

It's do as we say not as we do, as fat cat

consultants dodge government's training system

An alarming number of highly paid public service trainers lack strong credentials

PAUL CLEARY



THEY call it the training day. Public servants who endure the routine and the mundane can look forward to an easy day spent in a conference room where they are taught, and often entertained, by a well-paid training consultant.

The courses can involve topics such as how to write clearly and concisely, understanding how the media works, public speaking skills, and people management.

The cost to the taxpayer is usually about \$4000 a day, not

that the federal government's tender website declares these hefty charges. And the consultants who run the courses, often former business executives, academics or journalists, are not required to have training qualifications, and quite often they don't. It is a rort from start to finish, but there isn't a single institution in Canberra willing to do anything about it.

The Department of Finance, which is meant to uphold the highest standards of accountability, defended to Inquirer the veil of secrecy known as "commercial in confidence" that is used to hide the cost of these contracts from the taxpayer. These high rates are still being charged, even though AusAID has put a cap of about \$1000 a day on contracts for consultants working on overseas aid projects.



ALAN PRYKE

Deborah May is the real deal

University of Melbourne economics professor John Freebairn says the department's argument is unacceptable.

"When it comes to government contracts, my view is that government hiding under the veil of 'business in confidence' is unacceptable. They are spending our money," he says. "A condition of contracting with government is that details of successful contracts will be made public, and with the

objectives of transparency and voter ability to check that our money is being well spent."

Other departments have defended the high-cost engagement of unqualified consultants, arguing that the courses they are running do not lead to an accredited qualification. This means that the federal government doesn't apply its own national regulations for training to its own activities.

The firms that are cashing in on this lucrative trade have slick sales pitches. One of them is Media Manoeuvres, a firm of nine female former journalists that has earned more than \$600,000 from the Defence Department since 2008 for running "media awareness" courses. This was how a Defence spokeswoman defended its use of unqualified consultants: "The one-day introductory media awareness and skills course provided by the Department of Defence sought to help Defence personnel understand how the media works, and to develop skills and techniques to engage effectively with

the media in a variety of contexts.

"The media awareness training did not require a formal assessment process at its conclusion, and did not result in the awarding of any nationally recognised qualifications and, as such, there was no essential requirement for the providers of the media awareness training to hold formal training qualifications for this purpose."

Media Manoeuvres chief executive Sam Elam declined to comment, as did other consulting firms including Effective People and Interaction Consulting. None of the consultants on Media Manoeuvres' website lists any training qualifications.

To be fair to Defence, this is just one of hundreds of similar contracts awarded by federal government departments.

The Australian Public Service Commission, which is responsible for overseeing training in Canberra departments, says that the federal government's own training standards for registered training organisations apply only to cour-

ses that lead to an accredited qualification. This means that for non-accredited courses, it is open slather. The spokesman says that the standard training qualification, known as a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, is "not a pre-requisite, but specialist subject matter expertise is required".

This qualification is mandatory for anyone who provides training as part of the nationally accredited system that was introduced by the Howard government and then fine-tuned by Julia Gillard when she was education minister.

Known as the Australian Quality Training Framework, the federal Employment Department says it delivers "a quality assured approach" to the operations of training organisations.

Evidently, it is a case of do as we say, not as we do.

Opposition finance spokesman Andrew Robb says the system needs a radical shake-up. The Coalition introduced the AusTender website (www.tenders.gov.au) in 2004, but clearly this does not

go far enough, because it lists only the total value of contracts, not how much is paid per hour or day.

"AusTender as it stands is quite limited in the level of information it provides in relation to how taxpayers' money is spent," says Robb.

"There is a strong case for additional levels of detail, including daily or even hourly rates charged by consultants and a statement outlining the credentials of the consultant engaged.

"These measures would require extra levels of discipline before taxpayers' money is spent."

Robb says the Auditor-General agreed that significant savings would be made if tender processes were improved.

Canberra departments would have succeeded in keeping secret these cosy and lucrative contracts were it not for the Senate estimates committee, which asked for specific details on the Department of Finance's training courses.

The document obtained by senator Mitch Fifield showed that consultants charged hourly rates

ranging from \$411 to \$505 for coaching and management training for Finance. In 2010-11, the department spent \$627,000 on these services alone. The lack of rigorous standards means that the highly valued consultants are lumped in the same boat as those that lack strong credentials.

Management consultant Deborah May is a Fulbright scholar who has worked with several departments in Canberra to promote women into the upper echelon. "I work with senior leaders — men and women — to increase their level of awareness of the unintentional barriers and unconsciously held beliefs that prevent women from advancing," May says.

In 2001 she led an initiative called "five in five" that involved a coalition of women leaders committed to having five secretaries in five years. They achieved their goal in 3½ years.

A university professor who had engaged May says "she's worth every cent".