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Equity and diversity in public sector employment

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1. Introduction

In 2010 the OECD asserted that “diversity principles should be part of any public management reform, as diversity initiatives cannot succeed as an isolated strategy” (OECD 2010, p. 5). What is diversity, how does it relate to equity and how does it relate to the long history of inequity in public service employment in many countries? Equity and diversity in employment is seen as part of the new public sector management, but more fundamentally it is part of the approach to employment for all citizens in many countries. Government acts in the role of state overseer of human rights and employment equity as well as being the employer of a substantial component of a national labour force. The public service “is one in which the government, responsible elsewhere for broader policy on equalities, is also the ultimate employer” (Thornley 2007, p. 458). This leads to heightened scrutiny of employment practices and outcomes.

For most of the history of government bureaucracies a system of inequality in relation to positions in the public service has operated. Women were banned from many occupations and the senior levels, or were banned on their marriage, and particular ethnic groups were limited in their access to positions. While specifics vary from country to country (Tummala 1989), legal and official inequality remained in large part until changes from the 1960s. This legacy of inequality, of overt discrimination, different types and degrees of segregation, casts a long shadow that reaches into the 21st century as many public services strive to achieve equity in public employment in their society. Today, new social policies and management practices have emerged to foster more equitable practices and promote diversity policies in the workplace although difficulties and challenges remain.

This chapter presents an overview of public sector employment and the changes from inequity in employment to the equity and diversity approaches of the 21st century. It relies on academic literature in the English language and draws on the most prolific areas of analysis which are the USA and the UK, with material from the author’s country of Australia. Inevitably, this will not present a picture of all public service developments, as each country will have a unique perspective based on its own history and culture. However, many of the driving ideas in the area of diversity, in particular, come from the USA and have spread around the globe and influenced international organisations. It is in large part these ideas which the chapter focuses on. The chapter initially discusses the long legacy of inequity in employment, and then discusses the major approaches to both equity and diversity. A further section outlines the inequality that remains in public sector employment. The final section canvasses the current debates.

The chapter draws largely on the research on women and work – a vast literature. It recognises other areas of inequality such as that based on ethnicity, disability and sexuality, but does not go into detail about these areas. Compared to the debates on wom-