

3 **Special focus: Managing the senior level public service**

This chapter presents a selection of comparative indicators on the management of senior level public servants in OECD countries. It provides an update on the OECD Working Paper on Leadership for a High Performing Civil Service, complementing it with new data gathered through the 2020 OECD Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability. It shows that while most OECD countries use competency frameworks to focus on leadership skills, many are still challenged to develop these skills, assess them, and hold managers accountable for effective people management.

Introduction: Leading the future of the public service

The future of the public service will depend on the leadership of senior level public servants. Leaders cultivate an environment in which employees are engaged and supported to find the best ways to achieve the mission of the organisation. At the same time, leaders nurture integrity and ethical behaviour through daily interactions with employees (Detert and Burris, 2007^[1]) (OECD, 2020^[2]). These two elements – competence and values – are key drivers of trust in government (OECD, 2017^[3]). Public service leaders are therefore at the forefront in building an efficient, innovative and trustworthy public sector. In short – the future of the public service will depend on the future of leadership. The OECD's 2020 Working Paper on Leadership for a High Performing Civil Service makes the following predictions:

1. The goal of public service leadership will increasingly be to solve public policy challenges in innovative ways, supported by digital technology. This suggests the need for new capabilities (i.e. skills, behaviours, perspectives, knowledge, mindsets, etc.) within the senior level public service.
2. Public service leaders will lead increasingly diverse organisations with employees from a range of backgrounds on a range of contracts and in a variety of physical locations, flowing more fluidly in and out of organisations. This raises challenges to inculcate public values and an inclusive organisational culture.
3. Public leadership will become increasingly data-driven, with large sets of workforce and performance data driving insights and informing management responses. This suggests increased opportunity for evidence-informed decision making, and the need to invest in skills to support, and sometime challenge it.
4. Leaders will need to be more involved than ever in workforce and organisational development. Leaders will play central role in establishing learning cultures so that existing employees are provided with opportunities to learn as they go. Leaders will also play an increasingly visible role as organisational ambassadors, front and centre in the war for talent, articulating the value proposition of the public sector employer and attracting needed skill sets into the public service.

In order to ensure the leadership needed in the future, governments can put in place a range of policies and tools to develop leadership competencies in current and future leaders, assess these competencies in recruitment and promotion, and ensure they are reinforced in performance and accountability regimes. This chapter provides an update on the OECD Working Paper on Leadership for a High Performing Civil Service (Gerson, 2020^[4]), complementing the conceptual frameworks from that paper with relevant data gathered through the 2020 OECD Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

Box 3.1. Definition of leadership and senior level public servants

This chapter focuses on senior level public servants (SLPS) who occupy the highest-ranking positions of administrative bureaucracies and who lead public servants in the pursuit of governmental objectives.

The word senior denotes rank, and is not a reference to age or seniority in terms of length of career or tenure. In the majority of countries this group includes the top two levels of the administration under the Minister but in some countries this group includes additional layers beneath.

The chapter sometimes uses a D1 – D4 ranking system to refer to hierarchical levels of the administration. D1 leaders are the highest ranking SLPS, usually reporting to the Minister. They may be referred to as Permanent Secretaries, or Directors General, or other, depending on the administration. D2 leaders are the rank below them, D3 and D4 follow below those, and may be considered middle management in some administrations.

SLPS are also separate from elected officials, although they may be appointed by them. In this chapter, references to “leadership” refer to administrative and institutional leadership. This chapter does not look at the leadership of Ministers, or their political cabinet.

The concept of leadership, in this chapter, refers to the way senior civil servants work towards governance objectives through/with others. This implies two basic dimensions. First, leadership is about achieving objectives which change and improve upon the status quo, implying some kind of change, innovation and/or transformation. Second, leaders don’t achieve objectives alone. Leadership is an interpersonal phenomenon, and so leadership is about the relationship between individuals or groups.

The authors recognise that many other definitions of leadership exist, and that leadership is often exerted by others within and outside of the traditional civil service hierarchy. However this report focuses on the senior civil service as defined above, since they play a pivotal role in creating the environmental conditions for other kinds of leadership to emerge.

Key messages

- **Leadership competency frameworks are now common practice across OECD countries:** The majority of OECD countries have a standard competency framework for senior public servants, primarily used in job profiles, recruitment processes and performance assessment. Most of these frameworks emphasise competencies related to strategy, vision, results and integrity, while far fewer emphasise inclusion, innovation, digital and crisis management.
- **Recruitment increasingly focuses on leadership competency assessment:** This acknowledges that formal criteria, for example length of experience or educational qualifications are not enough to predict the success of a public manager. However assessing complex cognitive and behavioural competencies requires new skills among recruiters.
- **More emphasis can be put on pipeline development, career management and mobility:** Among OECD countries, it is not yet common to build a pipeline of candidates who have the competencies necessary for leadership by identifying them early in their careers. Doing so ensures a ready pool of potential leaders which is increasingly important in the context of ageing workforces.
- **There is still a diversity gap to close in senior levels of the public service:** Women are underrepresented in almost all senior civil services, and other diversity groups are often not tracked. While the use of diversity targets in recruitment processes has increased, data and tools to assess and strengthen diversity and inclusion in other areas are underutilised. To date, only a few OECD countries include diversity and inclusion as leadership competencies.
- **Accountability for quality of leadership and people management is lacking:** The use of specific performance objectives for senior public servants is widespread among OECD countries. However, managerial accountabilities for senior public servants often focus on financial management and accounting and rarely include specific accountabilities for leadership capabilities and people management.
- **Integrating a range of tools including mobility, is necessary to develop a learning culture:** Investing in learning, offering regular and quality feedback and providing opportunities for mobility can support public leaders in continuously developing the capabilities. While OECD countries offer a wide variety of learning opportunities and peer support to senior public servants, there is a strong focus on training seminars and online learning tools. Other tools could be promoted to provide more individual support to leaders.

Box 3.2. Leadership capabilities for public sector performance

Based on nine case studies, the OECD mapped the core leadership capabilities required of senior civil servants working on complex public sector challenges expected to become more relevant in the future of public work. The identified capabilities are organised in four groups (see Chapter 1, Figure 1.3):

- Values-based leadership
- Open Inclusion
- Organisational Stewardship
- Networked Collaboraiton

At its centre, the capabilities model underlines values-based leadership guiding leaders in their decisions and modelling ethical behaviour. Successful leaders challenge their own internal perceptions through open inclusion and encourage different voices and perspectives and promote an organisational culture in which employees felt confident to contribute to developing innovative solution to public sector challenges. Public leaders also have to act as organisational stewards by reinforcing a trust- and values-based culture and equipping their workforce with the right skills, tools and working environments. Finally, looking beyond their own organisation, successful SCS are adept at collaborating through networks, with other government actors, and beyond.

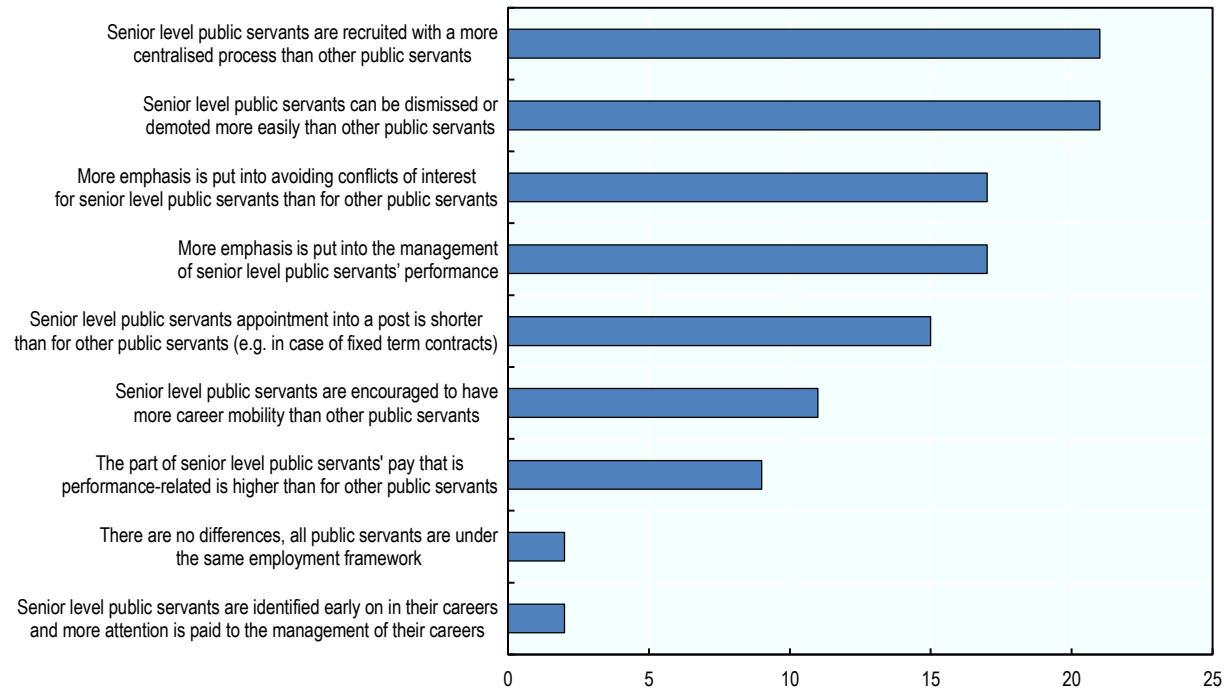
Source: Gerson, D. (2020^[4]), "Leadership for a high performing civil service: Towards senior civil service systems in OECD countries", *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, No. 40, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ed8235c8-en>.

Senior civil service systems

In recognition of their pivotal role in public service performance and to develop the skills of public leaders, most OECD countries set up a specific system for managing the senior civil service. These systems aim to ensure that the administrative leaders at the top of the organisational hierarchy are equipped with appropriate skills and resources and are supported through an enabling operating environment. Figure 3.1 outlines the main differences of such systems – the most common components include more centralised recruitment, easier dismissal or demotion, and more emphasis put on avoiding conflict of interest and performance management.

