoing process**	• value knowledge, have in place mechanisms that encourage the creation and sharing of it such as communities of practice, mentoring, succession planning and grey masters • develop knowledge optimisation systems • systematise review and continuous improvement processes
	Development of wisdom enabled by the organisation's structure and culture	• visible learning culture—one that recognises continuous learning from all opportunities and embraces learning by everyone • structural elements that facilitate information sharing and involvement across the organisation such as cross-organisation committees, integrated functions and flatter structure
Low	**Identification of new patterns of decisions about best ways to work**	• not considered a priority • could use a research-based approach • question patterns such as where decision-making power sits

Based on Table 4.3, an emergent view of actions or prescriptions to be taken regarding organisational learning can well be distinguished in that data. This view illustrates the prime

perceptions of respondents in terms of their expectations as to how organisational learning ought to take place during a period of change. It also captures the relative importance respondents placed on various organisational learning components that were explored during the interview. This summary view is best characterised as follows:

> Learning and development practitioners in APS agencies view organisational learning during a period of change as being primarily facilitated by leaders communicating a new vision, role-modelling the desired changes, and ensuring mechanisms are in place to encourage relationship building and shared learning during that operation.

4.6.   Strategy

The interview procedure described in section 4.4.2 was applied in order to answer the research question, "How is strategy viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?" The data collected in this manner were analysed using thematic analysis as described in section 4.4.3.

The results in this section have been presented in the order from most to least important components pertaining to strategy, as nominated by interviewees, in terms of contributing to the successful implementation of the desired reforms. These most and least nominations for the different strategy components are presented in Table 4.4, and the key considerations relating to all the components examined in relation to strategy are presented in Table 4.5.

It should be noted that there was no relationship identified between the question nominations and the order in which they were presented. As noted in section 4.4.2, interviewees were given the option of selecting the order of discussion from cue cards (as presented in Appendix 2).

There was no apparent relationship between the order in which components were listed on the cue cards and the order in which they were nominated by interviewees.

Table 4.4: Strategy components—most/least nominations

Component	Question nominations
Manner of leadership support	Most = 7 Least = 0
Operating environment	Most = 4 Least = 1
Learning as an integral part of making decisions and strategy	Most = 2 Least = 0
Flexibility when approaching strategy	Most = 2 Least = 1
Strategizing as a continuous process	Most = 1 Least = 3
Employee involvement in the strategic process	Most = 0 Least = 3
Strategy being shaped by key patterns of behaviour	Most = 0 Least = 3

4.6.1. Manner of leadership support

In order to explore this component of strategy, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

What manner of leadership support would you expect here?

Respondents felt a number of forms of leadership support would be important in order to develop strategy. These included collaborating and communicating across the organisation; being proactive and committing time to consult; and actively defining, directing and guiding the strategy.

"Need to recognise and build a leadership culture that enables us to develop good strategies around things like learning but doesn't foster the feelings of 'competitiveness', collaborative approach to leadership required to develop successful strategy." (I12)

"Inclusive manner—one that promotes leadership at all levels to take the time to be the leader …. need lower level managers to be empowered to spend time with their staff to gather strategy and get ideas." (I5)

"Would need clear definition and direction around the reforms—what we are going to do, what are the priorities, what is the timetable—articulated through consultative process—need to manage it properly—would need to start modeling the change—being positive about the change—communicating re the hot spots etc." (I9)

An alternative but complementary view was presented by one respondent who articulated the benefits of leaders utilising a questioning approach.

"Asking questions, posing the tough, complex questions, ensuring thoroughness of review and option consideration." (I13)

The leadership support aspect of strategy was nominated as the most important one in terms of contributing towards the successful development of strategy, with seven out of the thirteen respondents nominating this component as most important and no respondents nominating it as least important (see Table 4.4). These results appeared consistent regardless of agency size, APS classification level and time with the APS. The data do not provide any explanations as to why leadership support was nominated as the most important of the strategy components, but it could possibly be due to the reported high dissatisfaction with leadership communication in APS agencies, with the *State of the Service Report* indicating that:

- only 32% of employees agree with the statement "communication between senior leaders and other employees is effective"; and

- only 40% of employees agree with the statement that "senior leaders discuss with staff how to respond to future challenges" (Australian Public Service Commission, 2010).

4.6.2. Operating environment

In order to explore this component of strategy, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

> Would you expect the operating environment to impact on strategy in this situation? If yes, in what way?

Respondents felt that different aspects of the operating environment would have an impact on the development of the strategy, with aspects of both the internal and external environment

shaping the nature and perspective of the strategy in terms of focusing it on the type of learning required.

> *"Legislative operating environment requires a decentralised (in agency) technical learning approach but a more centralised approach to leadership development (across APS)."* (I7)

> *"Internal operating environment defined by operational planning process—this leads to the development of learning strategy within this context."* (I12)

In comparison to the other aspects of strategy, this component was considered to be of moderate importance in terms of contributing towards the development of successful strategy around the desired reforms, with four out of the thirteen respondents nominating this component as most important and only one respondent nominating this as least important (see Table 4.4).

4.6.3. Learning as an integral part of making decisions and strategy

In order to explore this component of strategy, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

> In what ways would learning become an integral part of decision-making in this situation?

Respondents felt that learning as an integral part of decision-making would be important in order to develop the strategy in a number of ways including through:

- a continuous improvement approach that systematically captures, analyses and disseminates the lessons learned;

- a considered risk management approach; and

- optimised knowledge management.

> *"In developing strategy you are often thinking about mistakes/successes of the past—the element of history—need to test those theories of experience."* (I1)

> *"It is part of installing a continuous improvement culture in the agency—where it is okay to make a mistake and you don't always have to be risk averse where it is okay to do so—some of the best ideas come from taking risks—it is about having a framework that describes what are the acceptable and unacceptable risks."* (I5)

> *"Learning is occurring all of the time while we are doing this and we are looking at better knowledge management and sharing of information across boundaries."* (I8)

One respondent cautioned that failure to take these considerations into account could have a detrimental impact on learning and decision-making.

> *"Not learning from each other to the extent that we could is a consequence of risk aversion—it is also a defensiveness that comes from an anticipation that it is not safe to take a calculated risk—the systems and processes don't exist to foster capturing the lessons learned."* (I11)

One respondent provided an alternative but complementary position in relation to learning as an integral part of making decisions and strategy, by asserting that learning should be encouraged through building a questioning approach using action learning.

"Trying to build a more questioning approach to what we do. Questions open people up to learning. Looking at using questioning and asking questions through action learning—if you are asking the right questions you are getting the right answers. This approach opens up learning." (I3)

In comparison to the other aspects of strategy, this component was considered to be of moderate importance in contributing towards the successful implementation of the desired reforms. Two respondents nominated it as the most important component and no respondents nominated it as the least important one (see Table 4.4).

4.6.4. Flexibility when approaching strategy

In order to explore this component of strategy, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

Is flexibility a necessary consideration here, in what way?

Respondents felt that flexibility when approaching strategy was important in a number of ways. They argued that to move forward, organisations need to develop flexibility skills in the form of a flexible mindset that is open to change and innovation. They also indicated that there is a need to be flexible in terms of being responsive to the operating environment in order for the strategy to have the desired impact.

"Having skills around different types of flexibility is critical and being able to define the different types of flexibility is helpful." (I13)

"Need to be flexible when implementing strategy and when thinking strategy because everything changes, the environment changes regularly if you don't have something that can change you won't be able to implement it." (I8)

In comparison to the other aspects of strategy, this component was considered to be of moderate importance in contributing towards the successful implementation of the desired reforms. Two respondents nominated it as the most important component and only one respondent nominated it as the least important one (see Table 4.4).

4.6.5. *Strategising as a continuous process*

In order to explore this component of strategy, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

In what way might strategising exist here as a continuous process?

Respondents felt that conceptualising and facilitating strategising as a continuous process was important in a number of ways. They suggested that strategising could exist here as a continuous process through having a systematic, planned cyclical review process incorporating a feedback loop.

> *"Strategising has to be a continuous process as there is so much change—some big changes and therefore won't get it all right first time so will have to go back and make changes as we go—continual improvement—continuous strategising—have to be able to recognise when don't have it right and feed this back into the next cycle."* (I7)

Some respondents, in acknowledging the importance of strategising as a continuous process provided cautions about some potential barriers to such an approach. These barriers were articulated as a "tick box" approach and a lack of strategic thinking skills.

> *"Seeing strategising as a continuous process is crucial but not convinced that it will occur particularly given the sheer scope of the reforms and there will be*

pressure on agencies to tick off as many boxes as quickly as they can which

may lead to things not being researched as effectively as would be ideal." (I11)

"Many organisations don't do strategising as a continuous process—they don't

teach people about strategic thinking, the strategic management framework,

how strategy works as a process—if you have taught people those processes

then they have those skills and the ability to go up a level and strategise." (I13)

In comparison to the other aspects, this component of strategy was considered to be of low importance in contributing towards the successful implementation of the desired reforms. Only one respondent nominated it as the most important component while three respondents nominated it as the least important one (see Table 4.4).

4.6.6. Employee involvement in the strategic process

In order to explore this component of strategy, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

How would you expect employees to be involved in strategic processes in this situation?

Respondents did not believe that this aspect of strategy made as significant a contribution as the previously discussed components, with three out of thirteen respondents nominating it as the least important component and none nominating it as the most important component (see Table 4.4). That said, there was some reluctance expressed by two of the respondents in nominating this component as least important. This may also have been because there was an underlying sentiment that employee involvement was nice to aim for but not always feasible, and in reality that not all employees will want to be involved.

There was some support for two different approaches to employee involvement:

- sharing ideas and providing input into strategic direction through representative consultation; versus

- a more tailored, strategic approach to involvement with selective input by involved employees examining how the strategy will affect them.

"Make sure each business group is represented and has input into strategy requires consultation process so that each voice is heard." (I1)

"Be more strategic in relation to consultation—using meetings of stakeholders—representatives of groups of people." (I9)

Another possible reason for this component being nominated as least important was provided by one respondent who suggested that there are factors that may influence the degree to which employee involvement is feasible.

"Would expect there to be some involvement of employees—it is desirable— how achievable it is depends on a number of factors such as the makeup of your workforce." (I11)

4.6.7. Strategy being shaped by key patterns of behaviour

In order to explore this component of strategy, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

Would you expect strategy in this situation to be shaped by key patterns of behaviour? If yes, in what way?

Along with strategising as a continuous process and employee involvement, respondents did not believe that this aspect of strategy made as significant a contribution as the previously discussed components, with three out of thirteen respondents nominating it as the least important component and none nominating it as the most important component (see Table 4.4).

There was some support for the view that strategy will be shaped by patterns of behaviour that are valued such as leadership, collaboration and high performance.

> *"Where we have patterns of behaviour which are very positive and where capability is being achieved—can learn from the high performers—can also learn from the ones that aren't performing quite as well—they will inform what we might do a little differently—strategy can be informed by both good and bad patterns."* (I5)

Another possible reason for this component being ranked lower down the list of strategic components is provided by one respondent, who suggests that patterns of behaviour will have more of an impact on implementation than on strategy.

