



## Professionalising the public service

*By: National School of Government*

### Introduction

An important commitment that the current administration made in the Medium-Term Strategic Framework (2019–2024) is to consolidate efforts towards building a capable, ethical and developmental state. A key imperative of this is the professionalisation of the public service, and the [National School of Government \(NSG\)](#) is spearheading efforts to achieve this goal.

On 18 November 2020, Cabinet approved the publication of a [draft National Implementation Framework towards the professionalisation of the public service](#), and in December 2020 the document was released for public comment. A public consultation process was initiated with the key stakeholders from various organisations, institutions and professional bodies in February 2021.

### Professionalisation of the public service – what does it mean?

South Africa's [National Development Plan \(NDP\)](#) asserts that “a developmental state needs to be capable”, but that capability can only come about if the public service is professionalised. This has long been an elusive pursuit, particularly in earlier transformation and state reform efforts. Almost two decades after the dawn of democracy, the NDP addressed the question of what went wrong in the evolution of post-apartheid South Africa – there was a failure to institutionalise a merit-based public service system where appointments in the administration of the state are based on competence and ethical disposition. The professionalisation of the public service seeks to correct this.

‘Professionalisation of the state’ means that the state employs people who have an ethical disposition and a sense of public service, who are qualified, who know what they are doing, and who are fully equipped to perform their public function with diligence. President Cyril Ramaphosa has consistently emphasised this as key in building state capacity.

An employee value proposition is important for attracting highly skilled people into the public service. Professionalisation is therefore not only about merit-based recruitment and selection practices, but also about making the public service and local government

careers of choice. Both financial and non-financial benefits, depending on how they are structured, could go a long way towards achieving this.

Of critical importance is how education and training systems strengthen the talent pipeline for the pool of people with skills suitable for a career in the public service, especially young graduates with enthusiasm and fresh insights to contribute to the development of the country. The framework for the professionalisation of the public service translates the NDP's vision into implementable or tangible outcomes. One of the key outcomes relates to how to stabilise the political administrative interface by involving the Public Service Commission and external experts in the appointment of the directors-general and deputy directors-general, including the head of the public service, to manage the political administrative interface and career incidents of the heads of departments. All these are measures intended to create a non-partisan public service system insulated from political influence, interference and manipulation and thus ensure continuity of administration through transitions of power.

## Process of professionalisation

The framework's approach targets the entirety of the value chain for human capital formation for the public sector, and is based on the following five pillars:

1. Pre-entry, recruitment and selection
2. Induction and onboarding
3. Planning and performance management
4. Continuous learning and professional development
5. Career development and incidents

**Pre-entry** interventions are designed to strengthen the talent pipeline and should therefore optimise recruitment and selection. **Induction and onboarding** shape the professional disposition of the recruits as they enter the public service and their workplaces. All these require strategic alliances with higher education institutions (HEIs) and professional bodies or associations. The framework is based on the logic that, especially insofar as these aspects are concerned, for the professionalisation of the public service to succeed, synergy of efforts and collaboration is required. This is important for co-creation of value, particularly as it relates to developing employment-based initiatives and skills pathways.

Key aspects of professionalisation should be reflected in **planning and performance management**, including **continuous learning and professional development**. It is critical that those whose professions require their competencies to be certified by participating in

continuous learning and professional development programmes as prescribed by professional bodies are required to do so. This is important if the state is to benefit fully from their professional engagement in the public service. In other words, for example, an engineer in the public service should comply with the requirements of the engineering council to be able to certify or sign-off certain projects.

The framework emphasises the importance of creating the opportunity for members of the senior management services, especially, to rejuvenate their insights and skills as part of their **career progression**. The revolving door policy<sup>1</sup>, which has been dormant for years, makes this possible and should therefore be fully used. When it comes to consequence management, existing public service processes should be used fully, including the [Public Audit Amendment Act 5 of 2018](#), which gives the auditor-general power to take action against the accounting officer or authority where material irregularities have been identified.

### **Ministerial Task Team process**

The minister for Public Service and Administration appointed the task team, which comprises 25 members drawn from selected organs of state, state-owned enterprises, academia, private sector, quality assurance and professional bodies, to review the draft framework and “consider discussions on the broader project of strengthening the state capacity”, including the latest research on international trends related to public service reforms. The ultimate goal was for the task team to advise on matters, including processes, systems, and policies related to the draft *Framework*.

The task team was constituted in a way that facilitates diverse insights and given 90 days in which to complete its work. However, the work required more time that was allocated – a situation exacerbated by covid-19 restrictions on planned activities – and the task team requested an extension. The report was due for submission to the minister of Public Service and Administration in the first week of November 2021.

### **What does the professionalisation project seek to achieve?**

The professionalisation process seeks to achieve a capable, ethical, and developmental state by reinventing the administration of the state as a profession, and therefore a career

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<sup>1</sup> According to the framework, the *Revolving Door Policy* (2008) allows those in senior management services to move between the private sector, academia and the public sector in order to teach “fresh, current and inspirational learning and innovative ideas”.

of choice, for the nation's brightest and most talented, with strong ethical disposition and a sense of public service committed to the public good. Of critical importance, as part of the broader project, is how to professionalise public financial management, where the objective is to achieve better audit outcomes for improved service delivery. This is about strengthening public financial management and leadership through education, training and development.

The nine key public finance management focus areas are:

1. management accounting (planning and budgeting)
2. revenue management
3. expenditure management
4. asset management (movable and immovable)
5. financial accounting
6. internal audit
7. internal control
8. enterprise risk management
9. supply chain management.

Anybody who wants to be appointed, or is appointed, to manage public finance should demonstrate knowledge and skills in these areas, which are subsumed in the broader discipline of public administration, public management or public governance. There is no standalone education, training, and development programme with a dedicated focus on public financial management in South Africa, aside from various ad hoc interventions largely provided by HEIs or private service providers.

The NSG aims to work with the National Treasury, in partnership with HEIs, to develop a programme in public financial management and engage the Council on Higher Education and South African Qualifications Authority to have this programme accredited and registered. The programme offering will be a partnership between the NSG and HEIs and should be made one of the pre-entry requirements for those who work, or aspire to work, in the public finance space, including those who aspire to hold management and leadership positions in the public service.

One of the nine public finance management areas referred to above is supply chain management (SCM). This is a specialised field; however, there has not been any standardisation of skills and knowledge in this area. The National Treasury has developed a public procurement national knowledge and skills standard in this field. HEIs are to be engaged to offer an academic qualification in SCM based on this knowledge and skills

standard. The NSG would continue to offer an SCM training programme as part of continuous professional learning and development, but in partnership with professional bodies or associations in the SCM field. The NSG will engage the SCM council, which was established by the National Treasury to facilitate the recognition of SCM as a profession, about awarding continuous professional development points and registration to those who are in the SCM profession.

SCM facilitates government procurement and purchasing –the biggest market and key to the economy. As Mark Kuipers in the Office of the Accountant-General puts it: “professionalisation of the SCM function as one of the nine disciplines of public finance management plays a significant role in transforming public finance management into a profession of the highest integrity and competence, supporting improved public procurement, smarter spending and, ultimately, better service delivery”.

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### **About the National School of Government (NSG)**

The NSG is a state training institution tasked with building public sector capacity to implement the South African government's developmental agenda. The NSG was established based on the belief that a capable public service is necessary for various sectors of society to flourish, therefore realising sustainable development outcomes.