Figure 3.1. Differences between Senior Level Public Servants' employment frameworks and those of other public servants

Number of OECD countries, n=32 (2020)

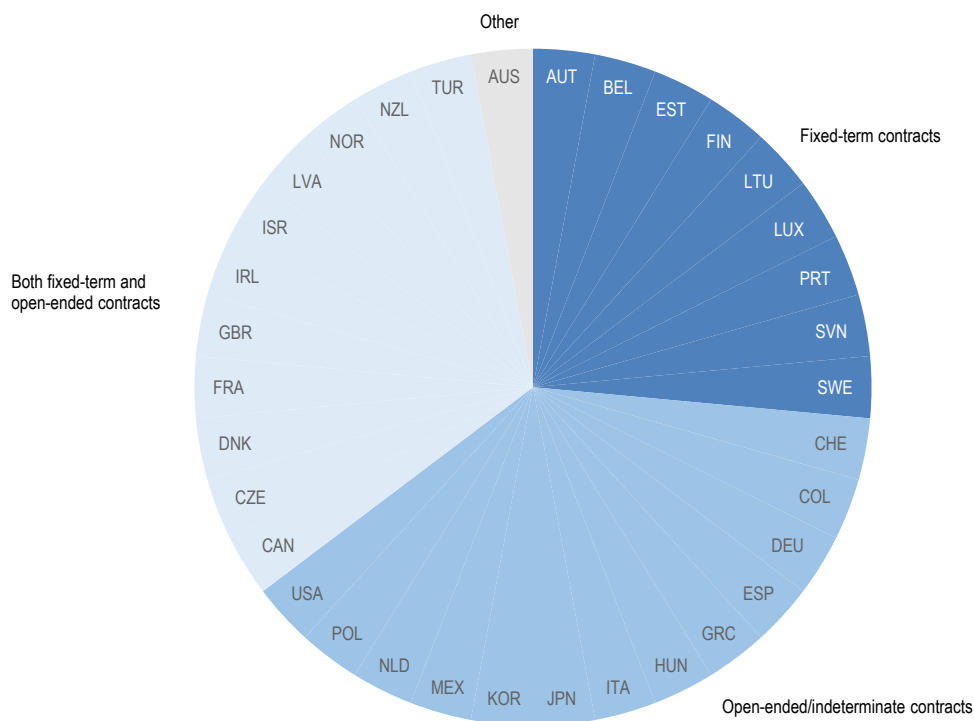


Note: Original survey question: "How different is the employment framework of senior level public servants from that of other public servants?"

Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

Given these different features, senior level public servants (SLPS) are also more often employed on fixed-term contracts than regular public service. Figure 3.2 shows that only about one third of OECD countries primarily use open-ended/indeterminate contracts for their senior level public servants. Some countries use a combination of both open-ended and fixed-term, which are often applied to different levels or specific functions. For example, in Canada, a few select positions at the D1 level (Deputy Ministers) are appointed with fixed terms based on legislative requirements, whereas in Ireland, all D1 positions (Secretaries General) serve a 7 year term which can be extended following a government decision, and lower senior level positions are open ended.

Figure 3.2. Primary legal employment contract type used for senior level public servants



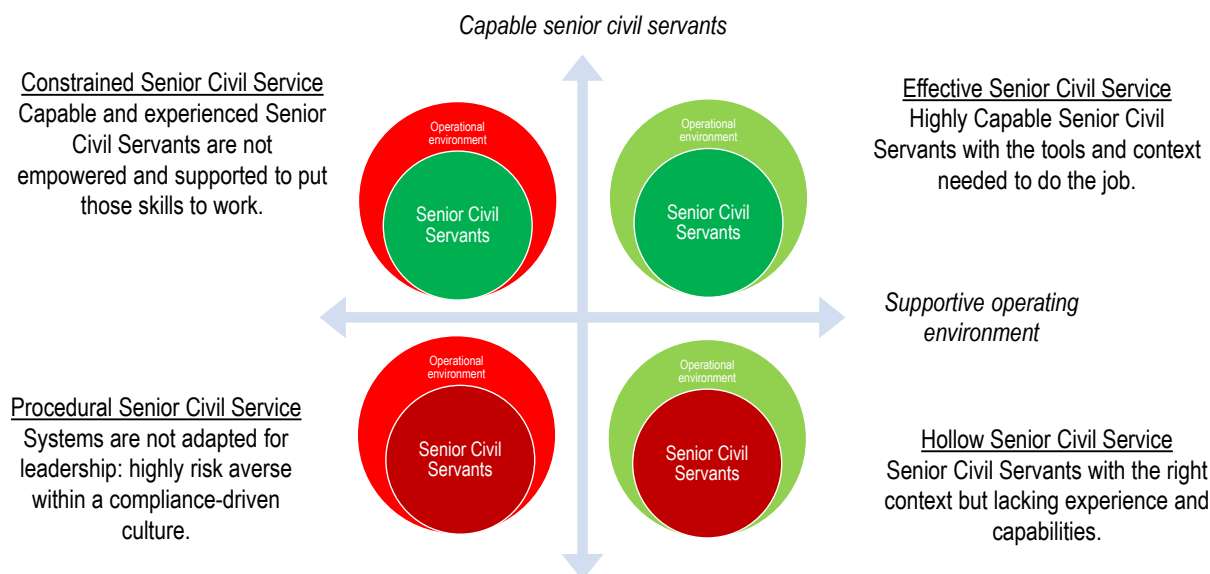
Note: Original survey question: "Which of the following legal employment contracts are primarily used for senior level public servants?"
Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

To assess Senior Civil Service Systems, the OECD has developed a model according to two axes:

- **Axis 1 - capable public leaders:** policies and interventions should aim to appoint senior leaders with the right skills and competencies for the job. This includes job profiles that clearly identify leadership capabilities (see Box 3.2), recruitment and selection tools assessing those capabilities, pipeline development and diversity and inclusion tools.
- **Axis 2 – supportive operating environment:** should provide leaders with the autonomy, tools, support and accountability necessary to effectively use their leadership skills and competencies. This means that leadership objectives set a clear sense of direction, learning opportunities and peer support contribute to leadership development, management tools support leaders in their decisions and the political interface is clearly defined ensuring independence.

The Senior Civil Service System matrix (Figure 3.3) developed by the OECD combines these two axes to identify four different types of senior civil service systems. The ideal type of an effective senior civil service means that senior civil servants are highly skilled and capable and are supported by an operating environment that allows them to optimise the use of these capabilities. The remaining three systems are characterised by weaknesses in the operating environment, the skills and competencies of senior civil servants or both.

Figure 3.3. Senior Civil Service System matrix



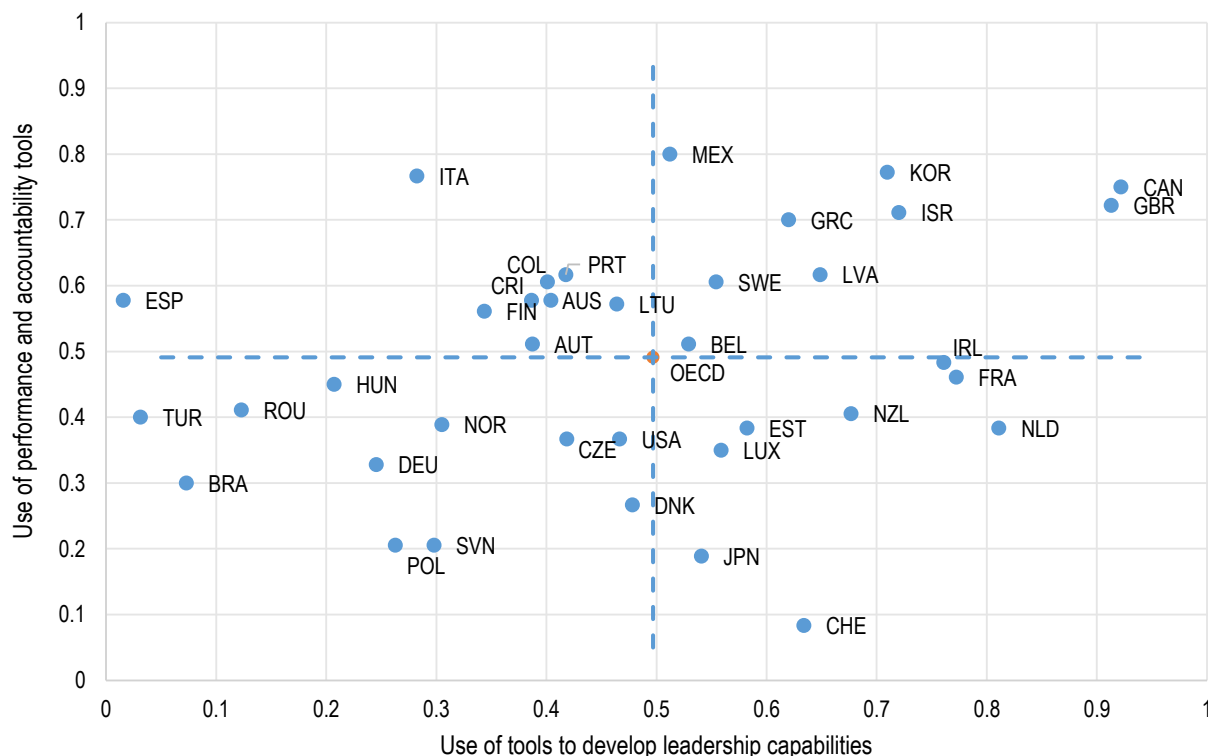
Source: Gerson, D. (2020^[4]), "Leadership for a high performing civil service: Towards senior civil service systems in OECD countries", *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, No. 40, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ed8235c8-en>.