> *"The effectiveness of the implementation will be more affected by patterns of behaviour than the actual strategy will be."* (I11)

4.6.8. How strategy is perceived in APS agencies

Towards answering the second research question, "How is strategy viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?", and based on analyses in the above sections, the researcher presents Table 4.5 as a fundamental distillation of that dataset. The *Importance* column is based on the nominations column taken from Table 4.4 and arranged here in hierarchical fashion, where (a) *high* represents those nominations with the highest most to least nominations ratio,

(b) *medium* represents those nominations with a mixed ratio of most to least nominations ratios, and (c) *low* represents those nominations with the lowest most to least nominations ratios. The *Component* column is then a reordering of the individual components detailed above to match up with their associated row in the *Importance* column. Finally, the *Key Considerations* column represents the crucial aspects of strategy obtained in response to its component under concern.

Table 4.5: Strategy considerations

Importance	Component	Key considerations
High	**Leadership support**	• most critical component—underpins all others • collaboration and communication across the organisation • being proactive and committing time to consult • actively defining, directing and guiding
Medium	**Operating environment**	• shapes the nature and perspective of the strategy • focuses strategy on the type of learning required
	Learning as an integral part of making decisions and strategy	• continuous improvement—systematically capture, analyse and disseminate lessons learned • considered risk management • optimised knowledge management
	Flexibility when approaching strategy	• develop flexibility skills and mindset open to change and innovation • be responsive to the operating environment
Low	**Strategising as a continuous process**	• systematic, planned cyclical review process with a feedback loop
	Employee involvement in the strategic process	• nice to aim for but not always feasible • not all employees will want to be involved • widespread versus focused approach to involvement
	Strategy being shaped by key patterns of behaviour	• not a critical issue • some influence from valued behaviours • may impact more on implementation than strategy

Based on Table 4.5, an emergent view of actions or prescriptions to be taken regarding strategy can well be distinguished in that data. This view illustrates the prime perceptions of respondents in terms of their expectations as to how strategy ought to take place during a period of change.

It also captures the relative importance respondents placed on various strategic practices that were explored during the interview. This summary view is best characterised as follows:

> Learning and development practitioners in APS agencies view strategy during a
>
> period of change as being primarily facilitated by leaders proactively
>
> collaborating, communicating and consulting across the organisation while
>
> also actively providing direction and guidance.

4.7. *Implementation*

The interview procedure described in section 4.4.2 was applied in order to answer the research question, "How is implementation viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?". The data collected in this manner were analysed using thematic analysis as described in section 4.4.3.

The results in this section have been presented in the order from most to least important components pertaining to implementation, as nominated by interviewees, in terms of contributing to the successful implementation of the desired reforms. These most and least nominations for the different implementation components are presented in Table 4.6, and the key considerations relating to all the components examined in relation to implementation are presented in Table 4.7.

It should be noted that there was no relationship identified between the question nominations and the order in which they were presented. As noted in section 4.4.2, interviewees were given the option of selecting the order of discussion from cue cards (as presented in Appendix 2). There was no apparent relationship between the order in which components were listed on the cue cards and the order in which they were nominated by interviewees.

Table 4.6: Implementation components—most/least nominations

Component	Question nominations
Leadership commitment	Most = 9 Least = 0
Communication processes	Most = 4 Least = 0
Culture supportive of learning	Most = 2 Least = 0
Alignment between learning and development and performance management	Most = 3 Least = 2
Explicit goals	Most = 1 Least = 1
Absence of silos	Most = 1 Least = 9

4.7.1. Leadership commitment

In order to explore this component of implementation, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

How would leadership commitment be shown during the process?

Respondents felt the types of leadership commitment included leaders:

- communicating with and encouraging staff;

- relating to their staff while explaining what, why and how; and

- being actively involved and visible—role-modelling the new initiatives.

"Communicating what is going to be implemented and the impact of that implementation and certainly the benefits—the what's in it for me—how is it going to help me—the leadership needs to be behind the change or you will get resistance—leaders need to be passionate about the change." (I7)

"The critical thing is for the leaders to be part of the process from the beginning and to see the process through—to still be the champion of the process even if handed it on." (I5)

An alternative but complementary view was presented by one respondent, who articulated the importance of leaders agreeing on and being consistent on the implementation methodology under consideration at the time.

"Need leadership commitment to either let you do it your way or if they are committed to the method and then support you in the method—the importance is that the leaders agree on the methodology." (I13)

The leadership commitment component of implementation was nominated as the most important one in terms of contributing towards the successful implementation of strategy around the desired reforms, with nine out of the thirteen respondents nominating this component as most important and no respondents nominating this as least important (see Table 4.6). These results appeared consistent regardless of agency size, APS classification level and time with the APS. It is likely that this component has received this high importance rating for the same reasons cited in section 4.6.1 in relation to perceptions of leadership within the APS as detailed in the *State of the Service Report* (Australian Public Service Commission, 2010). Three of the nine respondents who nominated leadership commitment as most important shared this ranking with communication processes. It appears that they see a connection between leadership commitment and communication processes. This may be to do with concerns in the APS regarding leadership communication as reported in the *State of the Service Report* and presented in section 4.6.1. It is also likely to be because a number of the respondents reported that leadership commitment itself would be demonstrated through leaders utilising communication processes, such as explaining things to and encouraging staff.

4.7.2. Communication processes

In order to explore this component of implementation, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

> How would communication processes be adapted to assist implementation in
>
> this situation?

Respondents felt communication processes should be adapted in a number of ways in order successfully implement strategy around the desired reforms. These included having in place strategies to maximise understanding and relevance for stakeholders, including two-way

communication processes and contextualised, translated, targeted messages. Respondents also felt it was important to select the right communication channels and to consider the most appropriate timing for messages.

> *"Communication is about getting a joint understanding so it needs to be two-way but at times even one-way would be better at least people understand why a decision is made, why a strategy has been put in place, some context around that so that people understand."* (I2)

> *"Select a channel that suits the culture."* (I13)

> *"No point in swamping everybody upfront—need to 'drip feed' as things are happening—but not too long a time and not too short between when they hear the message and when they see the results."* (I4)

In comparison to other implementation components, this one was considered to be of moderate importance in terms of contributing towards the successful implementation of strategy around the desired reforms, with four out of the thirteen respondents nominating this component as most important and no respondents nominating this as least important (see Table 4.6). As reported in section 4.7.1, three of the four respondents who nominated communication processes as most important shared this ranking with leadership commitment.

4.7.3. Culture supportive of learning

In order to explore this component of implementation, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

How might culture be used to assist implementation in this situation?

Respondents felt a culture supportive of learning was important if strategy around the desired reforms was to be successfully implemented. Respondents felt that for this to be achieved, it was important to foster a change embracing culture to optimise acceptance of doing things differently.

"Culture that would support that has to come from top leadership explaining why it would be better if it was different—have to convince people that doing things the way we are is not going to be a good result sooner or later and that is why we have to change—have to set up ways to use the culture." (I9)

"Need a culture that says 'we need to do it differently, what skills do we need to get there'." (I10)

One respondent provided an alternative but complementary position in relation to a culture supportive of learning, by asserting the importance of working towards a culture where learning is seen as a critical part of working and not as something separate.

"To be supportive of implementation the view needs to change through the leadership down—through the risk based process identify learning as a critical part of your job—learning needs to be viewed as an active part of your job description—learn new things and continuously improve—learning is working—time invested in learning is part of your job." (I5)

In comparison to other implementation components, this one was considered to be of moderate importance in contributing towards the successful implementation of the desired reforms. Two respondents nominated it as the most important component and no respondents nominated it as the least important one (see Table 4.6).

4.7.4. Alignment between learning and development and performance management

In order to explore this component of implementation, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

How would alignment between learning and development and performance management systems be made here?

Respondents felt alignment between learning and development and performance management should be made in a number of ways in order to successfully implement strategy around the desired reforms. These included:

- aligning performance agreements to strategic plans and supporting these with plans for the required learning;

- basing learning and development plans on capabilities required to achieve outcomes; and

- developing skilled people managers who can effectively manage performance conversations.

"New strategic direction being reflected in performance agreements— supportive strategies to ensure people can learn where they need to or broaden their experience, knowledge and skills." (I1)

"Need a true understanding that L&D that will be provided to employees is part of meeting a broader outcome as an agency—identify what capabilities

they need to do their job well and giving people the development they need to

meet their capabilities." (I5)

"This can be positively impacted by developing people managers and making

sure agencies place an importance on the function. Even the strongest system

with alignment and clear line of sight to corporate goals won't work unless the

people know what they are doing, that is the key." (I10)

In comparison to other implementation components, this one was considered to be of moderate to low importance in contributing towards the successful implementation of the desired reforms. Three respondents nominated it as the most important component while two respondents nominated it as the least important one (see Table 4.6).

4.7.5. Explicit goals

In order to explore this component of implementation, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

In what way would the prior setting of clear and explicit goals assist implementation in this situation?

Respondents felt the prior setting of clear and explicit goals was of some importance in order to successfully implement strategy around the desired reforms. They felt such goals would assist in implementation in a number of ways by explaining the goals and benefits clearly so people can buy into the reforms, and overcoming resistance to change. They reported that this would be achieved by clarifying the "why", "what" and "how" around the reforms.

"Will define what this means—how does this affect me sitting in my workplace

today—gives clarification re what is meant." (I4)

"Clear goals are critical—if we know what the goals we are working towards

we can have our plans to get there—need the clear definition of those goals—

what does it mean and what does it look like when you've got there." (I5)

In comparison to other implementation components, this one was considered to be of moderate to low importance in contributing towards the successful implementation of the desired reforms. One respondent nominated it as the most important component while one respondent also nominated it as the least important one (see Table 4.6).

4.7.6. *Absence of silos*

In order to explore this component of implementation, interviewees were asked to respond to the following question:

Are silos an important issue for you in this situation?

Respondents did not believe that this aspect of implementation made a significant contribution to implementation, with nine out of thirteen respondents nominating it as the least important component and only one respondent nominating it as the most important component (see Table 4.6).

There was some acknowledgement of the need to be able to permeate silos, and get people communicating and working across them. There was also acknowledgement of the need to consider silos and have mechanisms to work with them.

"You need to be able to permeate them—can work in a silo but have to be

conscious of what is going on around you—particularly with a change

process." (I9)

"The fact that they exist is not a bad thing if you know they are there and you have mechanisms in place to work with them—they are okay as long as the communication is still flowing." (I5)

One respondent provided an alternative but complementary position in relation to the issue of silos by asserting that strategies are needed to get past groupthink to prevent both defensiveness and dismissal of feedback.

"Need to get past the groupthink—the flexible mindset that openness and willingness to hear ideas—if I sit in my group all the time I can get defensive and then when I do get external feedback I dismiss it." (I13)

4.7.7. How implementation is perceived in APS agencies

Towards answering the third research question, "How is implementation viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?", and based on analyses in the above sections, the researcher presents Table 4.7 as a fundamental distillation of that dataset. The *Importance* column is based on the nominations column taken from Table 4.6 and arranged here in hierarchical fashion, where (a) *high* represents those nominations with the highest most to least nominations ratio, (b) *medium* represents those nominations with a mixed ratio of most to least nominations ratios, and (c) *low* represents those nominations with the lowest most to least nominations ratios. The *Component* column is then a reordering of the individual components detailed above to match up with their associated row in the *Importance* column. Finally, the *Key Considerations* column represents the crucial aspects of implementation obtained in response to its component under concern.