The OECD recently developed a pilot index that uses data from the 2020 survey to identify the use of policies and tools that contribute to the two axes of the Senior Civil Service System matrix (Figure 3.4). The vertical axis of Figure 3.4 refers to the use of tools to develop leadership capabilities. This includes many, but not all, of the tools that make up Axis 1 of the model above, including defining leadership capabilities through competence frameworks, hiring people with these competences, and providing leaders with the opportunities to learn and develop. The horizontal axis refers to policies to manage performance and accountability of results. This includes a few of the tools that make up Axis 2 of the model above, specifically the use of robust performance management systems and accountability framework. The other aspects of Axis 2 were not measured in the survey.

Countries in the upper right quadrant, such as Canada, the United Kingdom, Israel and Korea make comparatively extensive use of tools to build SCS capability (y axis), and tools to manage performance and ensure accountability (x axis). Conversely, countries in the lower left quadrant make use of fewer tools related to both. Some countries make more use of one set of tools than another. Spain and Italy for example, make more use of performance and accountability tools, while investing less in the capability development of their senior civil servants; and vice versa for Switzerland, Japan and the Netherlands.

It should be pointed out that the index looks at the extent to which these tools are used, and not the quality of the tools. Given this, it is an incomplete indicator of the breadth of the system rather than an objective assessment of the quality of the SCS system. Direct comparisons between the indicator and the model above should therefore be made with caution. However, this data can give governments a chance to reflect on the strengths and gaps of their SCS systems.

Figure 3.4. Managing the senior level public service, 2020



Note: Data for Chile, Iceland and the Slovak Republic are not available. Data for the Slovak Republic are not available as the senior level public service is not a formalised group.

Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

The following sections present data from the 2020 OECD Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability to analyse the status quo of senior civil service system in OECD countries according to the two axes identified, starting with Capability Senior Civil Servants, and then considering the operating environment.

Axis 1: Capable senior civil servants

In order to ensure that public leaders have the right skills and competencies to be effective leaders and are able to increase the efficiency and productivity of the organisation, the right people with the right skills need to be selected. The *OECD Recommendation on Public Service Leadership and Capability* underlines merit as the principal criteria for appointment. Merit might take different forms depending on the type of senior civil service system and the responsibilities for appointments. However, even in systems where the degree of discretion in appointments is high, the following characteristics can support an open and transparent process while ensuring the capable leaders are promoted.

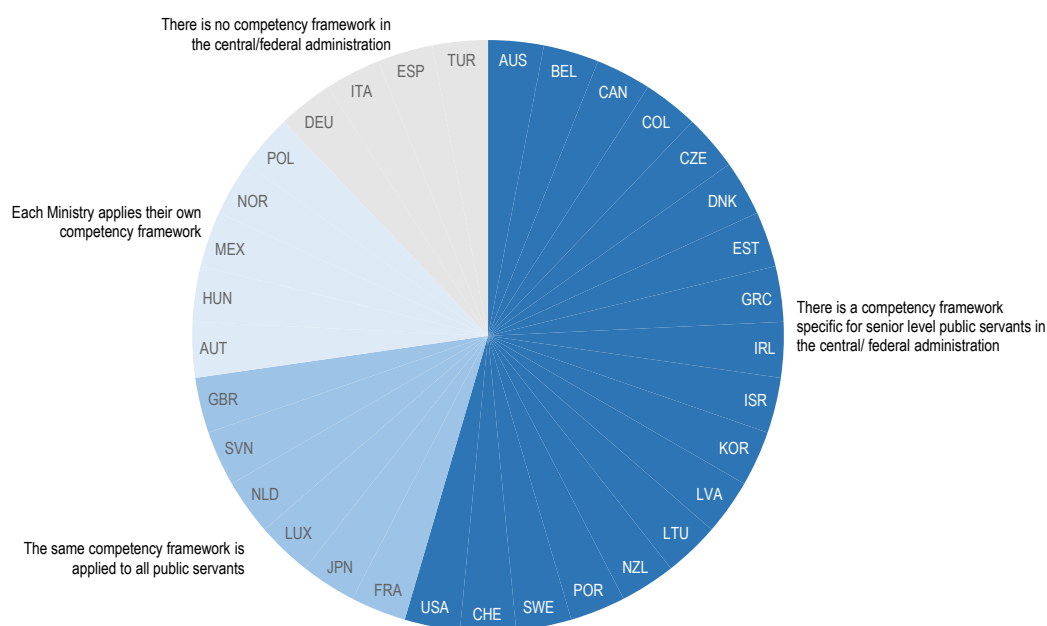
Leadership competency frameworks: Now common practice across OECD countries

The first step to bring the right people and skills in leadership positions is to develop job competences and profiles that identify the requirements regarding skills, competencies and experiences. The OECD framework for senior civil service systems identifies the following key objectives for this area:

- Develop a common understanding and expectation for leadership skills across the public service, through e.g. competency frameworks.
- Define the necessary leadership capabilities in specific SCS job profiles.

The majority of OECD countries have a standard competency framework for senior public servants in the central administration. This sets a common standard of the expectation for leadership capabilities within the public sector. In contrast, in some OECD countries each ministry applies their own competency framework. This may enable them to adapt the leadership profiles to the specificities of the organisation (Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5. Use of standard competency frameworks for senior level public servants, 2020



Note: Data not available for Chile, Iceland, and the Slovak Republic, other answer for Finland. Original survey question: "Is there a standard competency framework for senior level public servants?"

Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

The competencies included in the frameworks are generally reflective of the expectations set in senior public servants to be effective public managers (see Chapter 1, Figure 1.4). The top three areas included in competency frameworks in OECD countries are vision and strategy, achieving results and public values/integrity. At the same time, competencies in the area of digital technologies, diversity and inclusion, crisis management, resilience, emotional intelligence are only starting to emerge. For example, in Canada, the key leadership competency profile includes the competency "create vision and strategy". This requires leaders to understand the context in which they make decisions, in particular in complex, uncertain and rapidly changing environments. It also asks leaders to solve public sector challenges by building on diverse ideas and perspective and create consensus. France highlights digital capabilities for senior civil servants as one of the core competencies and has also included the strengthening of digital capabilities in its strategy for the future of public service, Action Publique 2022. Lastly, Australia has identified resilience, self-awareness and courage as personal qualities for effective leadership highlighting the role of senior civil servants to mobilise and drive change. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020/21 highlighted the need for managers to adapt to new challenges, be resilient and find solutions to public sector challenges based on digital tools and innovation. Therefore, this might be an area more countries will focus on in the future.

Apart from using these competency frameworks to design job profiles and descriptions, 27 OECD countries use them also during the recruitment process and 21 for performance assessment. 20 OECD countries structure learning for current and/or future senior public servants on the basis of the competency framework.

Recruitment: Increasingly focused on leadership competency assessment

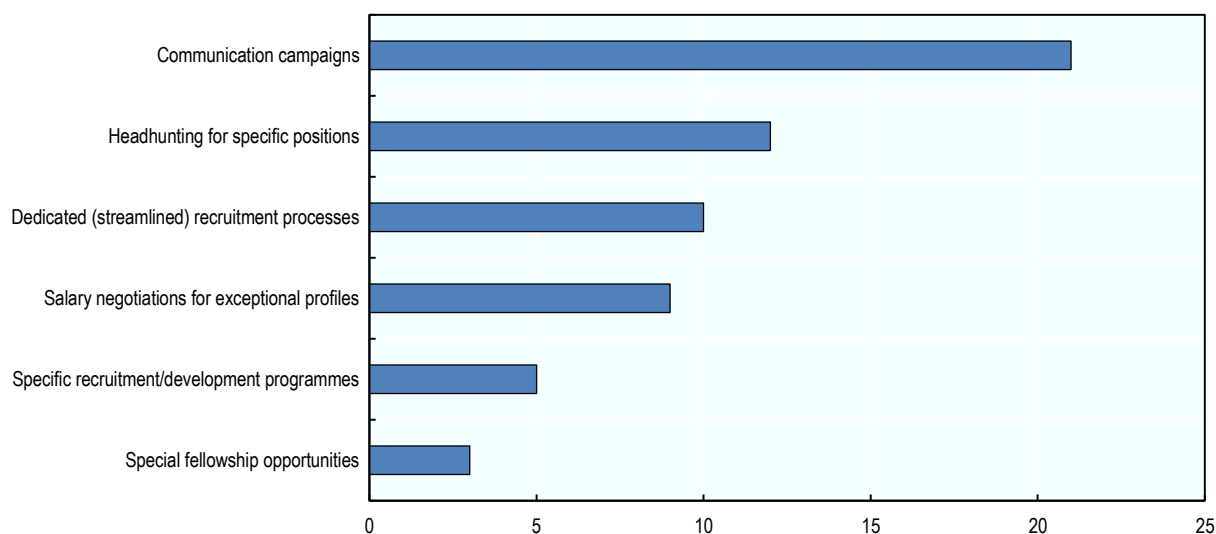
Recruitment processes ensure that the right people get the right senior level positions, and are therefore a fundamental driver of SCS system performance. The OECD framework for senior civil service systems identifies the following key objectives for this area:

- Effectively assess leadership capabilities and use this to inform appointment decisions.
- Ensure an appropriate degree of transparency and accountability for appointment decisions.
- Generate an appropriate level of external and internal candidates for SCS positions.
- Balance the need for political responsiveness with that of merit and stability.

The majority of OECD countries recruit senior civil servants through competition for a specific senior position or through direct appointment. Open competition allows the public sector to bring in senior civil servants from outside the public sector and broaden the skills sets, backgrounds, education and perspectives. Indeed, about half of OECD countries are actively trying to increase external recruitment, while no OECD country reports aims to reduce external recruitment. In order to attract external candidates, OECD countries use a wide range of tools, such as communication campaigns, headhunting or dedicated recruitment processes among others (Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6. Practices used to attract applicants to senior level positions from outside the public service

Number of OECD countries, n=34 (2020)



Note: Original survey question: "Which of the following practices are currently used to attract applicants to senior level public servant positions from outside the public service?"