Table 4.7: Implementation considerations

Importance	Component	Key considerations
High	Leadership commitment	• most critical component—doomed to fail without it • leaders communicating, encouraging and explaining the what, why and how • being actively involved, highly visible and role-modelling new initiatives
Medium	Communication processes	• need strategies to maximise understanding and relevance—contextualise, translate, target • be attentive to channels and timing • supports leadership commitment
	Culture supportive of learning	• change embracing culture to optimise acceptance of doing things differently
	Alignment between learning and development and performance management	• performance agreements aligned to strategic plans and supported by plans for required learning • learning and development plans based on capabilities required to achieve outcomes • skilled people managers who can effectively manage performance conversations
	Explicit goals	• clarifies "why", "what" and "how"
Low	Absence of silos	• not a critical consideration but keep them in mind • have strategies to work with them, permeate them and communicate across them

Based on Table 4.7, an emergent view of actions or prescriptions to be taken regarding implementation can well be distinguished in that data. This view illustrates the prime perceptions of respondents in terms of their expectations as to how implementation ought to take place during a period of change. It also captures the relative importance respondents placed on various implementation practices that were explored during the interview. This summary view is best characterised as follows:

Learning and development practitioners in APS agencies view implementation during a period of change as being primarily facilitated by leaders being actively involved through communicating, encouraging and explaining the what, why and how of the change and by role-modelling behaviours supportive of the new initiatives.

4.8. Relationship between organisational learning, strategy and implementation in APS agencies

Once the three conceptual elements as defined in this project had been explored, respondents were asked:

"Now that we have explored aspects to do with strategy, implementation and organisational learning, and which components of each of these you believe to be most important, I am interested in knowing how you perceive the overall relationship between these three elements. Could you please explain this to me?"

This question was asked in order to answer research question number four:

How do organisational learning, strategy and implementation interact in APS agencies during a period of change?

In order to answer the above research question, the researcher analysed the complete dataset produced in response to all four research questions and looked for relationships between the conceptual elements. When responding to the question relating to perceived relationships amongst these three elements, interviewees were encouraged to use the three question cards (refer to Appendix 2) to graphically represent the relationship or to draw the relationship on a

piece of paper. Eight of the thirteen respondents elected to represent the relationship both graphically and in words, with the remaining five respondents choosing to use words alone to describe the relationship. The resulting graphical representations and supporting textual data were captured and transcribed into an Excel spreadsheet. These graphical and textual data were then transferred on to index cards, which were sorted based firstly on whether respondents saw the relationships as sequential, simultaneous or both; and secondly on which conceptual element (if any) they saw as the starting point.

Based on this sorting:

- One respondent perceived all three conceptual elements to be interdependent and occurring simultaneously, with organisational learning as the overarching element.

- Two respondents perceived a linear, sequential relationship with organisational learning as the starting point followed by the development and then implementation of strategy, and then a feedback loop into new organisational learning. The feedback loop suggests that these respondents perceive the relationship to be both linear and interdependent.

- Ten respondents perceived a relationship that was both sequential and simultaneous. These ten respondents all perceived strategy as the starting point in a linear or cyclical process, with all of these respondents reporting that organisational learning was occurring simultaneously and in an interdependent manner with one or more of the other two elements (one of the ten reported organisational learning occurring simultaneously with strategy, three reported it as occurring simultaneously with implementation, and the remaining six reported it as occurring simultaneously with both strategy and implementation).

In summary, all respondents saw strong interdependent relationships between some or all of the three conceptual elements, with different respondents seeing different starting points. Respondents also differed as to whether they saw the elements as sequential or simultaneous, with the majority (ten of the thirteen respondents) arguing that they are in some ways both. All of these ten respondents who saw the three elements as both sequential and simultaneous did so by virtue of organisational learning occurring across one or both of the other two elements that were occurring sequentially.

In relation to the above research question, the researcher presents the following answer:

> Learning and development practitioners in APS agencies view the relationship between organisational learning, strategy and implementation during a period of change as follows. They perceive there to be strong interdependent relationships between the three elements that occur both concurrently and sequentially with organisational learning as the key. In this regard, organisational learning is seen as both informing the development and implementation of strategy, while also arising as a result of the development and implementation of that strategy. They also uniformly perceive that the three elements are strongly influenced by, and influence, leadership in the organisation.

4.9.   Summary

This chapter has presented the findings from the five focus groups and the thirteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with learning and development practitioners in APS agencies in relation to the research problems and questions as addressed in this dissertation. The results of the data analyses presented in the preceding sections of this chapter have been used to

describe how actively engaged practitioners view the conceptual elements of organisational learning, strategy and implementation during a period of change. In terms of how these practitioners view each of the three elements as separate constructs, the components that were considered most important were identified and discussed. The relationships respondents identified between the three conceptual elements were also identified and discussed.

The next chapter will discuss the significance and implications of these results within the theoretical frame of structuration theory, and will then incorporate them into an analytically derived schema to graphically represent the relationships between the three conceptual elements as investigated in this project. This discussion will confirm how the study findings extend the existing literature to gain a better understanding of strategic organisational learning implementation. It will also detail suggestions as to how the resulting schema could best tie together and direct usage of these three elements so as to assist practitioners to develop best practices regarding the use of the studied components of strategy, organisational learning and implementation in their professional endeavours.

Chapter 5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1.   Introduction

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the research problem and a description of the background of the study. The research problem acknowledged that the literature provides very little guidance to assist practitioners in the development and implementation of organisational learning strategy, and that limited research has been undertaken on organisational learning strategy in a public sector environment.

In Chapter 2 the literature on organisational learning, strategy and implementation was reviewed and discussed. Chapter 3 explained and justified the research approach, and the adopted research methodology. Chapter 4 presented the data from the focus groups and one-on-one interviews with learning and development practitioners.

Chapter 5 critically analyses the data presented in Chapter 4. The contributions from this study are explored in the context of literature, the research questions and implications for theory and practice. Limitations of the research are also discussed.

5.2.   Discussion of the findings

This section presents a discussion of the findings in relation to the answers to the four research questions. It progresses through the findings relating to the questions concerning each of the separate conceptual elements before presenting a discussion regarding the relationships between the elements.

5.2.1. Organisational learning in APS agencies

In Chapter 4 the answer to the research question, "How is organisational learning viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?" was presented as:

Learning and development practitioners in APS agencies view organisational learning during a period of change as being primarily facilitated by leaders communicating a new vision, role-modelling the desired changes, and ensuring mechanisms are in place to encourage relationship building and shared learning during that operation.

A range of factors were identified by learning and development practitioners as important in achieving organisational learning in APS agencies. These will be discussed in this section with reference to the relevant literature.

The research established that in APS agencies, learning and development practitioners believe organisational learning is most likely to occur when people develop shared understandings as they work together in new ways. The data suggest that for this to happen, agencies need to have in place mechanisms to encourage relationship building, sharing and mutual learning such as cross-function teams, networking, collaboration systems, group discussions and committees. This is in keeping with the conceptualisation of organisations as complex, open systems (Andreadis, 2009; Yeo, 2007b; Jerez-Gomez et al., 2004) that focuses on interrelationships between the component parts of the system. The data also support the stance in the literature, which argues that organisational learning best occurs through cooperative problem solving, and the creation of new knowledge and shared meanings (Fenwick, 2008; Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Choo, 2001; Tynjala, 2008). The data also indicate some options for achieving cooperative problem solving, and the creation of new knowledge and shared meanings in APS agencies through employing the mechanisms listed earlier in this paragraph, specifically cross-function teams, networking, collaboration systems, group discussions and committees.

The research also established that learning and development practitioners believe another key factor in organisational learning in APS agencies is leaders championing the new learning through instilling a vision of the desired new ways of working. This result suggests that for this to occur, leaders in agencies need to demonstrate a number of behaviours including using open two-way communication of the vision to get it shared; they also need to lead by example and be active role models of the change. The data support the stance in the literature, which argues for a strong role of managers and leaders in facilitating the emergence of such a vision (Senge et al., 1999; Hodgkinson, 2002; Voronov, 2008). The behaviours identified in the research are also in keeping with the transformational style of leadership argued as making a significant contribution to the facilitation of this process (Bierly et al., 2000; Garcia-Morales et al., 2008; Castiglione, 2006; LeBrasseur et al., 2002).

In addition to the above findings, the research established that learning and development practitioners believe the ongoing process of knowledge creation is moderately important for the facilitation of organisational learning in APS agencies. The data suggest that for this to occur, it is necessary to demonstrate that knowledge is valued through having in place mechanisms that encourage the creation and sharing of it, such as communities of practice, mentoring, succession planning and grey masters. The data also suggest that knowledge creation requires the development of knowledge optimisation systems, and the systematisation of review and continuous improvement processes. The data provide moderate support for the arguments in the literature that learning is knowledge creation as people interact (Fenwick, 2008; Voronov, 2008). The data also indicate some specific ways for achieving knowledge creation as people interact in APS agencies through employing the mechanisms listed earlier in this paragraph— specifically those such as communities of practice, mentoring, succession planning and grey masters.

The research also established that learning and development practitioners believe the development of wisdom enabled by aspects of the structure and culture of each agency is moderately important for the facilitation of organisational learning in APS agencies. The data suggest that for this to occur, agencies need to develop a visible learning culture—one that recognises continuous learning from all opportunities and embraces learning by everyone. Such a culture can be seen to drive the type of wisdom that is developed through role-modelling what is important. The data also suggest that agencies need to develop structural elements that facilitate information sharing and involvement across the organisation, such as cross-organisation committees, integrated functions and flatter structures. These results provide moderate support for arguments in the literature which claim that elements of an organisation's structure and culture can act as enablers of organisational learning (Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Bierly et al., 2000). However, one persistent aspect in the literature, which did not get mentioned by participants in this research project, is that of the importance of a culture which is accepting of risk and experimentation if organisational learning is going to be optimised (Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Jerez-Gomez et al., 2005; Chan and Scott-Ladd, 2004). There is no suggestion as to why this was not evident in the present data. However, characteristics of the APS environment as described in Chapter 1, such as risk aversion and accountability concerns, may be factors. The literature does indicate that these aspects are considered as barriers to change and continuous improvement (Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Coulson-Thomas, 2003; Jerez-Gomez et al., 2005; Management Advisory Committee, 2010). Currently, APS agencies are being encouraged to develop cultures more accepting of considered risks, innovation and experimentation (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2010; Management Advisory Committee, 2010). The shift towards a culture more open to risk and

experimentation, and how it relates to organisation learning strategy in APS agencies, should warrant further investigation.

The research provided limited support to the notion that organisational learning can be facilitated in APS agencies through identifying new patterns of decisions about best ways to work. The results here suggest that for this to occur, agencies need to adopt a research-based approach—looking for evidence to support decision-making processes and decisions about best ways to work. The present data also indicate that this could be achieved by reviewing and reflecting on the appropriateness of the decision-making patterns, including where decision-making powers sit in the agency. In making the above suggestions, the data provide limited support to the arguments in the literature which claim that learning occurs through the process of identifying new patterns or mental models that influence how decisions are made (Johanessen et al., 1999; Senge et al., 1999; Choo, 2001; Snowden, 2005; Jensen and Rasmussen, 2004). The reason this support is being reported as "limited" by the researcher is that the research participants indicated a clear preference for this component as the least important, in terms of contributing to the organisational learning necessary for the successful implementation of the desired reforms (see Table 4.2). There is no indication in the data as to why this was considered the least important component. However, one possible reason could be that respondents may have felt that they had less control over collective mental models and therefore placed higher priority on components of organisational learning over which they could exert more sway. As discussed in section 2.2.5, assisting individuals to identify and potentially change their action patterns and mental models is considered a core issue in organisational learning (Johanessen et al., 1999; Senge et al., 1999); however, the difficulty of doing this is also acknowledged in the literature (Oliver and Jacobs, 2007; Jensen and Rasmussen, 2004).