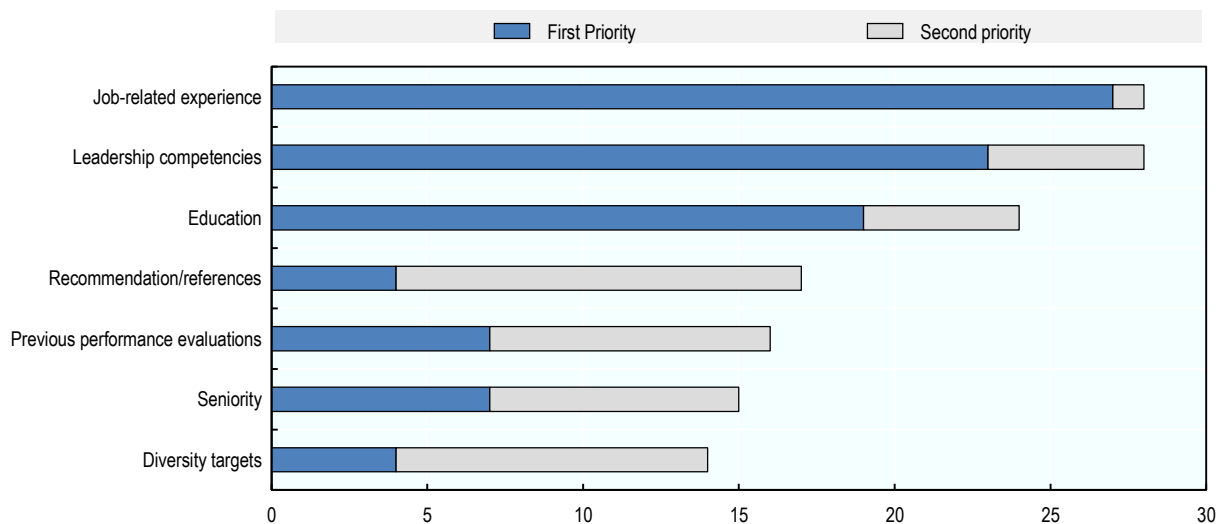
Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

To ensure merit and assess competencies and skills effectively many countries rely on formal criteria, for example length of experience or educational qualifications. However, these are not always effective in predicting the success of a candidate as a public manager and if he or she fulfils the expectations for public leaders discussed earlier. There are ongoing debates on how to find the right balance between subject matter expertise and transversal managerial and leadership skills. Increasingly, OECD countries consider that successful senior civil servants need to possess a deep understanding of the systems of governance and possess enough subject matter expertise and self-awareness to know which technical expertise they need to bring in to support them. While seniority and education are formally assessed during the recruitment phase, job-related experience and leadership competencies are a priority in most OECD countries. Only four countries, namely Canada, Greece, New Zealand and Portugal, set diversity targets as one of their key priorities in recruitment processes (Figure 3.7).

In order to assess the leadership competences, 26 OECD countries rely on experience-based interviews. In 24 OECD countries, it is also common to use situational interview questions to acquire insights in how potential leaders would react in particular situations. Furthermore, in 18 OECD countries reference checks are part of interviews. OECD countries also use simulation exercises, individually (in 13 OECD countries) or in groups (in 10 OECD countries), as a way to assess behaviours and values. Integrity tests are used by only six countries: Canada,¹ Colombia, France, Greece, Korea, and Netherlands. Values-based assessments can also provide insight on the values fit, which can be an important indicator of future performance. The way in which integrity is tested can vary ranging from personality-based integrity tests, testing awareness and knowledge of ethical procedures, and use of situational judgement exams to get a view of the candidates' judgement capacity (Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.7. Aspects formally considered during recruitment for senior level public servants during competitive processes

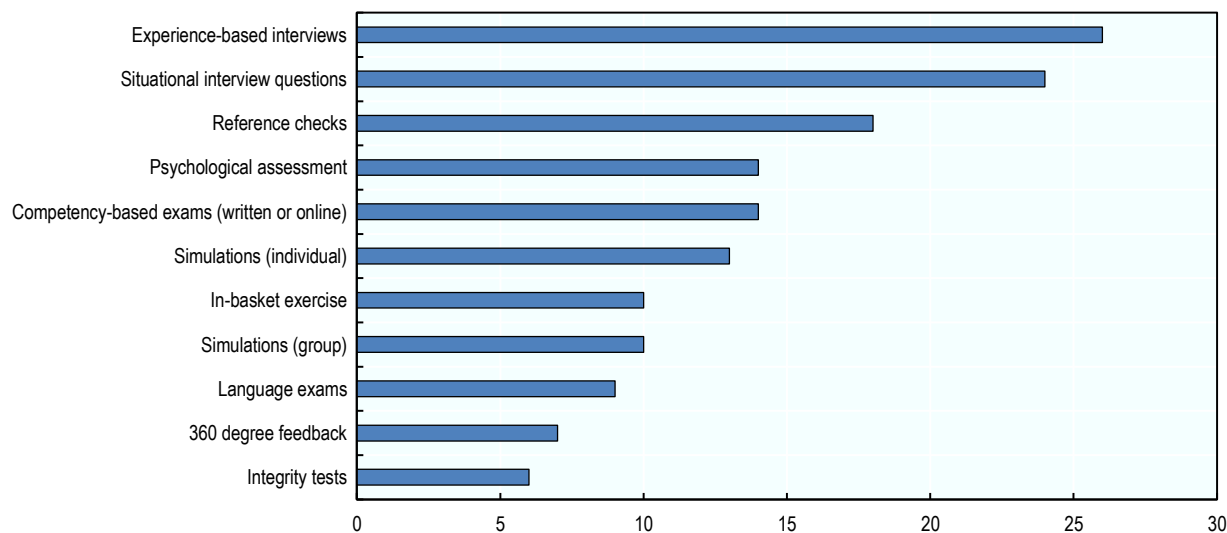
Number of OECD countries, n=29 (2020)



Note: Original survey question: "Which of the following aspects are formally considered in recruiting for senior level public servants positions?"
Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

Figure 3.8. Assessment of senior level public servants' competencies during recruitment

Number of OECD countries, n=33 (2020)



Note: Original survey question: "How are the competencies of senior level public servants assessed during recruitment?"

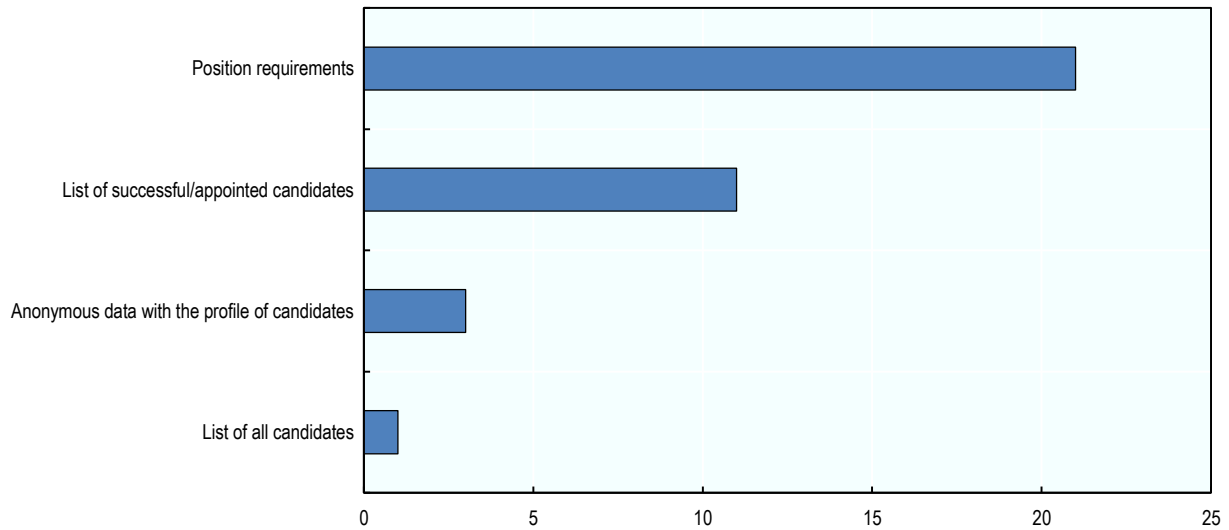
Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

In a majority of OECD countries, the recruitment panels assessing the skills of candidates consist of senior public servants of equal or higher level and members of the central agency in charge of managing senior public servants, where applicable. At the same time, some countries include external members or employee representatives which can strengthen transparency throughout the recruitment process. For example, in Slovenia, the selection board consists of a member of the Council of Officials, the body responsible for recruitment of senior civil servants, an official employed in the public sector organisation for which the candidate is recruited, an expert in the field of public administration, personnel resources management or the specific area concerned and a representative of the union.

Actively publishing information on the recruitment process can strengthen transparency and openness. It can also build trust in the meritocratic process to recruit senior civil servants. The most common type of information made public is the senior public servant vacancy itself and the position requirements (Figure 3.9). Eleven OECD countries publish the list of successful candidates, while Norway publishes the list of candidates. Austria, Ireland and Israel include anonymous information on the profile of the candidates, such as age, gender and ethnicity. This can reinforce the commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Figure 3.9. Type of recruitment information of senior level public servants published online

Number of OECD countries, n=34 (2020)



Note: Original survey question: "What types of data and information about the recruitment process of senior level public servants are proactively published online?"

Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

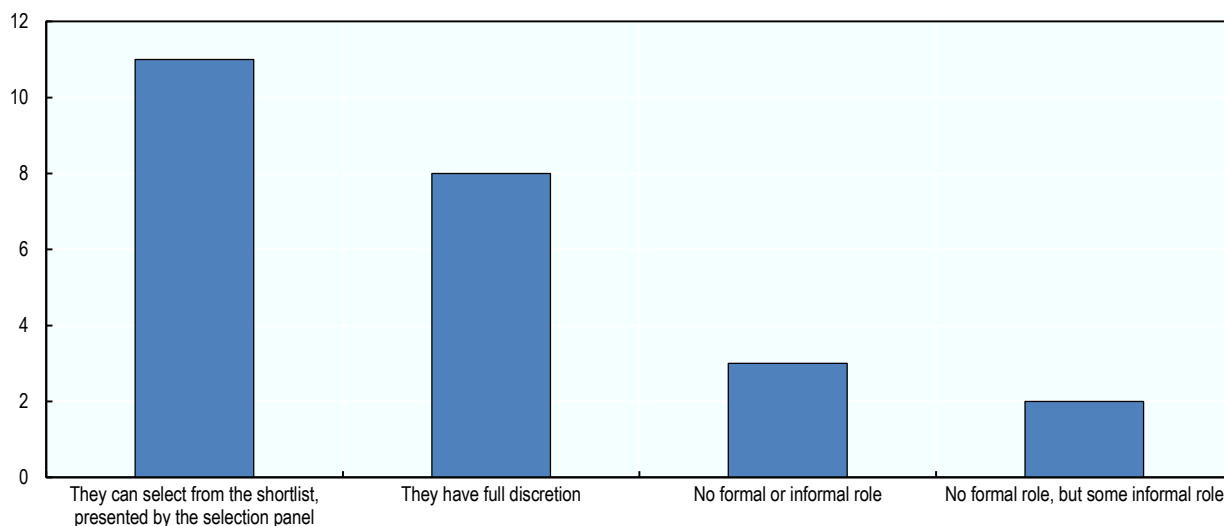
The degree of political influence in staffing decisions is widely debated as it can undermine merit, integrity, professionalism and trust. The assumption is that involving ministers in appointment decisions can help to nurture a close relationship conducive to responsiveness. However, if not managed appropriately, political influence can have negative consequences on merit, independence and stability. It can also create an environment in which senior civil servants do not speak out or provide evidence-based advice in opposition to political priorities out of fear of dismissal.

In OECD countries, the influence political officials have over recruitment processes varies (Figure 3.10). In eleven OECD countries, political officials (e.g. Ministers) can choose a candidate from a shortlist presented by the selection panel. This helps to ensure merit and accountability within the process. A recruitment panel ranks candidates according to merit-based criteria, while giving political officials the choice to make the final choice according to specific criteria. At times, the appointment also needs to be confirmed by the legislature. In eight OECD countries, political officials have full discretion in the recruitment. At the same time, it is more common for political officials to have a higher influence on D1 positions than on those below the top hierarchical level.

Political influence can also be exerted through politically motivated dismissals (Figure 3.11). Dismissals at the discretion of the minister (i.e. without any specific cause) are very limited, in particular at the lower hierarchical levels. In 16 OECD countries it is not legally possible to dismiss senior public servants at D1 level at the discretion of ministers.

Figure 3.10. Role of political officials in the recruitment/selection of senior level public servants

Number of OECD countries, n=34 (2020)

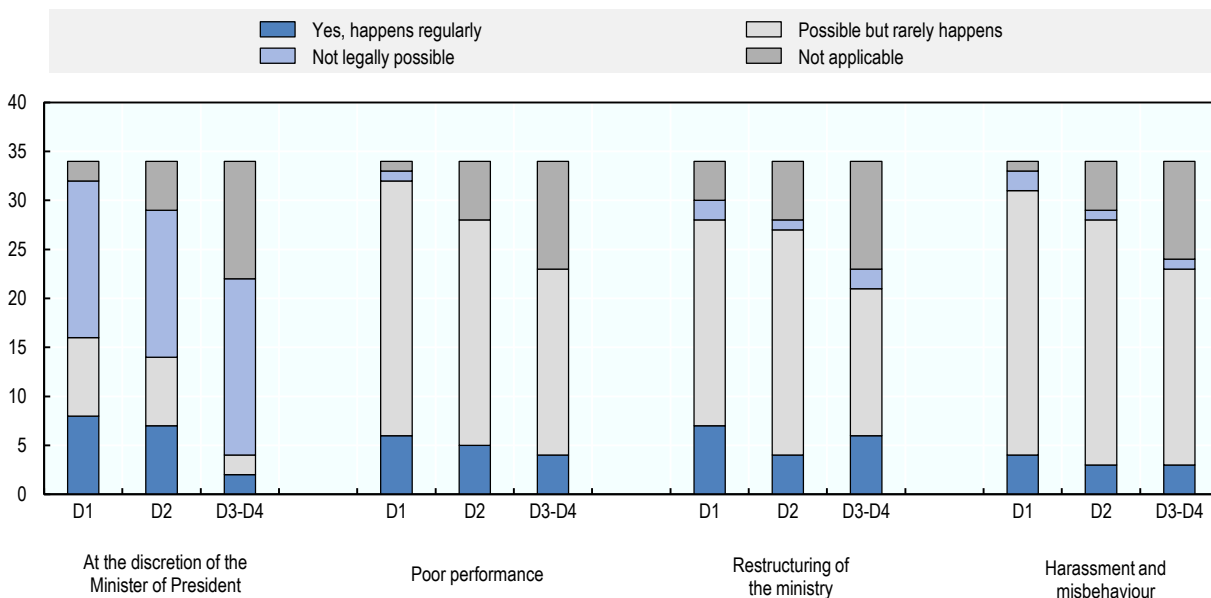


Note: 10 OECD countries indicated 'other' as a response to the question given that the role often varies according to the level of senior civil servant recruited. For New Zealand, ministers have no formal role, but some informal role. They may not always have this informal role though. Original survey question: "What role, if any, do political officials (president, prime minister, ministers, etc.) have in the recruitment/selection of senior level public servants?"

Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

Figure 3.11. Reasons for dismissing senior level public servants before the end of tenure

Number of OECD countries, n=34 (2020)



Note: Original survey question: "Can a senior level public servant be dismissed before the end of his/ her term, for any of the following reasons?"
Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

Career management and mobility: Scope to develop the pipeline

An effective senior civil service system reaches beyond the current top hierarchical level, to build a pipeline of candidates who have the competences necessary for leadership. The OECD framework for senior civil service systems identifies the following key objectives for this area:

- Develop and maintain a pool of candidates with the capabilities and experience necessary to take up SCS positions.
- Identify and support future leaders from within and outside the public service.
- Use a range of talent management tools for future SCS, such as mobility and career path planning, to develop the right kinds of experience needed.
- Position senior management as people developers and hold them accountable for developing the leadership pipeline in their organisations.

While it is not yet common in OECD countries to identify potential senior public servants early in their careers, a few countries do so using a combination of tools. For example, the United Kingdom trains some future senior civil servants as a separate group from the start of their career. The Civil Service Fast Stream is a graduate development programme aiming to equip participants with the knowledge, skills and experience needed to be future leaders in the civil service. Participants' personal development is achieved through a programme of carefully managed and contrasting postings, supplemented by formal learning and other support such as coaching, mentoring and action learning (OECD, 2020^[2]).

Other countries develop specific strategies and tools for lower levels of civil servants to provide the learning opportunities necessary for developing leadership skills. Australia combines various tools in building a pipeline of future leaders. The workforce strategy '*Delivering for tomorrow: APS Workforce Strategy 2025*' deliberately highlights leadership development as one of its three areas of action. The strategy sets out a broad framework to develop future leaders based on a clear understanding of leadership capabilities, a strategic approach to attracting, retaining and deploying senior civil servants, promoting collaboration and work across the APS, effective talent management, succession planning for critical senior roles, mobility to gain broad experiences early in employees' careers and investing in a culture that encourages learning and development. The Secretaries Talent Council and Deputy Secretaries Council are responsible for leading this work and building a pipeline of qualified and diverse future leaders.

Lastly, some countries build a pool of potential external candidates. In Estonia, the Top Civil Service Excellence Centre invests resources on tracking potential candidates and approaching them with potential opportunities when appropriate positions open up. Such an approach may be in particular interesting for smaller countries where private sector leaders are relatively well known.

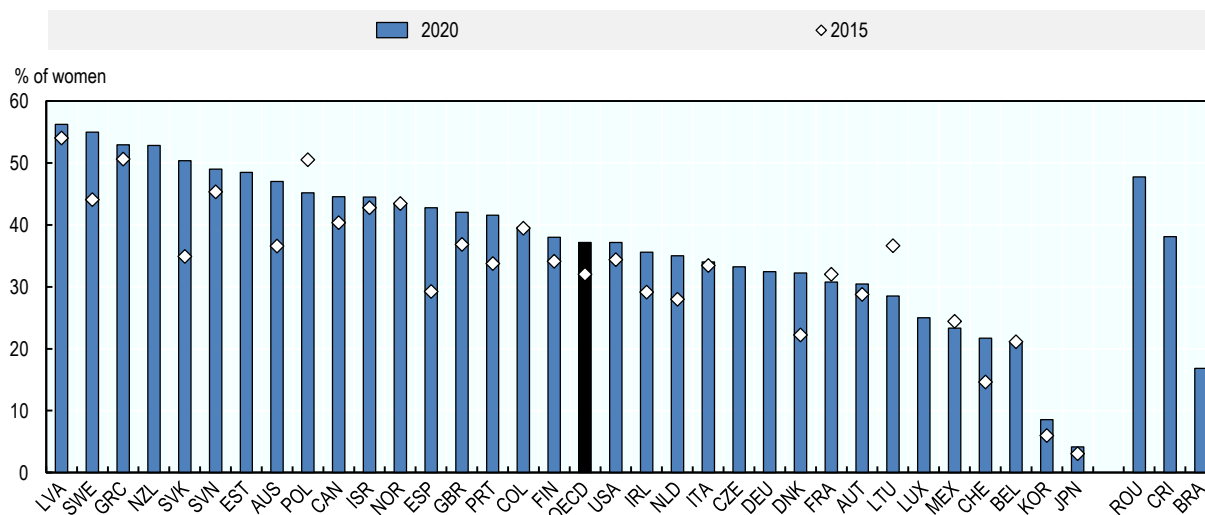
Diversity and inclusion: Still work to do to fill the gap

A diverse and inclusive senior civil service can contribute to strengthening organisational performance by boosting innovation and enhancing core public service values, such as fairness, transparency and impartiality. Ensuring that the leadership of public organisations reflect the society they serve can also improve dialogue and send a signal of valuing all communities. The OECD framework for senior civil service systems identifies the following key objectives for this area:

- Highlight diversity (gender, ethnic, linguistic and social) as a fundamental objective of an effective SCS.
- Track diversity in the SCS and in the pipeline using appropriate data.
- Make HR decisions with appropriate transparency and accountability to reduce bias risks.
- Intervene when analysis shows weak diversity.

In OECD countries, the share of women in senior civil service positions is lower than in central government positions. On average, women represent more than 56% of employees in central and federal administrations while only 38% of senior civil service positions are filled by women in the OECD (Figure 3.12) (OECD, 2021^[5]).

Figure 3.12. Gender equality in senior management positions in central governments, 2015 and 2020



Note: Data for Hungary are for 2018. Data for France refer to 31 December 2018. Data for Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Poland refer to December 2019. Data for Denmark and Finland refer to February 2020. Data for Colombia refer to March 2020. Data for Korea refer to December 31 2020. Data for Chile, Iceland and Turkey are not available. Senior management data for Austria refer only to D1.

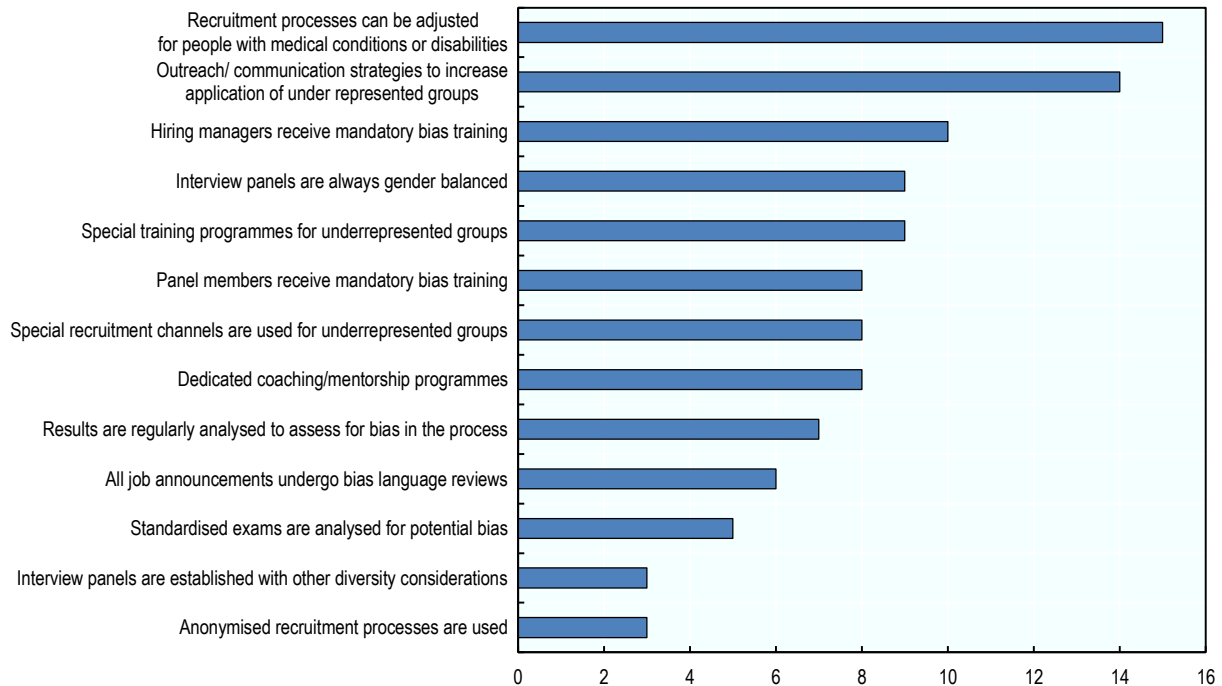
Source: OECD (2021^[5]), *Government at a Glance 2021*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1c258f55-en>.

OECD countries have adopted different tools to increase the representation of underrepresented groups in recruitment processes to the Senior Civil Service (Figure 3.13). Among the most common measures are to adjust recruitment processes for people with medical conditions or disabilities and design specific outreach strategies to increase the application of underrepresented groups. Similarly, some OECD countries have started offering bias training for hiring managers. Other measures include diversity of the hiring panel or dedicated training programmes for underrepresented groups. In Australia, guidance provided on recruitment highlights that selection committee members should reflect a diverse range of backgrounds and experience to facilitate an inclusive recruitment process. Belgium has developed a skills programme to offer women the possibility to perform a test assessment and receive coaching. Similarly, the Public Service Commission in New Zealand has set up a leadership mentoring programme for Pasifika public servants and has developed a Maori Emerging Leaders Development Programme in 2020. Less common tools used among OECD countries are anonymised recruitment or reviewing standardised exams for potential bias.

However, it is not enough to focus on the recruitment process as a way to increase diversity and inclusion among public leaders. A diversity and inclusion lens should also be applied to other HR processes and workplace policies to identify potentially discriminating practices, spot biases and spot areas for further efforts to strengthen diversity and inclusion among senior civil servants. Similarly, collecting data through employee surveys can support organisation to identify drivers of a more inclusive workforce culture (Nolan-Flecha, 2019^[6]). In fact, diversity and inclusion is one of the lowest scoring elements in leadership competencies (see Chapter 1, figure 1.4) and in only a few countries a priority throughout the recruitment process (Figure 3.7). This suggests that diversity and inclusion is not seen as a fundamental leadership role throughout OECD countries.

Figure 3.13. Tools used to increase the representation of underrepresented groups in the senior level public service

Number of OECD countries, n=34 (2020)



Note: Original survey question: “Does the central/ federal administration use any of the following tools to increase the representation of underrepresented groups?”

Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

Axis 2: Enabling operating environment

The Senior Civil Service System matrix developed by the OECD underscores that the right skills and competences among senior civil servants can only flourish in a conducive operating environment. It is crucial to build an awareness of the operating and contextual elements that support or impede senior civil servants in being effective public managers. The following section discusses these and common OECD practices in detail.

Objectives, autonomy, accountability: Scope to improve accountability for leadership capabilities and people management

An enabling environment for senior civil servants sets clear goals and objectives according to which senior civil servants act and lead. These help to set expectations and define accountabilities in accordance to political objectives. The OECD framework for senior civil service systems identifies the following key objectives for this area:

- Ensure senior civil servants have tailor-made objectives, which promote change-oriented leadership, in line with government priorities.
- Hold senior civil servants accountable for working towards their objectives in a way that respects public service values and the complexity and uncertainty of their environment.
- Delegate an appropriate level of autonomy and trust aligned to senior civil servants objectives.

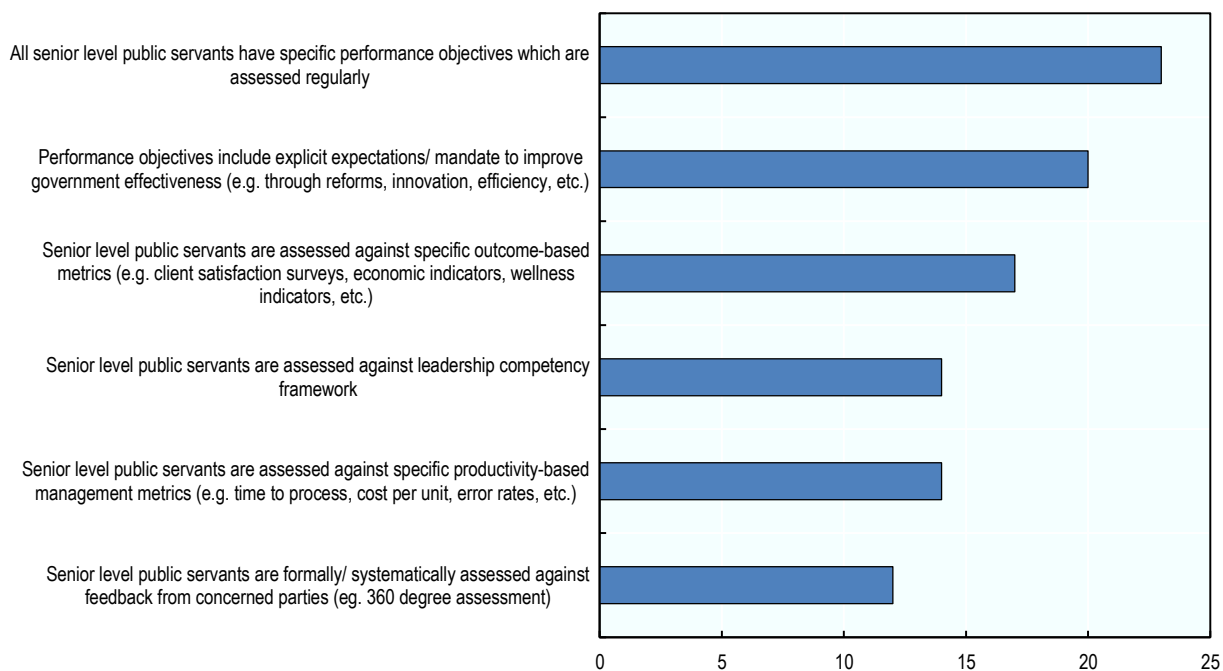
Most OECD countries use specific performance objectives for senior public servants (Figure 3.14). Objectives should ideally be visionary and challenging, to push leaders to advance the organisation or area they are responsible for. In the majority of OECD countries, performance objectives for senior civil servants include expectation to improve government effectiveness. However less than half of OECD countries assess leaders against their leadership competency framework, suggesting a missed opportunity to reinforce the importance of good leadership in the senior civil services of many OECD countries.