Analyses of the data pertaining to the five organisational learning components show that some strong relationships had emerged amongst them. In particular, the data suggest that implementing a range of collective mechanisms makes a positive contribution towards three components of organisational learning: shared understanding, knowledge creation and development of wisdom. The relationships described in this paragraph are explored further in section 5.2.4.3, which represents the specific relationships as like clusters and presents them as part of an analytically derived schema. The implications for future research, and the implications and recommendations for practitioners that arise from the findings in relation to organisational learning, are presented in sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2 respectively.

5.2.2. Strategy in APS agencies

In Chapter 4 the answer to the research question, "How is strategy viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?" was presented as:

> Learning and development practitioners in APS agencies view strategy during a
>
> period of change as being primarily facilitated by leaders proactively
>
> collaborating, communicating and consulting across the organisation while
>
> also actively providing direction and guidance.

A range of factors were identified by learning and development practitioners as important in developing strategy. These will be discussed in this section with reference to the relevant literature.

The research established that in APS agencies, learning and development practitioners believe leadership support for strategy is the most important factor in developing successful strategy. The data suggest that for this to occur, leaders need to demonstrate a range of behaviours

including collaborating, communicating, being proactive, committing time to consult, actively defining, directing and guiding the strategy. The data also suggest that consideration could also be given to leaders utilising an approach where they pose tough, complex questions about strategic options under deliberation to ensure thoroughness of review of the strategic process. The data support the stance in the literature, which argues that the shared vision necessary for successful strategy is most likely to arise when the leadership behaviours identified in this research are present (Mintzberg, 1994; Hodgkinson, 2002; Stewart and O'Donnell, 2007; LeBrasseur et al., 2002).

The research also established that in APS agencies, learning and development practitioners believe aspects of both the internal and external environments are moderately important, due to shaping the nature and perspective of the strategy in terms of focusing it on the type of learning required. The data provide moderate support for the stance in the literature, which argues that a range of factors in an organisation's environment will influence the form and content of its strategy, as well as the development and implementation of that strategy (Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Slater et al., 2006).

In addition to the above findings, the research established that learning and development practitioners believe learning as an integral part of decision-making is a moderately important consideration in the strategic process in APS agencies. The data suggest that for this to occur, a number of initiatives need to be in place including continuous improvement processes that systematically capture, analyse and disseminate lessons learned; a risk management approach; and optimised knowledge management. The data provide moderate support for the stance in the literature, which argues that strategy making is in itself a learning process (Mintzberg, 1994; Stewart and O'Donnell, 2007; Voronov, 2008). The data also indicate some ways in which strategy making can be enhanced as a learning process in APS agencies through employing the

mechanisms listed earlier in this paragraph—specifically continuous improvement processes that systematically capture, analyse and disseminate lessons learned; a risk management approach; and optimised knowledge management.

The research also established that in APS agencies, learning and development practitioners believe it is moderately important for strategy to be flexible to be responsive to the operating environment, change and innovation. The data suggest that for this to occur, agencies need to develop flexibility skills in the form of a flexible mindset. The data provide moderate support for the stance in the literature, which argues that organisations need to consider where their strategic approach falls along the emergent–deliberate (fuzzy–clear) continuum, with the emergent end being more aligned to facilitating new organisational learning (Mintzberg, 1987; 1994; Hubbard et al., 2007; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Slater et al., 2006; Sminia, 2009).

The three further components of strategy explored in this research project received limited support, in that respondents considered them to be of relatively low importance in terms of developing and implementing strategy to bring about the desired reforms. These components relate to strategising being viewed as a continuous process, employee involvement in the strategic process and strategy being shaped by key patterns of behaviour.

In terms of strategising being viewed as a continuous process, the data suggest that while this is considered to be of relatively low importance, learning and development practitioners believe it is achieved in APS agencies through having systematic, cyclical review processes with feedback loops; however, the data also pointed out some potential barriers to such an approach, such as pressure towards a "tick box" approach and a lack of strategic thinking skills. The literature presents two alternative views of strategising as a continuous process: one that represents a structured and defined process, and an opposing view that sees the process as more complex

and meandering (Nielsen-Englyst, 2003; Sminia, 2009). The data suggest that the former is more closely associated with the APS approach to strategising than the latter. There is no indication in the data as to why this might be the case, but aspects of the APS operating context as discussed in Chapter 1, such as legislative limitations and accountability concerns, may account for this.

In terms of employee involvement in the strategic process, this is seen by learning and development practitioners as nice to aim for, but is neither seen as critical nor always feasible in APS agencies. The data suggest that there are two main approaches to employee involvement in APS agencies: widespread consultation, or a more tailored strategic approach with selective input by involved employees. The finding regarding the relatively low importance placed on employee involvement runs somewhat contrary to the approach promulgated in the literature, which argues for involvement in the strategic process of employees who are close to the action to optimise both the realism of the strategy and the learning that arises from the process (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Stewart and O'Donnell, 2007; Hubbard et al., 2007; Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995). It also somewhat conflicts the earlier finding that the preferred manner of leadership support for strategy involves collaboration, consultation and communication across the organisation. It is possible that respondents felt that employee involvement was already accounted for in the manner of leadership support, and thus rated this component as less important due to a sense of redundancy. The data do not provide any answers in regards to this anomaly, but it may be explained by the finding from the *State of the Service Report* presented in section 1.2.2 that only 40% of employees agree with the statement that "senior leaders discuss with staff how to respond to future challenges" (Australian Public Service Commission, 2010). This may be indicative of a culture of low consultation—an aspect that may warrant further investigation.

In terms of strategy being shaped by key patterns of behaviours, the data suggest that while this is considered to be of relatively low importance by learning and development practitioners, it is achieved in APS agencies through taking into account behaviours that are valued by the agency, such as leadership and collaboration when strategising. Some data indicated that patterns of behaviour may be more important to implementation than to strategy development, which may in part explain the relatively low importance placed on this component of strategy. The data provide limited support for the stance in the literature, which argues that strategy itself is in fact a pattern and that strategising involves converging on patterns of behaviour that work for the organisation (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Mintzberg, 1987).

Analysis of the data pertaining to the seven strategy components shows some strong relationships between them. In particular, the data suggest that if the manner of leadership support is based on collaboration and communication, then it may make a separate focus on employee involvement redundant. The data also suggest that implementing systematic continuous improvement and review processes makes a positive contribution towards two components of strategy: ensuring that learning occurs as a result of strategising, and ensuring that strategising is occurring as a continuous process. The data also point to a strong relationship between the components operating environment and flexibility, with one of the key drivers of flexibility being the need to be responsive to the operating environment. The relationships described in this paragraph are explored further in section 5.2.4.3, which represents the specific relationships as like clusters and presents them as part of an analytically derived schema. The implications for future research, and the implications and recommendations for practitioners that arise from the findings in relation to strategy, are presented in sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2 respectively.

5.2.3. Implementation in APS agencies

In Chapter 4 the answer to the research question, "How is implementation viewed in APS agencies during a period of change?" was presented as:

Learning and development practitioners in APS agencies view implementation during a period of change as being primarily facilitated by leaders being actively involved through communicating, encouraging and explaining the what, why and how of the change and by role-modelling behaviours supportive of the new initiatives.

A range of factors were identified by learning and development practitioners as important in implementing strategy. These will be discussed in this section with reference to the relevant literature.

The research established that in APS agencies, learning and development practitioners believe leadership commitment is the key concern for implementation of strategy. The data suggest that for this to occur, leaders need to demonstrate commitment by communicating with and encouraging staff, and explaining the what, why and how in relation to implementation; they also need to be actively involved and be seen to role-model the new initiatives. The data support the stance in the literature, which argues that successful implementation of strategy requires commitment, support and role-modelling from senior leaders (Newbold and Pharoah, 2009; Yeo, 2007b).

The research also established that in APS agencies learning and development practitioners believe effective use of communication processes is of moderate importance to the implementation of strategy. The data suggest that for this to occur, agencies need to use

strategies to help maximise understanding and relevance for stakeholders. The data present suggestions for the effective use of communication processes, including selecting and using the right channels; considering the timing of the messages; and making sure the messages are two-way, contextualised, translated and targeted. The data provide moderate support for the stance in the literature, which argues that successful implementation of strategy is dependent on effective communication processes including dialogue and feedback, and the effective distribution of contextualised information (Yeo, 2007b; Burley and Pandit, 2008).

A further finding from the research was that learning and development practitioners believe the presence of a culture supportive of learning within an agency is of moderate importance to the implementation of strategy in APS agencies. The data suggest that for such a culture to be facilitated, agencies need to nurture a view that both embraces change to optimise the acceptance of doing things differently, and also promotes learning as a critical part of working and not as something separate. The data provide moderate support for the stance in the literature, which argues that successful implementation of strategy requires a culture supportive of learning and knowledge sharing (Newbold and Pharoah, 2009; Sveiby, 2007) and devoid of caution and blame (Vince and Saleem, 2004).

The research also established that learning and development practitioners believe alignment between learning and development and performance management is of moderate importance to the implementation of strategy in APS agencies. The data suggest that for this to occur, agencies need to align performance agreements to strategic plans and have them supported by learning plans. The data also suggest that learning and development plans need to be based on the capabilities required to achieve agency outcomes. In addition, the data indicate that the best alignment will not support implementation if agencies do not have skilled people managers who can effectively manage performance conversations. The data provide moderate support for the

stance in the literature, which argues that alignment between an organisation's learning strategy and its performance management system is a critical success factor for the implementation of the strategy (Yeo, 2007b; Newbold and Pharoah, 2009). Examining the specific skills of managers conducting performance conversations was beyond the scope of this research, but it is an area that warrants further exploration from both a research and a practitioner perspective.

A further finding from the research was that learning and development practitioners believe clear and explicit goals are moderately important for the implementation of strategy in APS agencies, as they can help with buy-in as well as in overcoming resistance to change. The data suggest that for buy-in to occur and resistance to change to be overcome, agencies need to ensure that goals clarify the what, why and how of the implementation. The data provide moderate support for the stance in the literature, which argues that clear and measurable objectives and criteria must be set for implementation of strategy to be successful (Newbold and Pharoah, 2009; Yeo, 2006; Yeo, 2007b).

The final finding in relation to implementation in APS agencies established that taking into account organisational silos is not considered as critical by learning and development practitioners. The data suggest that silos can be an issue for implementation but that they will not become one if agencies have in place strategies to work with them, permeate them and get people working across them. The data provide limited support to the stance in the literature, which argues that silos can create significant implementation barriers unless mechanisms are put in place to work with them (Schutz and Bloch, 2006; Sveiby, 2007; Sy and Cote, 2004; Newbold and Pharoah, 2009; Burley and Pandit, 2008).

Analysis of the data pertaining to the six implementation components shows some strong relationships between them. In particular, the data suggest that the form of leadership

commitment has a relationship with the communication processes used with the communication processes underpinning the leadership commitment. The data also indicate that the form of leadership commitment has a relationship with the presence or otherwise of a culture supportive of learning. The relationships described in this paragraph are explored further in section 5.2.4.3, which represents the specific relationships as like clusters and presents them as part of an analytically derived schema. The implications for future research, and the implications and recommendations for practitioners that arise from the findings in relation to strategy, are presented in sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2 respectively.