In comparison to public servants in general, the objectives and goals of senior civil servants are often more complex and challenging due to the involvement of stakeholders and partners. Performance objectives should, therefore, be interpreted as potential milestones, but allow for revisions in case of new information or changing situations. Overly rigid objectives may also increase the risk of senior public servants merely concentrating on achieving the determined objectives without taking into consideration ethical considerations or integrity on how objectives are achieved. It may also reinforce organisational silos if senior civil servants are only held accountable for the objectives within their organisation's authority. To counteract this, OECD countries commonly assign objectives that require collaboration to multiple senior civil servants. In few occasions, collaboration objectives may also be assigned to a senior public servant on a temporary assignment who leads the project full-time (Figure 3.15). In addition, some countries, such as Ireland, assess senior public servants against feedback from concerned parties, such as employees, peers or stakeholders (Figure 3.14).

A performance assessment system can also introduce incentives, such as performance related pay or dismissal in case of low performance. 16 OECD countries provide senior public servants with financial rewards for high performance. 42% of OECD countries dismiss senior public servants for low performance.

Figure 3.14. Performance assessment of senior level public servants

Number of OECD countries, n=34 (2020)

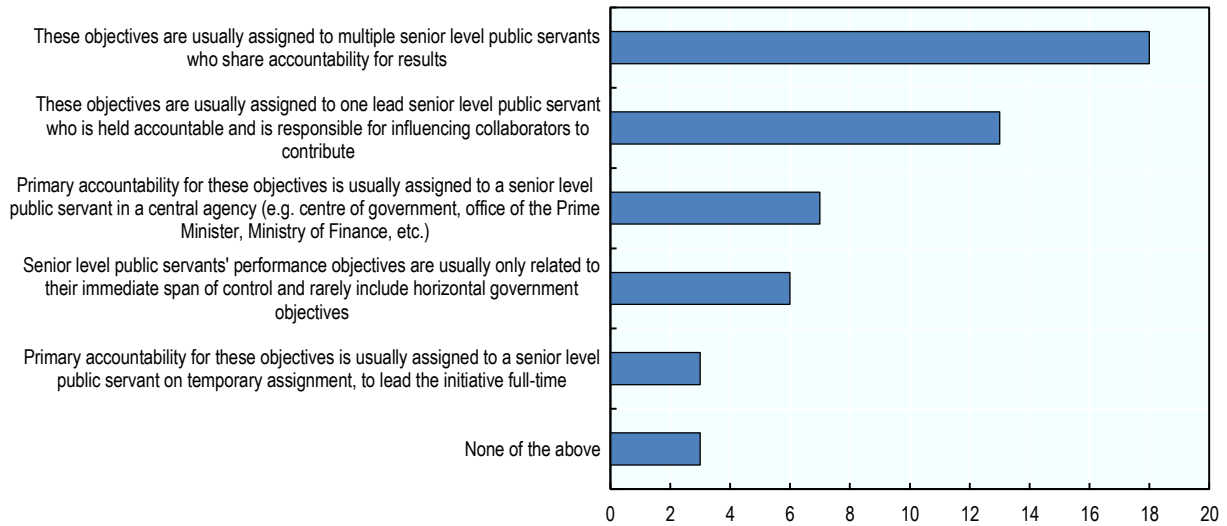


Note: Original survey question: "Which of the following apply for performance assessment of senior level public servants?"

Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

Figure 3.15. Accountability for collaboration across ministries and agencies

Number of OECD countries, n=31 (2020)



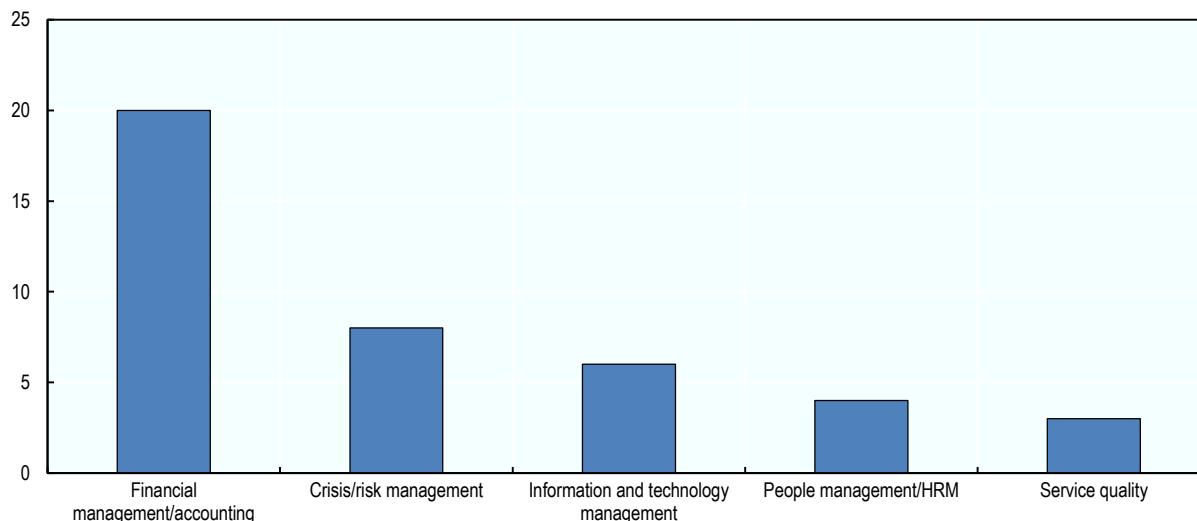
Note: Original survey question: "How are senior level public servants held accountable for objectives that require collaboration across ministries and agencies?"

Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

In achieving the objectives and advancing the mission of their organisation, senior civil leaders need to count on the necessary level of autonomy over resources and organisation of work. Managerial accountabilities can help to build trust that the autonomy granted is used effectively. 24 OECD countries have a law or a comparable document in place laying out specific managerial accountabilities for senior public servants. These principally refer to financial management and accounting, but also include crisis and risk management. However, in only 4 OECD countries it also includes specific accountabilities for people management (Figure 3.16). Emphasising accountability for people management across senior civil servants, and not only within the HR department, can help to reinforce this fundamental leadership capability among the senior civil service.

Figure 3.16. Type of managerial accountabilities of senior level public servants

Number of OECD countries, n=24 (2020)



Note: Original survey question: “Is there a law or other document that explicitly lays out specific managerial (financial, HR, etc.) accountabilities of senior level public servants? If yes, do these accountabilities include:”

Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

Learning: Integrating a range of tools including mobility, to develop a learning culture

Senior civil servants benefit from structured opportunities to reflect on their experience, learn and adapt to evolving public challenges, however learning opportunities must fit into busy schedules and be relevant to the highly specific challenges SCS face. To encourage public leaders to continuously develop, the public sector needs a learning culture that values investment in learning, and offers regular and quality feedback. This includes mobility opportunities that allow SCS to develop their skills by working on new challenges. The OECD framework for senior civil service systems identifies the following key objectives for this area:

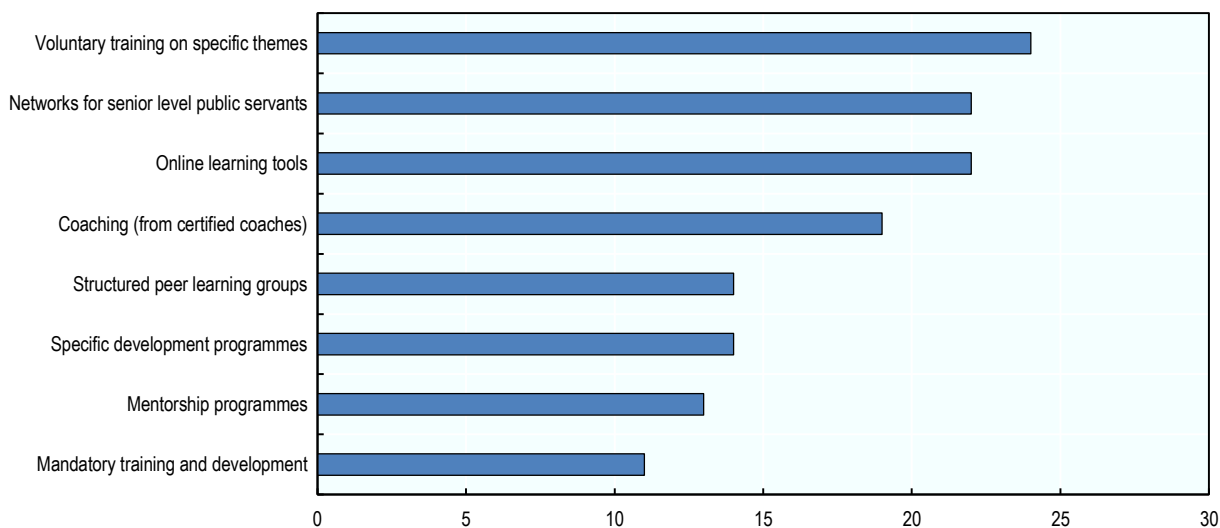
- Structure opportunities to build senior civil servants networks and enable peer support.
- Provide senior civil servants with tailored coaching.
- Design senior civil servants development programmes to fit the specific contexts and needs of this senior group.
- Manage mobility for individual and organisational learning.