5.2.4. Schema showing the relationship between the three conceptual elements

In Chapter 4 the answer to the research question, "How do organisational learning, strategy and implementation interact in APS agencies during a period of change?" was presented as:

Learning and development practitioners in APS agencies view the relationship between organisational learning, strategy and implementation during a period of change as follows. They perceive there to be strong interdependent relationships between the three elements, which occur both concurrently and sequentially with organisational learning as the key. In this regard, organisational learning is seen as both informing the development and implementation of strategy, while also arising as a result of the development and implementation of that strategy. They also uniformly perceive that the three elements are strongly influenced by, and influence, leadership in the organisation.

Analysis of the research findings, which led to the above answer to research question number four, is best underscored through the theoretical frame of structuration theory (Giddens, 1982).

The theory in the first instance helps leverage an understanding of strategic organisational learning implementation and, in turn, advances an understanding of the applicability of structuration theory to organisational learning. The structuration theory principle, duality of structure and culture, was used in the literature review in section 2.2.2 as part of the rationale for considering culture and structure together. Another key structuration theory principle, duality of structure and agency, gives fuller explanation to the research findings, particularly in relation to organisational learning being seen to both inform the development and implementation of strategy, while simultaneously arising as a result of that development and its later implementation.

It has been argued (Allison and Merali, 2007) that the duality of structure and agency notion is particularly useful in understanding organisational processes during a period of change. An explanation as to how structuration theory helps understand and explain the current research findings is presented in the next paragraphs, and this is immediately followed with the presentation of a schema that has been developed to graphically depict the identified relationships within and between the three conceptual elements and their component parts.

The literature presents an argument that structuration theory has been used to interpret managerial situations as dualities or tensions (Chanal, 2004). The notion of duality of structure presents the theoretical argument that structure is conceived as both a medium and an outcome: structure shapes people's roles and practices, yet the structure in which they behave is also being shaped by these same practices (Giddens, 1982). This provides a useful theoretical frame for examining the relationship between organisational learning, strategy and implementation. The usefulness of this approach is, in part, informed by the fact that learning and strategy had each separately been identified as being simultaneously products (outcomes) and processes (mediums) in sections 2.2 (Fenwick, 2006) and 2.3.7 (Sminia, 2009) respectively.

Another aspect of structuration theory, structuration, is also informative in developing an understanding of the relationships between organisational learning and the other two conceptual elements in this research. Structuration has been conceptualised as an ongoing process in which the rules and resources of a social system are produced and reproduced (Algesheimer and Gurau, 2008) based on their reflexive monitoring of the activity and interaction of knowledgeable organisational members (Akgun et al., 2007; Berends et al., 2003). This extends the argument that when analysing strategic organisational learning implementation as a recursive rather than as a linear process, the focus should not only be on the way in which structure enables and constrains organisational learning practices, but also on the way in which such same practices reflexively recreate and change structural characteristics itself (Berends et al., 2003). This supports a representation of organisational learning as being purposefully engaged by virtue of being represented as both an input to, and an outcome of, strategy and implementation.

The following schema and its accompanying descriptions have been developed based on a comprehensive analysis of the data collected throughout the research process, and as buffered by the theoretical frame of structuration theory. The schema has been developed to graphically depict the various interrelationships that became apparent amongst the three primary elements and their respective components during different phases of analysing the collective dataset. The schema has been developed with three levels as follows:

- **Schema level 1**—the high-level dynamic interdependence of the three conceptual elements themselves;

- **Schema level 2**—the degrees of influence of the components within each conceptual element; and

- **Schema level 3**—specific relationships identified between components within and across the three conceptual elements.

5.2.4.1. Schema level one—dynamic interdependence between the three conceptual elements

The interconnectedness between the three conceptual elements as captured in the answer to research question number four is shown in Figure 5.1 as a schema represented in the shape of a four-sided pyramid. The four faces of the pyramid are graphic representations that depict the three conceptual elements, but with two of the four faces each representing organisational learning. These four faces are drawn to illustrate that they each support the others in equal measure. The allocation of two faces to organisational learning is recognition that the research findings suggest it is purposefully engaged by virtue of being both a structure for, and an agency of, both strategy and of implementation. Such a schema is in keeping with the discussion presented in section 5.2.4, which argued that organisational learning could be better understood within the framework of structuration theory, particularly the concepts of a duality of structure and agency as first enunciated by (Giddens, 1982). Thus this schema portrays at once (a) the duality of structure by apportioning the three conceptual elements as a pyramid, while at the same time (b) allocating the role of organisational learning as agency interposing itself between its other partner elements to both influence and recast the ongoing, cyclic interplay that continually occurs amongst the three.

Figure 5.1: Schema level 1—pyramid showing high-level relationship between the three conceptual elements

Face 1: Strategy

Face 2: Organisational Learning

Face 3: Implementation

Face 4: Organisational Learning
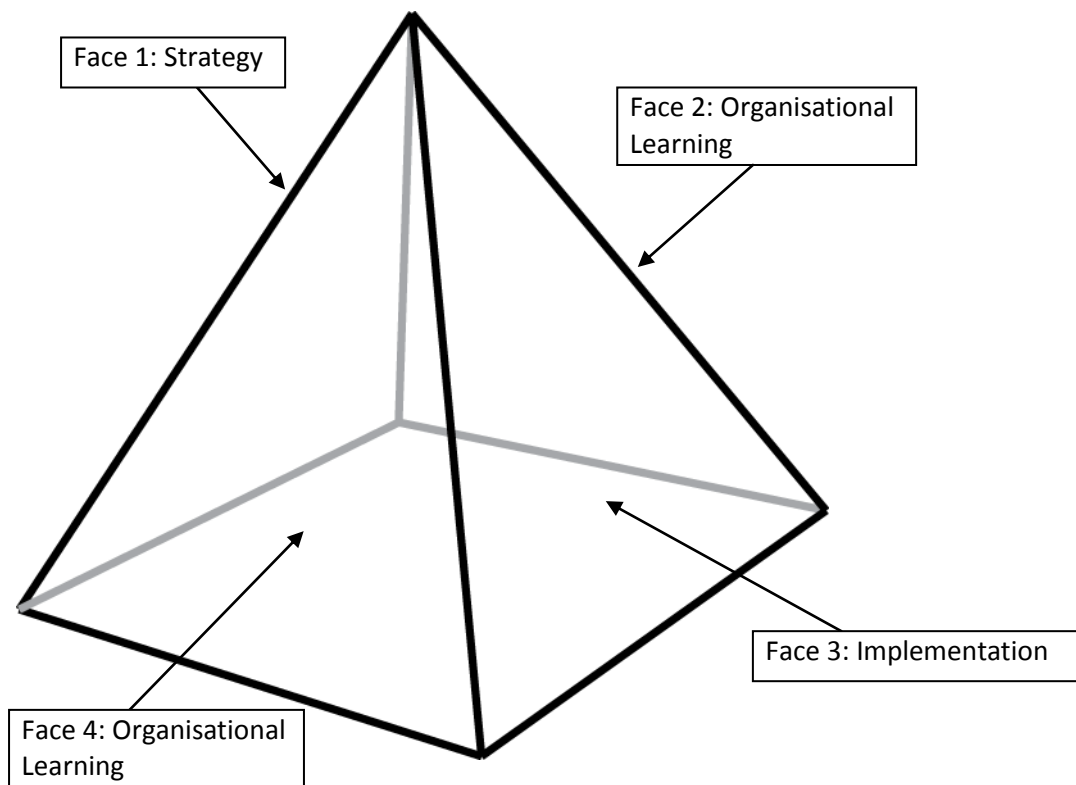
As depicted in Figure 5.1, the four-sided pyramid provides a figurative representation of the high-level relationships between the three conceptual elements under study here. It graphically depicts the organisational learning conceptual element in particular as being purposefully engaged by the other two conceptual elements by virtue of it being both a product of, and the basis for, interactions of strategy and of implementation in keeping with the view of organisational learning as a recursive process according to structuration theory (Dumay, 2008).

Further representations of each of these three conceptual elements and their components, which can also be derived from analyses of the data, require the addition of more levels on to this schema. These levels are presented in sections 5.2.4.2 and 5.2.4.3.

5.2.4.2. *Schema level two—degrees of influence*

The research established that different components of each of the three conceptual elements (as specified in Tables 4.2 to 4.7) are perceived by respondents as having varying degrees of influence on each of their respective conceptual elements.

These degrees of influence were presented in Tables 4.2, 4.4 and 4.6. These tables listed the components in order of their perceived importance by learning and development practitioners, in terms of contributing to the development and implementation of an organisational learning strategy necessary for the successful transformation of APS agencies to the new ways of working as required by the Blueprint reforms. Due to the dynamic interdependent relationship between each of the three conceptual elements, and in recognition of the impact of subsystems on the totality, these components will therefore also have varying degrees of influence on the whole itself.

In the schema to be finally developed in level three below, it is first necessary to prefigure how to represent the perceived varying degrees of influence of those components in that schema. Accordingly, at level two a pre-configuration is presented where the graduated degrees of their respective influences are to be symbolically represented by a given space, and shading of their background colours to be allocated to them on each pyramid face. These resulting space and shading allocations reflect the findings from the research such that the components at the base of the pyramid, which occupy more space and have stronger colours (the foundations), are perceived by learning and development practitioners as having a greater influence on the characteristics of that specific conceptual element.

5.2.4.3. Schema level three—specific relationships between components

Analysis of the data has also identified some specific relationships between components within and across the each of the three conceptual elements. The relationships between components within each of the three conceptual elements have already been discussed in sections 5.2.1 to 5.2.3. These relationships have now been combined across the three conceptual elements and formed into like clusters as detailed below. These clusters are then summarised in Table 5.1 before being transferred onto the pyramid faces in Figures 5.2 to 5.4.

- **Cluster 1—leadership:** a number of components across all three conceptual elements were identified as being interrelated by virtue of being strongly impacted by the approach to leadership in the organisation. In the strategy conceptual element, a strong relationship in this regard was identified between the "leadership support" and "employee involvement" components; and in the implementation conceptual element another similar relationship was identified amongst the "leadership commitment", "communication processes" and "culture supportive of learning" components. These relationships were discussed in sections 5.2.2 and 5.2.3 respectively. An additional component with a strong relationship in this regard is the component "leaders instilling a shared vision" from the organisational learning conceptual element. These observations robustly suggest that leadership will have a strong influence on each conceptual element separately, and thereby on the overall implemented organisational learning strategy. This is the only cluster that crosses concurrently with all three conceptual elements and, as such, it is considered to be a particularly powerful cluster in its own right and having the strongest sway within the schema as a whole.

- **Cluster 2—collective mechanisms:** a number of components across the organisational learning and implementation conceptual elements were identified as being interrelated by

virtue of being strongly impacted by a range of collective mechanisms. In the organisational learning conceptual element, a strong relationship in this regard was identified between the components "developing shared understanding", "development of wisdom" and "knowledge creation", and was discussed in section 5.2.1. The collective mechanisms common to this cluster include cross-function teams, networking, collaboration systems, group discussions, cross-organisation committees, communities of practice, mentoring, succession planning, integrated functions and grey masters. An additional component with a strong relationship in this regard is the component "silos" from the implementation conceptual element with the identified collective mechanisms minimising the negative impacts of silos. This cluster, however, does not suggest how many or which of these specific mechanisms should be focused on when tracing the more detailed interactions of organisational learning with the other two elements of the schema.

- **Cluster 3—continuous improvement:** a number of components across the organisational learning and strategy conceptual elements were identified as being interrelated by virtue of being strongly impacted by continuous improvement processes. In the strategy conceptual element, a strong relationship in this regard was identified between the components "learning and decision-making" and "continuous process", and was discussed in section 5.2.2. An additional component with a strong relationship in this regard is the component "knowledge creation" from the organisational learning conceptual element. The cluster here suggests that attention to the identified continuous improvement processes—such as having a systematic cyclical review process that captures, analyses and disseminates the lessons learned—will maximise learning and knowledge creation arising from ongoing strategic processes.

- **Cluster 4—operating environment:** a cluster pertaining to the operating environment was identified within the strategy conceptual element. This relationship was apparent between two of the strategy components—"operating environment" and "flexibility"—and was discussed in section 5.2.2. The nature of this relationship pertained to one of the key drivers of flexibility being the need to be responsive to the operating environment.

- **Cluster 5—knowledge optimisation systems:** a new cluster, not previously identified from the data analysis conducted within each of the three conceptual elements, was identified when analysing the data across the three conceptual elements. The relationship being represented by this cluster was apparent between the strategy component "learning and decision-making" and the organisational learning component "knowledge creation". The cluster suggests that incorporating knowledge optimisation systems contributes to learning in the form of knowledge creation, and additionally enhances learning from ongoing decision-making and strategy development processes.

- **Cluster 6—learning culture:** similarly as was developed for cluster five, a new cluster also not previously identified from the data analysis conducted within each of the three conceptual elements was identified. The relationship being represented by this cluster was apparent between the implementation component "culture supportive of learning" and the organisational learning component "development of wisdom". The cluster suggests that a visible learning culture both facilitates the implementation of strategy and organisational learning through the development in organisational members of the type of wisdom considered to be important to the organisation.

To aid in transiting these six clusters and their related components to level three of the schema, Table 5.1 first presents these in tabular form through the use of different font colours. In Table

5.1 the shaded background for each cell represents which key conceptual element (as represented by the colour of the associated face on the pyramids presented in Figures 5.2 to 5.4) this component derives from. The font colours in the headings for each cluster are then used to represent those clusters in Figures 5.2 to 5.4, which further present the details of each face of the pyramid. The key to these font colours is provided in Table 5.2.

Table 5.1: Related components organised into clusters for schema level 3

Cluster 1 (leadership)	Cluster 2 (collective mechanisms)	Cluster 3 (continuous improvement)	Cluster 4 (operating environment)	Cluster 5 (knowledge optimisation)	Cluster 6 (learning culture)
Leaders instilling shared vision	Developing shared understanding	Learning and decision-making	Operating environment	Learning and decision-making	Culture supportive of learning
Leadership support	Development of wisdom	Continuous process	Flexibility	Knowledge creation	Development of wisdom
Employee involvement	Knowledge creation	Knowledge creation			
Leadership commitment	Silos				
Communication processes					
Culture supportive of learning					

Note: this table is explained in the descriptions of schema level three in section 5.4.2.3.

The varying perceived degrees of influence of the different components of the three conceptual elements, as presented in Tables 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 and discussed above, combined with the specific relationships between components within and across the three conceptual elements (as presented in Table 5.1), is now shown in Figures 5.2 to 5.4 as representing their respective "face" of the schematic pyramid. As such, Figures 5.2 to 5.4 are representing both levels two and three of this schema. As it is not possible to combine Figures 5.2 to 5.4 into a three-dimensional, four-faced pyramid here, in the full representation of this schema these figures would form neatly together into the four-faced pyramid as presented in Figure 5.1. Table 5.2 has also been provided here as a key to the font colours used for the labels of each component on the faces of the pyramid, as explained in the descriptions of schema level three in sections 5.4.2.1 and section 5.4.2.3.

Table 5.2: Key to Figures 2 to 4

Font colour	Cluster represented
Red	Leadership
Purple	Collective mechanisms
Green	Continuous improvement
Pink	Operating environment
Blue	Knowledge optimisation
Brown	Learning culture

Note: Some components are represented across clusters and, as such, use more than one font colour.

Figure 5.2: Schema levels 2 and 3—organisational learning pyramid face
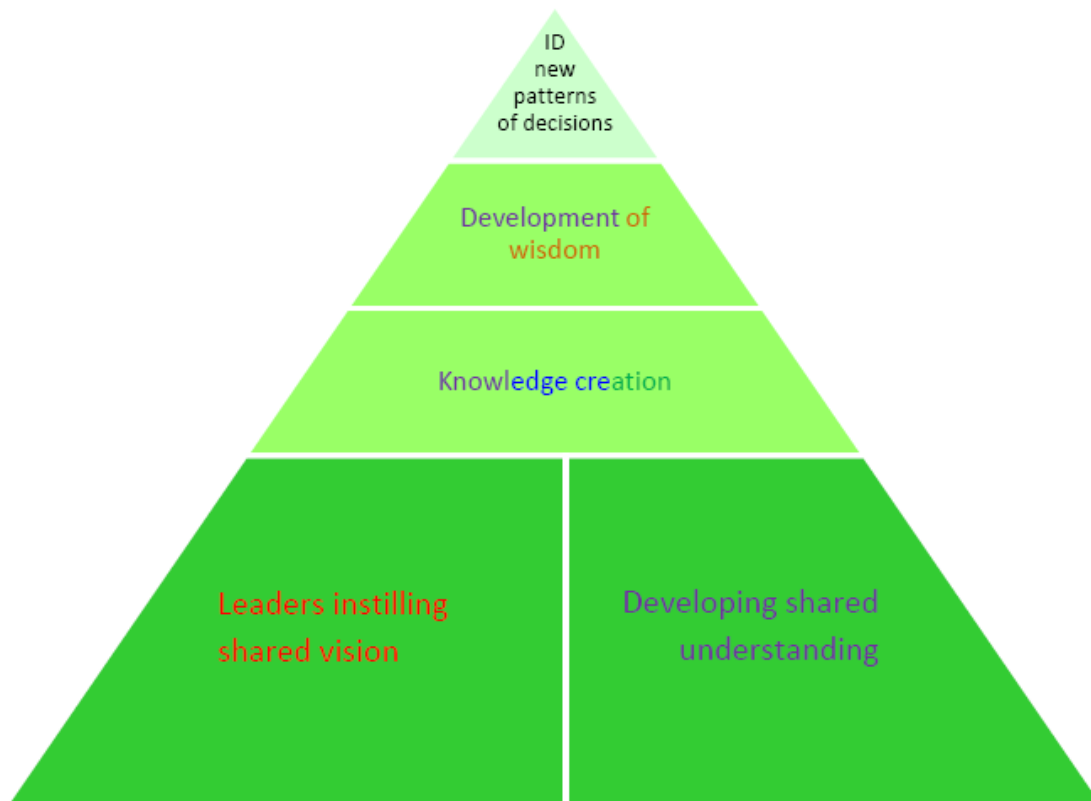
Note: a detailed description of this pyramid face and its use of colour, in terms of both degrees of shading and font colour, are provided in the descriptions of schemas level 2 and 3 in sections 5.2.4.2 and 5.2.4.3.

Figure 5.3: Schema levels 2 and 3—strategy pyramid face

Note: a detailed description of this pyramid face and its use of colour, in terms of both degrees of shading and font colour, are provided in the descriptions of schemas level 2 and 3 in sections 5.2.4.2 and 5.2.4.3.

Figure 5.4: Schema levels 2 and 3—implementation pyramid face

Note: a detailed description of this pyramid face and its use of colour, in terms of both degrees of shading and font colour, are provided in the descriptions of schemas level 2 and 3 in sections 5.2.4.2 and 5.2.4.3.

5.2.4.4. Schema summary and contribution

Sections 5.2.4.1 to 5.2.4.3 have presented the three levels of the schema that was developed to graphically portray the dynamics of strategic organisational learning implementation as analytically derived from the data of this research.

In summary, the three levels of the schema show in turn:

- **Schema level 1**—the high-level dynamic interdependence of the three conceptual elements as represented there. This illustrates the concurrent and sequential relationships identified by respondents, with organisational learning occupying two faces in recognition of the fact that it is seen as informing the development and implementation of strategy, while also arising out of the development and implementation of that strategy.

- **Schema level 2**—the degrees of influence of the components within each conceptual element is represented there. This illustrates the degrees of influence of each of the components as perceived by respondents in terms of contributing to the development and implementation of an organisational learning strategy necessary for successful implementation of the desired reforms.

- **Schema level 3**—specific relationships identified between components within and across the three conceptual elements are represented as clusters there. The relationships within these clusters suggest that attention to one specific component within a cluster is likely to have an impact on other components within that cluster.

The contribution of the schemas is twofold in relation to the research problem as specified in section 1.3.2 and the aim of this research overall as specified in section 1.3.1. Firstly, in acknowledgement of the fact that limited research has been undertaken on implementation of

organisational learning strategy in an Australian public sector context, it adds to a better conceptual understanding of strategic organisational learning implementation with particular reference to the APS during a period of change. In this regard, the schema presents specific relationships that have been identified within and between the three conceptual elements and their component parts.

Secondly, in recognition of the limited guidance available in the literature to assist practitioners in the development and implementation of organisational learning strategy, the schema has added to a better pragmatic understanding. This, in turn, can better inform the development of tools designed specifically to provide such guidance; this has been addressed through the inclusion of practitioner checklists, based on aspects of the schema, in section 5.3.2.

5.3. Implications for future research and management practice

This section presents implications for both future research and for management practice. In terms of management practice, this is provided through recommendations for practitioners.

5.3.1. Implications for future research

During the discussion above of the findings of this research, a number of areas that potentially warrant further investigation were identified. These will be presented and discussed here.

Section 5.2.1 discussed the findings in relation to organisational learning in APS agencies. The data in relation to the contribution of the existing APS culture to organisational learning appeared to contain a significant gap in terms of not addressing risk-taking and experimentation, despite strong support in the literature for inclusion of these characteristics in a culture that optimises learning (Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995; Jerez-Gomez et al., 2005; Chan and Scott-Ladd, 2004). The push for agencies to shift towards a culture more open to risk and experimentation

(Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2010; Management Advisory Committee, 2010) and how it relates to organisation learning strategy certainly warrants further empirical investigation.

Section 5.2.2 discussed the findings in relation to strategy in APS agencies. The data in relation to employee involvement in the strategic process in APS agencies suggested that this component of strategy was considered to be of relatively low importance in comparison to five of the other six components of strategy. This finding runs somewhat contrary to the stance in the literature, which promotes the benefits of employee involvement in the strategic process (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Stewart and O'Donnell, 2007; Hubbard et al., 2007; Bierly and Hämäläinen, 1995). This result, coupled with data from the *State of the Service Report*—which reports relatively low levels of involvement of staff in discussing future challenges (Australian Public Service Commission, 2010), and as discussed in sections 1.2.2 and 5.2.2—should warrant further investigation. Such an investigation could look for the barriers to employee involvement in the strategic process during times of significant organisational change and how they might be recognised earlier and/or in fact better ameliorated in actual practice.

Section 5.2.3 discussed the findings in relation to implementation in APS agencies. The data in relation to aligning learning and development and performance management suggested that the best alignment may not make the desired contribution without skilled people managers leading the process. Examining the specific skills of managers conducting performance conversations was beyond the scope of this research, but it is an area that warrants further exploration from both a research and a practitioner perspective.