OECD countries offer a wide variety of learning opportunities and peer support to senior public servants (Figure 3.17). 22 OECD countries have put networks for senior level public servants in place. These can strengthen an environment of continuous learning, boost network collaboration and help build connections across organisational siloes. It can also confront senior civil servants with different voices and perspectives not common in their area and inspire new solutions to problems. 19 OECD countries offer coaching opportunities for senior leaders. Coaching opportunities can provide leaders with very specific learning, tailored to their needs and availability, which may strengthen leaders’ commitment to learning. Specific development programmes or structured peer learning groups, used in 14 OECD countries, invite senior civil servants to reflect on their experience and receive specific advice from others who can understand their context. They can also provide a safe space to reflect on mistakes, identify success factors or receive peer support. It may also make senior civil servants aware of new skills or areas to develop.

Despite these advances in training methods, a majority of countries focus on training seminars and online learning tools. 24 OECD countries offer voluntary training on specific themes. These can be good opportunities for leaders to meet with their peers and be exposed to new ideas and tools. However, since it is hard to target generic trainings to the particular needs of an individual leader, these risk being less effective.

Figure 3.17. Learning opportunities and peer support available to senior level public servants

Number of OECD countries, n=34 (2020)



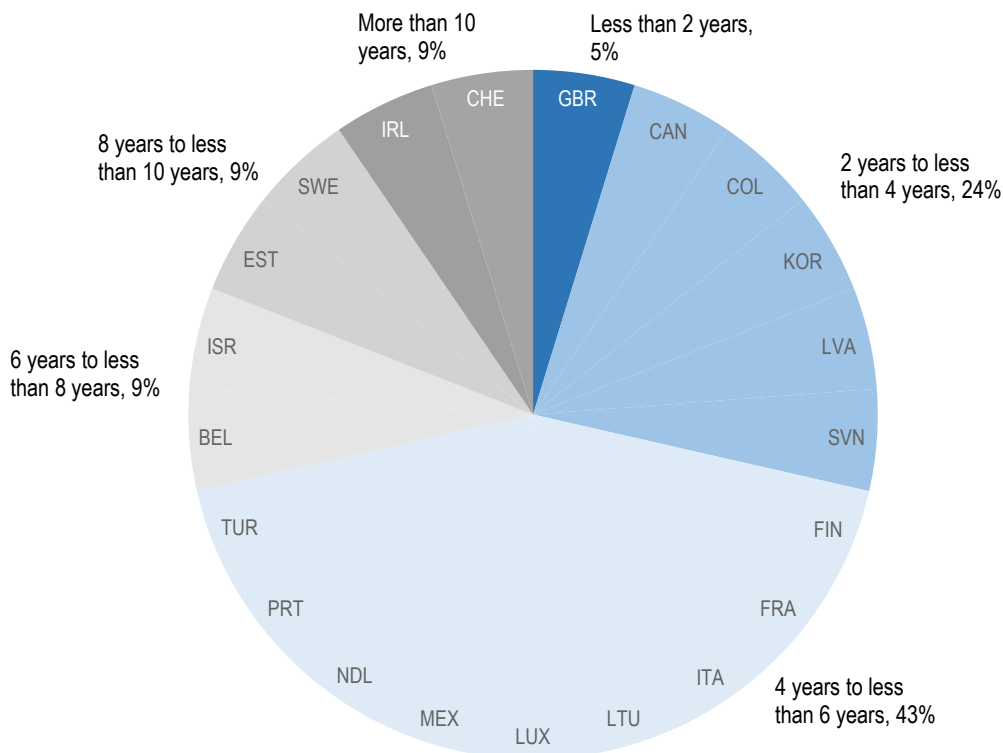
Note: Original survey question: "Which of the following learning opportunities and peer support are available for senior level public servants?"
Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

Mobility of senior civil servants can also contribute to a learning culture. Mobility can generate new ideas by bringing new perspectives, opportunities for career development contributing to the motivation of the senior civil servants, and it can help to break down organisational silos. At the same time, it takes time to build the relationships and trust necessary for cultivating organisational culture. In OECD countries, the average tenure of senior public servants in a particular position varies between less than two years in the United Kingdom to more than ten years in Ireland and Switzerland (Figure 3.18). Between four and six years in a position is most common. In nine OECD countries the average tenure is the result of a specific policy. In the Netherlands, senior civil servants spend at least three years in a certain position and are encouraged to look for a new position after five years. Seven years is the maximum amount most senior civil servants can remain in one position.

While there is discussion on the optimal number of years to spend in a position, mobility should ideally be organised in a staggered manner within an organisation to avoid too much movement at the same time. Similarly, decoupling the tenure from the political cycle may limit the degree of dependence on political leaders, while also ensuring institutional memory is not lost between one cycle and the next.

Figure 3.18. Average tenure of senior level public servants in a position

Number of OECD countries, n=21 (2020)



Note: Original survey question: "What is the average tenure of senior level public servants in a given position?"

Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

Conclusion

In addition to the elements discussed, an effective operating environment for senior civil servants also equips them with the right tools to do their job and fulfil their responsibilities. This includes financial tools to use budgets, HR tools to recruit, develop and allocate skills, data and information to make decision based on evidence and communication tools to reach out to stakeholders. Furthermore, political-administrative interface between senior civil servants and the elected government should be characterised by stability, trust and mutual recognition of roles and responsibilities between political and administrative decision making guided by public service values.

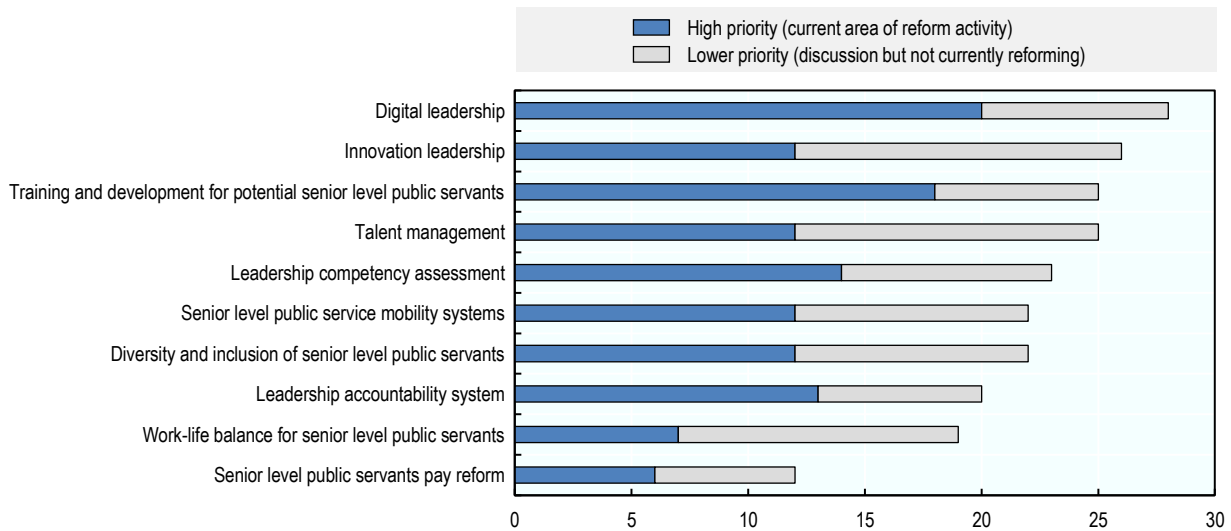
Developing a mature senior civil service systems requires a long-term and systemic perspective. As evident from the wide-ranging practices among OECD countries, it is not one specific intervention or tool that enables effective leadership, but rather the interaction between different elements building capable leaders who are able to put their skills to best use in an enabling operating environment.

At the same time, it is essential to underline that the priorities for senior civil servants develop alongside the challenges and opportunities presented. As can be seen from Figure 3.19, OECD countries consider a wide breadth of priorities for reform of the senior civil servant system. While digital and innovative leadership might not have been a priority several years ago, the current circumstances require countries to take action in these areas to ensure an effective civil service able to deliver. However, it is curious that more countries do not highlight these in their leadership competency frameworks. Therefore, an effective

senior civil servant system needs to be built on a long-term strategy, while allowing flexibility to address emerging areas and challenges.

Figure 3.19. Reform priorities of the senior civil servant system among OECD countries

Number of OECD countries, n=34 (2020)



Note: Original survey question: "Please indicate priorities from among the following:"

Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability.

Returning to the question of public service leadership for the future, the OECD framework suggests that Senior Civil Service Systems will need to be:

- **Forward-looking:** Building the Senior Civil Service of the future requires action today, so there needs to be a sense of what competencies and skills those leaders require. The gap between the high priority given to digital and innovation leadership in Figure 3.19 and low rates of incidence of these in existing competency frameworks suggests opportunities to update countries' visions of public service leaders, taking into account lessons learned from the pandemic and increased need for leadership that is able to manage change and innovation in a context of uncertainty and ambiguity. This also requires alignment with the rest of the SCS system, and in particular, building a pipeline of people with the right skills.
- **Flexible:** Senior Civil Service Systems require flexibility in various ways. Mobility can be used to ensure the right SCS can be assigned to the right tasks, particularly as issues emerge quickly and require rapid response. They require flexibility in their performance systems, to ensure that SCS are able to meet ambitious targets that take into account unforeseen shifts in the operating environment. They also require flexibility in management tools, such as HR and Financial management, to enable adjustment within sound management frameworks.
- **Fulfilling:** The public service will have to compete for talent by offering fulfilling work, attracting senior civil servants who are motivated by the mission of the public service. Senior civil servants need to be given challenging and exciting goals and the right tools to engage their workforce and support their achievement.

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Note

¹ The use of personality tests as part of staffing processes is still considered contentious in the Canadian Public Service. Federal departments subject to the Public Service Employment Act must seek the permission of the Public Service Commission before using a personality test as part of a staffing process.



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