The process of analysing the data to look for relationships within and between the three conceptual elements identified a number of clusters as described in section 5.2.4.3. One cluster,

leadership, stood out from the other clusters due to its frequent occurrence and impact across all three conceptual elements. Digging deeper into the impact of leadership on the development and implementation of organisational learning strategy in APS agencies was beyond the scope of this research, and ought to warrant further investigation as matter of priority within management research.

5.3.2. *Implications and recommendations for practitioners*

The results from this research provide guidance for APS learning and development practitioners when developing and implementing strategic organisational learning for their agencies, particularly during periods of significant change or reform. The following checklists (Tables 5.3 to 5.5), as suggested by the dataset and its subsequent analyses, have been developed to provide guidance as to the priority areas to focus on for the successful development of each of the three studied elements. In that regard, the energy of practitioners should be focused primarily on the "foundation" components (introduced in section 5.2.4.2), as they will undoubtedly have the strongest influence on the ultimate look, shape and feel and therefore the results of the implemented organisational learning strategy. The 80:20 rule could be adapted for application here. This would involve the majority of the effort being put into the foundation components, the smaller percentage of factors that will have the greatest impact (Rao, Carr, Dambolena, Kopp, Martin, Rafii and Fineman Schlesinger, 1996; Murray and Greenes, 2006). In the checklists presented in Tables 5.3 to 5.5, these foundation components have been presented as the high priority components. In turn, a reduced amount of effort could be directed towards the factors with less influence on the ultimate outcome. Once the high priority components have been satisfactorily addressed, attention could move the medium priority and, ultimately, low priority components if time and finances permit.

It is important to note that this guidance is not suggesting generalisability of results; and practitioners are encouraged to take into account their own unique organisational contexts when considering whether the specific priorities as suggested by the checklists are indeed applicable to their situation. The checklists do, however, still provide useful guidance to inform the process of prioritisation as well as informing other key considerations in relation to each of the components that could, in turn, be tailored to specific organisations.

In addition to assisting with prioritisation, the checklists can be used to tailor the specific response to the requirements of the particular agency. This inbuilt flexibility in the checklists to tailor the response to the requirements of each agency is in acknowledgement of the need for a unique and customised strategy as reported in the literature (Dealtry, 2002). The completed checklists could then be combined to inform the development and implementation of the overall organisational learning strategy for the agency.

Table 5.3: Practitioner checklist for facilitating organisational learning in APS agencies

	Organisational learning		
Priority	**Component**	**Specific strategies in my agency (list)**	**☑**
High	**Developing shared understanding** • Develop mechanisms to encourage relationship building, sharing and mutual learning such as cross-function teams, networking, collaboration systems, group discussions and committees	•	☐
	Leaders instilling shared vision • Leaders need to use open, two-way communication of the vision to get it shared • Leaders need to lead by example and be active role models of the change	•	☐ ☐
Medium	**Knowledge creation** • Show knowledge is valued, have in place mechanisms that encourage the creation and sharing of it such as communities of practice, mentoring, succession planning and grey masters • Develop knowledge optimisation systems • Systematise review and continuous improvement processes	•	☐ ☐ ☐

Organisational learning			
Priority	**Component**	**Specific strategies in my agency (list)**	**☑**
	Development of wisdom • Develop a visible learning culture—one that recognises continuous learning from all opportunities and embraces learning by everyone • Incorporate structural elements that facilitate information sharing and involvement across the organisation such as cross-organisation committees, integrated functions and flatter structure	•	☐ ☐
Low	**Patterns of decisions** • Research decision-making approaches that have been successful elsewhere • Question patterns such as where decision-making power sits	•	☐ ☐

Table 5.4: Practitioner checklist for strategising in APS agencies

Strategy			
Priority	**Component**	**Specific strategies in my agency (list)**	☑
High	**Leadership support—leaders need to:** • Collaborate and communicate across the organisation • Be proactive and commit time to consult • Actively define, direct and guide the strategic process	•	☐ ☐ ☐
Medium	**Operating environment—analyse the internal and external environments to:** • Shape the nature and perspective of the strategy • Focus strategy on the type of learning required	•	☐ ☐
	Learning and decision-making • Develop continuous improvement systems and processes to systematically capture, analyse and disseminate lessons learned • Have a considered approach to risk management • Optimise knowledge management systems	•	☐ ☐ ☐
	Flexibility • Develop flexibility skills and mindset open to change and innovation	•	☐ ☐

	Strategy		
Priority	**Component**	**Specific strategies in my agency (list)**	☑
	• Be responsive to the operating environment		
Low	**Continuous process** • Develop a systematic, planned cyclical review process with a feedback loop	•	☐
	Employee involvement • Consider whether a widespread versus focused approach to involvement is required	•	☐
	Patterns of behaviour • Look for valued behaviours that can shape strategy	•	☐

Table 5.5: Practitioner checklist for implementing strategy in APS agencies

Strategy			
Priority	**Component**	**Specific strategies in my agency (list)**	☑
High	**Leadership commitment—need leaders:** • Communicating, encouraging and explaining the what, why and how • Being actively involved, highly visible and role-modelling new initiatives	•	☐ ☐
Medium	**Communication processes** • Need strategies to maximise understanding and relevance—contextualise, translate, target messages • Be attentive to channels and timing	•	☐ ☐
	Culture supportive of learning • Develop a change embracing culture to optimise acceptance of doing things differently	•	☐
	Alignment between learning and development and performance management • Align performance agreements to strategic plans and support them with plans for required learning • Ensure learning and development plans are based on the capabilities required to achieve agency outcomes	•	☐ ☐

Strategy			
Priority	**Component**	**Specific strategies in my agency (list)**	☑
	• Develop skilled people managers who can effectively manage performance conversations		☐
	Explicit goals • Make sure that goals clarify "why", "what" and "how"	•	☐
Low	**Silos** • Have strategies to work with them, permeate them and communicate across them	•	☐

5.4. *Limitations of the research*

A number of limitations in relation to the research design and methodology were identified in Chapter 3. Specifically these limitations were:

- the potential subjectivity of interpreting data;

- the potential for groupthink in focus groups;

- the lack of generalisability of results to other APS agencies and organisations; and

- the potentially risk-averse nature of participants in the research as members of the APS.

Certain mitigation strategies described in Chapter 3 were applied throughout the research process. Specifically:

- the researcher managed subjectivity by continuously practising reflexivity throughout all stages of the research project. This was achieved by keeping a journal and having feedback sessions with the researcher's supervisor several times during the course of the focus group and interview sessions;

- the researcher paid particular attention to employing skilled facilitation techniques during the focus groups;

- the researcher endeavoured to provide sufficient information regarding the research and the studied environment to aid transferability; and

- protection of privacy was maintained throughout the research project.

Additional limitations that arose or became apparent through the course of the field research are described here. Firstly, the approach taken whereby participants were given a common

frame of reference by being asked to respond in terms of the *Blueprint for the Reform of Australian Government Administration*, as introduced in sections 1.2.3 and 4.4.3 and outlined in the focus group and interview planning protocols in Appendices 1 and 2, led to respondents in focus groups and interviews being asked to comment specifically in relation "to this situation". As such, the findings may not be transferable to other periods of change or to business-as-usual situations. The same mitigating factors described above in relation to the potential lack of generalisability of results to other APS agencies are applicable to this limitation too. As such, the provision of sufficient information regarding the research and the studied environment is still considered to aid transferability.

Additionally, the structure of two of the interview questions may have created some limitations due to interpretation issues on the part of respondents. For instance, when exploring aspects of organisational learning, the question, "How might structural and cultural elements of your agency be used to facilitate organisational learning in this situation?" led some respondents to focus on structure and others on culture, potentially resulting in less data being available about the other aspect. When exploring aspects of strategy, the question, "Would you expect the operating environment to impact on strategy in this situation? If yes, in what way?" had a similar result, with some respondents focusing on the internal environment and others on the external environment, again potentially resulting in less data being available about the other aspect. This possible limitation arose despite a trial interview being conducted. The manner in which the participant in the trial responded to questions did not reveal the issue that became apparent during the research.

5.5.   Overall conclusion

The main aim of this research project "Building strategic organisational learning implementation for the Australian Public Service (APS)" was to add to a better conceptual and pragmatic understanding of strategic organisational learning implementation in an Australian context, with particular reference to the APS during a period of change.

A review of the literature highlighted the fact that the three conceptual elements that are represented in this project, organisational learning, strategy and implementation are complex and multidimensional constructs, but provided limited guidance as to strategic organisational learning implementation in the studied environment.

A qualitative research methodology utilising focus groups and semi-structured in-depth interviews with APS learning and development practitioners was employed to investigate the four research questions that were developed to achieve the aim of this research. Five focus groups with a total of twenty-two participants and thirteen individual one-hour, in-depth interviews were undertaken for the data collection in this project. Interpretive content analysis was used to analyse the data collected.

The results were used to answer the four research questions and to describe how actively engaged practitioners view the three conceptual elements both singularly and collectively during a period of change. These practitioners identified specific components as the most critical aspects of each of the three conceptual elements as follows:

- **Organisational learning**—developing shared understanding, and leadership and vision;

- **Strategy**—leadership support; and

- **Implementation**—leadership commitment.

Additionally, the results were used to develop an analytically derived schema within the theoretical frame of structuration theory to conceptualise the interdependent relationships between the three conceptual elements as investigated in this project, and to detail suggestions as to how the resulting schema could best tie together and direct usage of these three elements. These suggestions were made to assist practitioners to develop best practices regarding the use of the studied components of the three conceptual elements—strategy, organisational learning and implementation—in their professional endeavours. Practitioner checklists were developed to facilitate this process.

The schema represents the three conceptual elements as a four-sided pyramid with two opposing faces representing organisational learning. This recognises the fact that the research suggests that, in keeping with structuration theory, organisational learning is a recursive rather than linear process, in that it is purposefully engaged by virtue of both the inputs to, and the outcomes of, both strategy and implementation. It also depicts both the dynamic interdependent relationship between each of the three conceptual elements, while at the same time interposing the ongoing, cyclic interplay that organisational learning presents between its other partner elements. Additional features of the schema have been developed to represent specific relationships between the different components that make up each of the three conceptual elements. These additional features highlight the importance of leadership to the three conceptual elements, both singularly and collectively. This research has indicated that digging deeper into the impact of leadership on the development and implementation of organisational learning strategy in APS agencies ought to warrant further investigation as matter of priority within management research.

Additional areas for future research were also identified, specifically in relation to:

- the push for agencies to shift towards a culture more open to risk and experimentation and how it relates to organisation learning strategy;

- the barriers to employee involvement in the strategic process during times of significant organisational change, and how they might be recognised earlier and/or in fact better ameliorated in actual practice; and

- the specific skills necessary for managers conducting performance conversations, which warrant further exploration both from a research and a practitioner perspective.

Despite some acknowledged limitations of this research, the researcher believes this study has made a valuable contribution to both knowledge and practice regarding strategic organisational learning implementation in the studied environment, as well as advancing structuration theory to explain organisational learning's function when employed in strategy and implementation processes.

Endnote

i. The APS is organised into three broad classification tiers: APS 1–6 representing entry-level to supervisory positions; EL1 and EL2 representing middle and senior management positions; and senior executive service (SES) representing senior management positions.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Focus group—planning

Planned groups

5 groups each with 4-8 participants from a single agency. Participants targeted in each agency will be learning and development practitioners (APS6 level and above). Each focus group will run for 1 hour.

Focus groups will be held on site at each agency's premises. Focus groups will be planned for over the lunch period (12.30 - 1.30pm) or at the end of the day (4.30 – 5.30pm) to reduce impact on the agency and maximise the likelihood of participation being agreed to. Light refreshments will be provided (sandwiches and juice).

My role will be to act as moderator with key roles being:
- Keeping the group focused while encouraging free flow of ideas; and
- Maintaining the group dynamics while encouraging responses from all participants.

Focus groups will be audio recorded using a Sony digital recorder.

As each focus group will only run for 1-hour, the number of questions will be limited to enable each aspect to be explored adequately.

Focus Group—The Scenario (provided to participants)

Background
The Federal Government has recently released the report - *Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for Reform of Australian Government Administration[1].* This review proposes changes to strengthen the APS to meet the tests of a new century and stay ahead of the game.

The report identifies four main components of a high-performing public service that form **a framework for evaluating APS performance** and a benchmark for future reviews.

- First, a world-class public service must meet the needs of citizens by providing high quality, tailored public services and by engaging citizens in the design and development of services and policy.
- Second, a high performing public service provides strong leadership and strategic direction.
- Third, a high performing public service is distinguished by a highly capable workforce.
- Finally, a high performing public service operates efficiently and at a consistently high standard.

Focus Group Task (role play)

You are a team of internal learning and development consultants who have been brought together as an Organisational Learning Advisory Group (OLAG) supported by the APSC and tasked with utilising its skills in assisting with the change of the APS as set out in the Blueprint for Reform. As these reforms will enable the APS to better "meet the tests of a new century", *OLAG will focus primarily on helping to establish and implement **organisational learning processes** within the agency as it goes about making changes as prescribed under the reform agenda*. I am the OLAG convener (provided by the APSC as part of their support).

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[1] Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, March 2010, *Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for the Reform of Australian Government Administration*, Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Focus Group—Script for Facilitator (not to be provided to participants)

Housekeeping

1. Check understanding (information statement & consent forms) – briefly explain overall approach to the research
2. Clarify roles & task
3. Confirm timing

Issue 1 – clarifying our understanding of organisational learning

As we are going to primarily focus on helping to establish and implement **organisational learning processes** within our agency it is important that we as a team are "on the same page" in terms of how we regard organisational learning. I have listed on the poster 5 components of organisational learning – I will briefly take you through these 5 components to ensure we have a common understanding of them.

Have "posters" on A3 paper available so everyone can see them.

Provide a brief explanation as to what each of the 5 OL components mean and indicate that they have been derived from the OL literature.

Issue 2 – consideration of ideas about how we (OLAG) could facilitate implementation of these organisational learning processes within our agency's strategic frameworks.

Now that we have a common understanding of what the components of "organisational learning" are, we need to consider how we might use these components to employ **organisational learning** within our agency as we implement the Blueprint reforms. In doing this, we need to consider our strategic framework.

Listed on the 2nd poster are 7 components of our strategic framework – I would like us to consider how we might implement the OL processes we just worked on within this framework.

Briefly explain strategic framework components (also informed by the literature) then commence 1 by 1 going through implementing the new OL with each of the components (within this strategic framework). For example:
- How could we use "developing a shared understanding as people work together" to implement the OL required by the Blueprint reforms?

Work through these one by one and then finish with a holistic look at them.

Organisational learning occurring through:

1. Developing shared understandings as people work together

2. Enabling features of the structure and culture of the organisation

3. The ongoing processes of doing our business

4. Leaders enabling a shared vision to emerge

5. The identification of patterns of decisions about best ways to work

How could we implement the organisational learning processes within a strategic framework which takes into consideration our:

1. Operating environment

2. Flexibility when approaching strategy

3. Employee involvement at different levels in the strategic process

4. Leadership as supportive of collaborative learning

5. Strategy as shaped by patterns of behaviours that work

6. Learning as part of its decision making

7. Strategising as a continuous process

Appendix 2: Interview protocol

Overview of the interview process

12-16 participants will be interviewed – selection will employ a snowballing technique with initial interviewees having been focus group participants or other learning and development practitioners in APS agencies.

Interviews will be conducted on site at the interviewee's agencies. Interviewees will be asked to arrange a private meeting room for the interviews rather than holding them in their offices.

The interviews will be open-ended driven by a minimum of questions. My role will be to guide the interviewees through a conversation using the cues provided on the "interview cues" worksheet (included in this protocol). These will be provided in the form of 3 separate cards (representing the 3 conceptual elements and their components) which do not show any relationships between the 3. The cards will provide an important visual cue to help maintain the focus of the conversation. Having each card separate is important as they can then be moved around the table as the conversation progresses both to reinforce the focus of the conversation at that point in time and also to illustrate any perceived relationships which emerge from the conversation.

The *"Blueprint for Reform"* will be the context to ground the interviews and the "interview context" handout (included in this protocol) will be provided.

Interviews will be audio recorded using a Sony digital recorder.

Interviews will run for 1-hour.

Managing the conversation

1. Thanks participant for being involved in the research, check understanding of the information statement and the consent form. Check they understand this includes recording the conversation. Confirm "demographic data" – present level, how long with APS, how long with current agency.

2. Explain that the context of the interview will be the *"Blueprint for Reform"* – provide a copy of the Blueprint handout.

3. Explain that the interview will be open-ended and that we will be having a conversation about issues pertaining to the strategic organisational learning process necessary to implement the Blueprint reforms. Explain that the conversation will be around the 3 elements: strategy, implementation and organisational learning both in terms of what is important about each element separately and also in terms of any relationships they perceive between these 3 elements. Explain that we will be together for an hour.

4. Start the conversation with reference to the 3 cards on the table in front of us. Ask an open question along the lines of:

- *"In order to successfully implement the Blueprint reforms in your agency, I would like to explore with you components to do with strategy, implementation and organisational learning. Which of these 3 would you like to start with?"* (**Note:** record the order selected)

    i. Based on the response, the selected card will be placed centrally and the other 2 will be moved to the side (still within sight so they can be referred to if necessary). For example, if "strategy" is selected the initial conversation would be around the 7 items (representing the 7 components) on the strategy card with the implementation and organisational learning cards to the side. A series of open questions would be used to get behind their responses and to get a deeper understanding of how they perceive each of the items on the cards.

    ii. The type of discussion starters for this "probing" would be (these will be "steered" but not prescribed by the questions on the "Questions" sheets included in this protocol document):

        1. "tell me more about …."

        2. "in what way is that important …."

    iii. Once all the components on the card had been explored I would ask a question along the lines of "which of these 7 components do you believe to be most important in contributing towards the successful implementation of the Blueprint reforms?" and then "which do you believe to be least important?"

    iv. At this point I would be steering the conversation away from identifying any relationships between strategy, implementation and organisational learning.

    v. Once all the items on the first card had been explored I would get the interviewee to select the next topic for discussion and again the selected card would be moved centrally to be a visual cue. The same process would be repeated with this topic.

5. Once I was satisfied that the components on each card had been explored I would guide the conversation towards identifying any relationships participants perceived between the 3 elements. To do this I would use a conversation starter along the lines of:

- *"Now that we have explored aspects to do with strategy, implementation and organisational learning and which components of these you believe to be most*

important, I am interested in knowing how you perceive the relationship between these 3 elements. Could you please explain this to me?"

6. Close conversation and thank for participation. Ask if it is okay to get back to them with any further questions and check if they would like a summary of results. Ask if they have someone they can recommend for interview.

Interview context (provided to participants)

Background
The Federal Government has recently released the report - *Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for Reform of Australian Government Administration[2]*. This review proposes changes to strengthen the APS to meet the tests of a new century and stay ahead of the game. The report identifies four main components of a high-performing public service that form **a framework for evaluating APS performance** and a benchmark for future reviews.   - First, a world-class public service must meet the needs of citizens by providing high quality, tailored public services and by engaging citizens in the design and development of services and policy.   - Second, a high performing public service provides strong leadership and strategic direction.   - Third, a high performing public service is distinguished by a highly capable workforce.   - Finally, a high performing public service operates efficiently and at a consistently high standard.

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[2] Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, March 2010, *Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for the Reform of Australian Government Administration*, Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Interview cue cards (cut into 3 and placed in front of participants)

STRATEGY	IMPLEMENTATION	ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING
1. Operating environment	1. Absence of silos/stove pipes	1. Development of wisdom enabled by the organisation's **structure and culture**
2. Flexibility when approaching strategy	2. Leadership commitment	2. Knowledge creation as an **ongoing process**
3. Employee involvement in the strategic process	3. Culture supportive of learning	3. People developing shared understanding as they **work together** in new ways
4. Manner of leadership support	4. Explicit goals	4. **Leaders instilling a shared vision** of new ways of working
5. Strategy being shaped by key patterns of behaviour	5. Alignment between L&D and Performance Management systems	5. Identification of new **patterns of decisions** about best ways to work
6. Learning as an integral part of making decisions and strategy	6. Communication processes	
7. Strategising as a continuous process		

Interview Protocol—interview "questions"—strategy

STRATEGY	
1. Operating environment	1. Would you expect the operating environment to impact on strategy in this situation? If yes, in what way?
2. Flexibility when approaching strategy	2. Is flexibility a necessary consideration here, in what way?
3. Employee involvement in the strategic process	3. How would you expect employees to be involved in strategic processes in this situation?
4. Manner of leadership support	4. What manner of leadership support would you expect here?
5. Strategy being shaped by key patterns of behaviour	5. Would you expect strategy in this situation to be shaped by new patterns of behaviour? If yes, in what way?
6. Learning as an integral part of making decisions and strategy	6. In what ways would learning become an integral part of decision making in this situation?
7. Strategising as a continuous process	7. In what way might strategising exist here as a continuous process?

Note: when referring to "here" or "in this situation" this is reference to implementing the Blueprint reforms.

Interview Protocol—interview "questions"—implementation

IMPLEMENTATION	
1. Absence of silos/stove pipes	1. Are silos an important issue for you in this situation?
2. Leadership commitment	2. How would leadership commitment be shown during the process?
3. Culture supportive of learning	3. How might culture be used to assist implementation in this situation?
4. Explicit goals	4. In what way would the prior setting of clear and explicit goals assist implementation in this situation?
5. Alignment between L&D and Performance Management systems	5. How would alignment between L&D and PM systems be made here?
6. Communication processes	6. How would communication processes be adapted to assist implementation in this situation?

Note: when referring to "here" or "in this situation" this is reference to implementing the Blueprint reforms.

Interview Protocol—interview "questions"—organisational learning

ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING	
1.Development of wisdom enabled by the organisation's **structure and culture**	1. How might structural and cultural elements of your agency be used to facilitate organisational learning in this situation?
2. Knowledge creation as an **ongoing process**	2. Knowledge creation as an ongoing process is an important component of organisational learning. How might this be facilitated in this situation?
3. People developing shared understanding as they **work together** in new ways	3. People working together in new ways plays an important role in developing shared understandings. How might such organisational learning be facilitated in this situation?
4. **Leaders instilling a shared vision** of new ways of working	4. Leadership also plays an important role in championing organisational learning. How might leadership go about this to instil a shared vision of new ways of working here?"
5. Identification of new **patterns of decisions** about best ways to work	5. How might new patterns of decisions about best ways to work be identified in this situation?

Note: when referring to "here" or "in this situation" this is reference to implementing the Blueprint reforms.